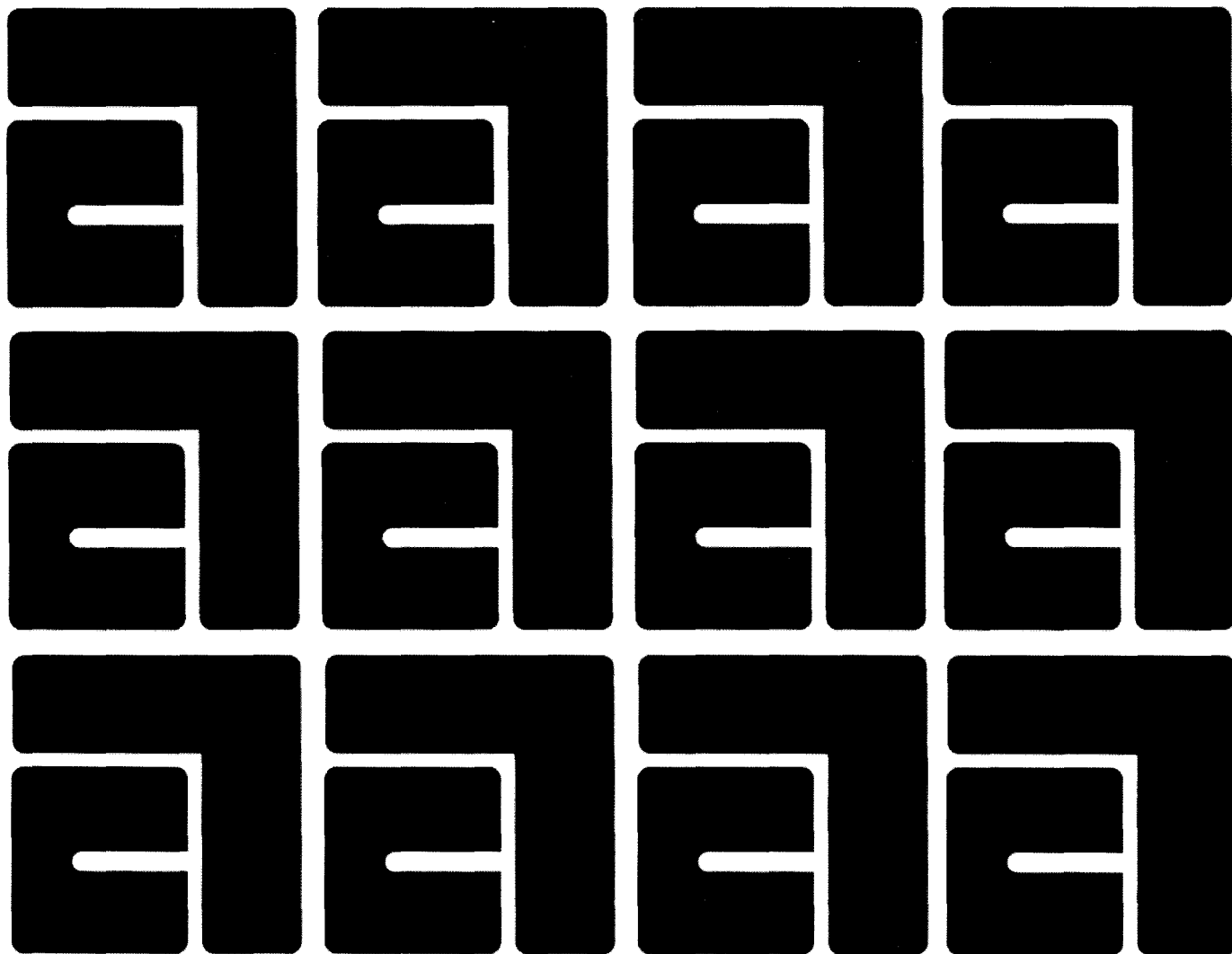


FOUNDATIONS

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FOUNDATIONS

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Editor's Notes

This is my last issue editing *Foundations*. It has been a great privilege and joy to edit the theological journal of Affinity, but it is time to let someone else take over. I want to thank the three general secretaries that have been so supportive and patient – Alan Gibson, David Ford and Jonathan Stephen. My thanks are also due to those in the background who have helped in various ways in the production – Digby James, Paul Brown and Derek Williams. The contributing editors and most recently the Affinity Theological Team have been great encouragers and supporters. Not least I must mention Ian Herring and Phil Grubb, Affinity's successive administrators, who have been very patient with me. There is so much more that I would have liked to have done with the journal. I would have liked to have had more exegetical articles, but strangely they have not often come my way. In fact, articles don't flow in. As deadlines approach I more often than not found that the cupboard was spare. But the Lord is gracious and there was always enough to get an issue out. Some issues were better than others, but from the feedback I have had the journal is appreciated. As I depart I want to thank you, the readers, for your support and urge you to contribute material and to urge others in your circles to do so.

I am an historian and this last issue has an historical flavour to it. For my last Editor's Notes I want to reflect on Protestantism by looking at several books. The selection is somewhat random as they are some of the ones sent by publishers left on my shelf. Nevertheless they offer something of a snapshot of Protestantism at the beginning of the 21st century. 'Protestant' is something of a dirty word today in Britain. In part this may be due to its associations with loyalism in Northern Ireland. I suspect it is also due to the doctrinal downgrade not only in the main denominations, but also in the mindset of many evangelicals, who while technically orthodox are not particularly doctrinal in their evangelicalism. Many prefer a reductionist 'mere Christianity' which, in the form of evangelicalism, may be more alive, but deprives itself of the doctrinal and spiritual riches of the evangelical heritage and is too susceptible to passing fads and obsessions. The idea of

holding a clear set of beliefs and practices is anathema to many. If *Foundations* and Affinity stand for anything it is the recovery of historic Protestant Christianity. For what is the classic evangelicalism that they stand for, but living orthodox Protestantism? It is the orthodox Protestantism of the Reformation (salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, from Scripture alone), but alive through the work of the Holy Spirit as it was in the ministries of men like Luther, Calvin and Knox and experienced and understood by later generations such as the Puritans, John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey, Thomas Chalmers, C.H. Spurgeon, J.C. Ryle, B.B. Warfield, Gresham Machen, Wang Ming Dao, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, William Still, John Stott and so many others. It is our job to appropriate this great tradition that like Calvin we trace back through the best men of the middle ages and the fathers to the Bible itself. It is necessary to do this for the sake of Christ's kingdom here in Great Britain and more widely in Europe, if we are to see the forces of unbelief and false religion pushed back and the church being renewed and growing. It is also necessary with the phenomenal growth of evangelical Christianity in what has become known as the Global South. For the sake of the evangelisation of the nations living orthodox Protestantism needs to be understood, taught, lived and communicated in our fast changing world.

It is interesting to notice that the positive contribution of Protestantism to British identity and culture is being increasingly appreciated. One historian who does is Tristram Hunt of Queen Mary, University of London. The book for his recent BBC 4 series *The Protestant Revolution* ¹ has recently been published. While Hunt presents the series, the book is written by William G. Naphy of Aberdeen University. From the author's previous writings as well as the photographs (the last one is of the gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, Gene Robinson) I thought this might turn out to be a gay history of Protestantism. Towards the end it gets near to that and seems to reduce Protestantism to being about the freedom of the individual conscience. However the bulk of the book is a not bad survey of Protestant history.

While not agreeing with Naphy at many points, he shows a good deal of understanding and certainly tells a good tale. What is not in doubt is the revolutionary impact of the dangerous Protestant idea that every Christian should be able to read and understand the Bible. This idea has shaped European culture and increasingly global culture. Hunt provides a long and very good introduction that recounts how deeply indebted we are in Britain to Protestantism. Sadly, more contemporary classic evangelicalism is largely missing. Nigerian Pentecostals and American fundamentalists make an appearance, but the kind of classic evangelicalism represented by Affinity's constituency doesn't. That may be because of ignorance and prejudice, but it is more likely to be because we do not here, or elsewhere, make much of an impact. Our numbers are relatively small and, except perhaps in the USA, we simply don't appear on the radar of our culture. We mustn't be content with that. Our desire is not to gain recognition and certainly not respectability, but rather to see, as happened at the Reformation and in the early 19th century, our culture being so penetrated with the gospel that it is transformed for good. Like the early Christians may we be accused of filling our cities with the teaching of Christ (Acts 5:28). Of course, to do this we need to focus on the priorities of gospel ministry. Meditation on the Pastoral Epistles is always a good antidote to temptations to get away from the teaching of the word and prayer. **Ben Witherington III** has produced in volume one of *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*² a fine commentary on the pastorals as well as 1–3 John. He approaches these letters with his socio-rhetorical method that helps to bring out their historical and social background and literary form. The commentary has weaknesses. His treatment of 1 Timothy 2:9–14 is not complementarian and being a Methodist (I assume he is as he teaches at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky) he is weak on election. But there is a lot here that is very helpful for Bible study and sermon preparation. Those of us who are pastors need to remind our congregations regularly of what Protestant, pastoral ministry is all about. Someone I always find helpful in this area is **Eugene Peterson**. His *Christ*

*Plays in Ten Thousand Places*³ is the first volume in a trilogy on spiritual theology. Peterson can be a bit too open to some critical theories, but I love his fresh takes on familiar passages of Scripture and his Bible-infused approach to spiritual life. I think that some of us evangelicals can drain the life and colour out of Scripture in the way we teach it. Peterson's books are a good antidote to that as well as a feast of good things for the soul. For another feast of good things read *Authentic Christianity*,⁴ sermons from Acts 7: 1–29 by **Martyn Lloyd-Jones**. I suspect that Lloyd-Jones would have found Peterson frustrating and not a little annoying. Banner is to be thanked for publishing these evangelistic sermons of Lloyd-Jones that remind us that he was, as he himself thought, primarily an evangelist. How we need such straight, Christ-exalting preaching today. I must admit that the sermons can be a little repetitive, but that is the problem of printed sermons that cannot convey the original context and act of preaching. This and its companion volumes are not commentaries on Acts, but an example of preaching from it.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to classic Protestantism in recent times has been the New Perspective on Paul. What has made it so difficult is that many of its advocates come from within evangelicalism and have such a deep understanding of and reverence for Scripture. So much of what someone like **N.T. Wright** writes is good and helpful. Certainly we must be thankful for his robust defence of the historical resurrection of Christ. Read his Faraday Lecture at Cambridge earlier this year, 'Can a Scientist Believe in the Resurrection?',⁵ and rejoice that Christ has given his church someone who can so ably commend orthodox Christianity and defend it against its cultured despisers. Nevertheless I cannot go along with him in regard to justification by faith. I don't pretend to have read everything he has written on the matter or even always to understand him, but what I have read does not seem to add up when weighed against the Bible. Of course he argues that what he is doing is simply what the Reformers did in going back to the Bible. That is where he must argue the case one way or the other. Wright makes some valid points on the role of justification in

answering the question, 'Who now belongs to God's people?' which he asks in *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*.⁶ But justification is also about how sinners under God's wrath can be accepted and forgiven by God through faith on the basis of Christ's finished sacrifice and imputed righteousness. It seems to me that if we lose this we will undermine classic Protestantism. I sat in a conference once as a jobbing pastor, surrounded by academic theologians, listening to Wright on this subject. Many erudite questions were asked, but the one I wanted to ask and wished I had was, what his teaching means for me as a Protestant pastor? If he was right then 500 years of not only Protestant theology, but Protestant spirituality was wrong. Not only our confessions, but our hymns – 'Jesus your robe of righteousness', 'Jesus the name high over all', 'Yes, finished the Messiah dies' – and the spirituality they express is wrong. In principle he may be right. If what we believe on justification is not biblical, then we must change – we are Protestants after all! But there will be a price. We will lose a spirituality that has at its heart the imputed righteousness of Christ and I suspect that in its place will come a much more 'catholic' spirituality. Before I deconstruct the classic Protestant theology and spirituality of the people under my pastoral care I want to make sure that the proposed alternative is right. I think Wright and others would say that the choice is not that stark. They are only changing some of the categories but offering essentially the same thing. Perhaps in some respects, but I suspect that there is something much more fundamental at stake. In order to understand what is fundamentally at stake I recommend *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ*⁸ by Cornelis Venema. For a clear and straight-forward analysis of the New Perspective and exposition of the classic doctrine of justification this can hardly be beat. Venema is in no doubt about what is at stake in this debate. He has also written a much shorter book that distils the larger one. *Getting the Gospel Right* is a useful summary that helps keep the issues in one's head as well as being a helpful introduction to the issue for thoughtful Christians. But in addition to reading about justification we must preach the doctrine with boldness, clarity and joy. Perhaps this is an issue

because even among classic Protestants it is less a living reality and more a confessional commitment. The late Francis Schaeffer understood how important this was with his emphasis on a moment by moment appropriation of the finished work of Christ and that the absence of this produces a cold, hard and judgmental evangelicalism that is unattractive and discredits the gospel. Let's love, live and preach the classic and, more importantly, the biblical doctrine of justification.

Someone who does that and who has ably defended the doctrine is John Piper. His recent book *What Jesus demands of the world*⁹ is vintage Piper with its careful exposition of Scripture, warm-hearted application and passion for God's supremacy in all things. When there is so much talk today of the true message of Jesus, Piper puts before us the gracious demands of Jesus in all their radical simplicity. Here is a book, divided into 50 short chapters, to read meditatively over a period of time in order to deepen your commitment to Christ.

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The Lloyd-Jones Memorial Lecture
at the John Owen Centre for Theological Study
24th September 2007

Introduction

The subject of my lecture this evening is 'The Evangelistic Preaching of Lloyd-Jones – Lessons for Today'. I have chosen this subject because I believe that we need to give very careful thought to the whole matter of evangelism in evangelical and Reformed churches today. It is a subject which, I believe, merits our closest attention at this time.

There can be little doubt, I think, that Reformed churches in Britain face an evangelistic crisis. The crisis does not consist in a lack of evangelistic activity. The crisis consists in the fact that, despite a great deal of activity, we see in our churches relatively few conversions from the world – by which I mean the conversion of men, women and children from an entirely non-Christian, unbelieving background. It is true, thankfully, that some branches of evangelicalism, and some Reformed churches, are experiencing real numerical growth. There are undoubtedly encouraging developments of various kinds in different evangelical churches across the country. Nevertheless, I suggest that, overall, the picture in evangelical and Reformed churches in Britain today is largely disappointing, in terms of numbers of conversions from the world.

Let me repeat. The crisis that we face is not due to a lack of evangelistic activity. There is generally, I suggest, a fairly high level of activity in our churches, the main aim of which is, one way or another, to reach unbelievers – tract distribution, book-stalls, friendship evangelism, men's breakfasts, Christianity Explored groups, mothers and toddlers groups, and so on. I'm sure, too, that we are regularly reminded by those who preach to us of our responsibility as believers to share our faith with those around us, as opportunity arises, and, although we probably all experience some level of guilt at our failure to

witness to others as much as we feel we ought to, I'm sure that there is a significant amount of personal witnessing and evangelism taking place in our communities. No, the problem is not, lack of activity.

But if lack of activity is not the problem, what is? It is not my intention to provide a complete answer to that question – that would, in any case, be beyond me. But I do want to highlight this evening two aspects of our approach to evangelism which, I believe, warrant our serious and sustained attention – indeed, two areas in which what is needed is a thorough and urgent work of real reformation. I want to argue, firstly, that over the last few decades evangelism in British evangelicalism has suffered from a *serious imbalance* in its approach; and, secondly, that there are several aspects of our evangelistic preaching which may require some *serious attention*.

To help us in our analysis I have chosen to take as our example the evangelistic preaching of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones. I do so, not because I believe him to have been in some way infallible or beyond reproach. (I do not believe in hagiography.) I take him as our example, simply because here was a man who ministered over a lengthy period in our capital city, with very significant and evident evangelistic success. Though he eschewed publicity, and certainly never published numbers of conversions or anything of that sort, it is clear from anecdotal evidence that a large number of people, from many different backgrounds and walks of life, were converted under his long ministry. While he was the minister at Westminster Chapel, membership grew from about 520 at the end of the Second World War to around 700 in the 1960s, making it one of the largest churches, in terms of membership, in London. The numbers actually attending the services were, of course, significantly greater – one author states that, between 1948 and 1968, average attendance on a Sunday morning was around 1500; in the evenings, when the service was consistently

and deliberately evangelistic, that number rose to around 2000.

I suggest to you, therefore, that here is a man whose evangelistic ministry is, at the very least, worth some study and attention and from whom we can learn, to the benefit of our own ministries. God, by his Spirit, chose to bless Lloyd-Jones's evangelistic ministry with fruit in the form of conversions, in a way which he has not chosen to bless the ministries of most of us who preach today. I accept, of course, that Lloyd-Jones was an exceptional man with exceptional gifts, and that we are, most of us at least, ordinary men and women, with ordinary gifts. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that that fact in itself provides a complete answer to the situation in which we find ourselves today. Of course, it may be that God, in his sovereignty and for his good and perfect reasons, is simply choosing not to bless us with conversions in any great numbers at this time. It may be that we are doing everything as we ought to, and that it is simply a matter of persevering in the same way, continuing in prayer, and hoping that sooner or later we shall see better days. But, personally, I think that that is not the answer either. As I have said, I believe that our approach and our practice at present require serious attention and, indeed, reform. I believe that Lloyd-Jones has some significant and important lessons for us, as we seek to engage in that reform.

Serious imbalance

At the start of this lecture I suggested that there is some *serious imbalance* in our whole approach to evangelism today. I want now to turn to that subject. What concerns me is that, in my estimation, we have so emphasised the role and responsibility of every church member and every Christian in personal evangelism, that we are at the present time giving insufficient weight and attention to the responsibility of the minister of the gospel to proclaim that gospel regularly and publicly in a manner that is specifically designed to

address unbelievers.

Lloyd-Jones gave enormous emphasis, throughout his own ministry, to preaching that was specifically evangelistic in this way. Some may be surprised at this, but the fact is that Lloyd-Jones saw himself, first and foremost, not as a Bible teacher but as an evangelist. It is worth pausing for a moment and considering this point. It is of the greatest importance. Most of us, I suspect, know Lloyd-Jones's ministry primarily through his published sermons and addresses. Some of us, and I am one, never had the privilege of hearing him in person, though we may have heard him on tape or CD. Our view of his ministry, therefore, is formed by what we read, and the fact is that most of the published material that is available is of Bible teaching aimed primarily at Christians – the series of studies on Romans, the sermons on Ephesians, and so on. As a result, we have the impression that that was the main purpose of his ministry – but that is quite a wrong impression.

I can demonstrate that by two very simple facts. Firstly, he consistently devoted his Sunday evening service to evangelism. The sermon on the Sunday evening was always evangelistic. Secondly, when he preached elsewhere during the week, as he often did, again his preaching would frequently be evangelistic. One may reasonably conclude that a very substantial proportion of Lloyd-Jones's lifelong ministry was devoted to specifically evangelistic preaching.

This is how he saw himself – as an evangelist. He was not interested simply in building up the people of God. Important though that task was, he believed that he was called also – even primarily – to take this gospel to the world outside and to reach unbelievers of every kind with its message of power and love and deliverance.

I believe, therefore, that many of us need, on this matter, to make a significant adjustment in how we view Lloyd-Jones. He was an evangelist. Indeed, he saw this as one of the primary, if not the primary,

role of the minister of the gospel. He saw the Sunday evening service where he was minister as the main evangelistic thrust of that church, and all the other evangelistic efforts of the church, formal or informal, fed into this great, weekly evangelistic event. Truly, as he once said, he held an evangelistic campaign every week. This, I think, presents a very clear and important challenge to us. Where do we see the main thrust of our church's evangelism? When we discuss evangelism in our elders' meetings and in our members' meetings, or when we are simply thinking about the subject ourselves, individually, what kind of activities do we concentrate on? I suspect that many of us, if asked, would think of our church's evangelism primarily, and perhaps exclusively, in terms of the efforts of individual church members, witnessing amongst the friends, acquaintances and colleagues with whom we mix daily. Or we might think of the more organised church evangelism in which we engage – door-to-door work, handing out tracts, perhaps running a stall on the local market. That's what we mean, when we think of our church's evangelism.

Lloyd-Jones would, I am sure, have viewed all those things as legitimate, valuable activities; he was certainly supportive of that kind of activity at Westminster Chapel. In 1947, he wrote in his annual letter to members of the Chapel that, 'the work of evangelism is to be done regularly by the local church and not by sporadic efforts and campaigns'. In 1956, on a visit to Los Angeles, Lloyd-Jones said on this subject: 'When the local church has a spirit of evangelism, members tell others about Christ, and through personal contact among friends, acquaintances and business associates bring many into the church.' In a sermon on sanctification, from John 17, he said, quite simply, 'we must recognise that the plain and clear teaching of Scripture is that every single Christian person is an evangelist'.

Moreover, he emphasised strongly the need for holiness of life in the believer, if his witness is to be

effective – a note that perhaps is too often missing in our exhortations to witness today. He says,

'If Christians are to evangelise the world, they themselves must be right, there must be no contradiction between the message and the life ... All our elaborate efforts to get people to come to church are going to be useless if, when they come, they find the message contradicted within the church herself.... When people are sanctified, they will act as evangelists.'

Evangelism, then, is something which should be going on all the time, and in which all in the local church should be involved in one way or another. But – and this is my point – in Lloyd-Jones's view, personal witness had to be complemented by regular, strong evangelistic preaching in the local church. His expectation was that personal witness would lead to unbelievers coming to hear the preacher expound the gospel message.

This, I believe, is where evangelicalism in our generation suffers from what I have called a serious imbalance. Our emphasis upon every-member evangelism, though right and biblical in itself, has, I suggest, tended to eclipse the equally important – perhaps even primary – role of preaching as the evangelistic engine of church growth. The responsibility of every believer to witness for Christ is undoubtedly there in the Scriptures – we have the example of the Jerusalem believers, scattered by persecution, who, we are told in Acts 8, 'went about preaching the word'. We have Peter's exhortation, in his first letter, that we should, all of us, be 'always ... prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you'. We have the grave warnings of the Lord Jesus himself against being ashamed of him before men. But when we stand back from these individual texts, important as they are in themselves, and ask ourselves the question: on whose shoulders does it seem that the responsibility for evangelism primarily lay, and who is that we see doing most of the evangelism in the New Testament – the answer

is clear. It was, first of all, the apostles who had this responsibility, and whom we see discharging it across the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, and then also their helpers and assistants. How did they discharge that responsibility? By going around preaching – proclaiming publicly this gospel – in whatever situation they could find – synagogues, hired lecture halls, private homes, the market-place or wherever. That is the position in the New Testament. These men felt a serious duty to ensure the regular, public proclamation of the message of the gospel to unbelievers.

The question arises then, on whom does this responsibility now lie? – not simply to respond to opportunities when they arise, as is the duty of every believer, but to make opportunities, imaginatively and appropriately to local conditions – to ensure the regular, public proclamation of this message to unbelievers. Well, in answer to that, I would draw your attention to Paul's exhortation to the young pastor of the church in Ephesus, Timothy, that, as part of the solemn charge delivered to him as a minister of the gospel, he was to 'do the work of an evangelist'. He, the pastor, was to carry on this work, in the town where the Lord had placed him. Now, it is very striking that nowhere in the New Testament epistles do we see the kind of sustained exhortation to personal evangelism that is so often heard from our pulpits and which seems now to be taken to be the primary, if not the only, valid approach to evangelism today. But we do see in the New Testament a solemn command to a pastor to engage in the work of evangelism.

Please do not misunderstand me. I agree that, as believers, we all have some level of responsibility in the area of evangelism, as I have already, I hope, made clear. I am not arguing about that. My point is to do with balance. I am arguing that we have the balance wrong and that our emphasis upon personal evangelism has led us to neglect this other emphasis in Scripture – the responsibility of the minister to

ensure that he regularly preaches the gospel to unbelievers. My prayer is that we urgently redress this imbalance, that our preachers and pastors commit to take on again the responsibility to 'do the work of an evangelist' – to recover in our thinking and in our practice the vital place of regular evangelistic preaching in our churches today.

I appeal, therefore, to preachers and pastors amongst us to examine our own ministries. Do we really give sufficient time and space to preaching that is specifically evangelistic? As we look ahead to what we will be preaching in the coming weeks, do we deliberately plan to include regularly in our schedule, sermons that are aimed primarily at the unbeliever, that seek to expose him or her to a fully-orbed gospel message? And for those who are not preachers, do you encourage your pastor to do this? Do you tell him that you have friends who are not saved, who you want to bring to hear the gospel, and please could he let you know when he will next be preaching in that way so that you can invite those friends to hear it? And do you pray urgently and consistently for your pastor, that God would pour down upon him the Holy Spirit, that as he prepares to preach evangelistically and as he delivers those sermons, God would move in power upon the unsaved who are listening, that they would be convicted of sin and converted to Christ?

Before I leave this first point, let me add just one thing. I am not arguing necessarily that we should all make every Sunday evening service an evangelistic occasion, as Lloyd-Jones did. That was how he decided to do it. We are not bound to follow him slavishly in that. What we each need to do is to assess carefully our own situations, and decide for ourselves when and where to do our regular evangelistic preaching. It may be on a Sunday – or it may be at some other time of the week. It may be in the context of the local church meeting – or it may be that we conclude it would be more effective to hold meetings elsewhere – in a village hall, in the

open-air, or some other suitable location. These are points which will differ from one situation to another. The vital thing is that we make a firm decision to engage regularly in the proclamation of the gospel message to unbelievers.

Aspects requiring serious attention

I suggested also, at the start of this lecture, that there are several aspects of our evangelistic preaching which require serious attention. That, of course, is a risky thing to say, in the presence of preachers. Perhaps I speak mostly to myself and my own preaching. In any event, I want now to turn to examine, more briefly, five specific aspects of Lloyd-Jones's evangelistic preaching, from which I believe we can learn for the benefit of our own preaching.

First: Lloyd-Jones in his evangelistic preaching gave a great deal of time and energy to the matter of sin. This is evident from a brief perusal of any of the published volumes of his evangelistic sermons – look, for example, at the volume of Old Testament evangelistic sermons published by the Banner of Truth, or the volume of his evangelistic sermons on Isaiah 1, entitled, *God's Way Not Ours*. Lloyd-Jones's aim in taking this approach was twofold – the glory of God, and the salvation of souls. He held that the primary goal of preaching the gospel is the glory of God. This came as a priority even before the saving of souls. In an address to the leaders of the Crusaders' Union in 1942, on the subject of the presentation of the gospel, Lloyd-Jones laid down a number of what he saw as foundational principles for evangelistic preaching. The first of these he expressed as follows: 'The supreme object of this work is to glorify God. That is the central thing. That is the object that must control and override every other object. The first object of preaching the gospel is not to save souls; it is to glorify God. Nothing else, however good in itself, or however noble, must be allowed to usurp that first place.'

To this end, therefore, it is necessary for the preacher

to expound fully the character and attributes of God, including his holiness which features so prominently in Scripture. Necessarily this involves expounding God's utter opposition to and hatred of sin, and his settled determination to punish sin which the Bible calls his wrath. To ignore these matters in evangelistic preaching, or to downplay them, is to present a god who is not the God of the Bible.

Sin must be preached, also, Lloyd-Jones believed, because men and women need to be given a reason to come to Christ for salvation. The great danger for the preacher is to try to persuade his hearers to come to Christ only on the grounds of all the good things Christ offers them. Lloyd-Jones believed that approach to be fundamentally mistaken. The biblical pattern is first to demonstrate to man that he is a sinner and that he is therefore subject to the wrath of God and eternal punishment in hell. This requires the preacher to seek to impress the reality of these things on the minds of his hearers. We need to note that Lloyd-Jones deliberately aimed to do precisely this.

'I am not afraid of being charged,' he said, 'as I frequently am, of trying to frighten you, for I am definitely trying to do so. If the wondrous love of God in Christ Jesus and the hope of glory is not sufficient to attract you, then, such is the value I attach to the worth of your soul, I will do my utmost to alarm you with a sight of the terrors of Hell'.

Can anyone accuse us, I wonder, of being too ready to frighten our hearers by the terrors of hell and the wrath of God against their sin?

Only after the preacher has sought to convince his hearers of these terrible truths, and impress them clearly and urgently upon their minds and their hearts, argued Lloyd-Jones, is it appropriate for him then to urge his hearers to repent and come to Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. 'There is not much point', he said, 'in trying to consider the theme of God's love until one has first

of all considered the question of sin'. He told a meeting of the Congregational Union in 1944 that 'it was not the wooing note which was needed but the note of judgment. We must convict men of sin and make them feel that they [are] under the condemnation of God.'

I believe that we need to examine our own attempts at evangelistic preaching, in the light of these principles. If nothing else, Lloyd-Jones's approach surely condemns any attempt simply to entertain our hearers and attract them into the kingdom by means which avoid the difficulties of pinpointing and convicting of sin. Sadly, I believe we are too prone to fall to this temptation. To preach the wrath of God, to seek to bring true, deep, lasting conviction of sin to our hearers is difficult, and the flesh rebels at the thought. Yet, if we are to be true to our commission as preachers, it is absolutely necessary. There is no other way.

There is a subtle danger at work here. We have a tendency, as evangelicals, to subscribe in theory to the doctrine of the wrath of God, but to avoid it in our actual practice of evangelism. In his exposition of Romans chapter 1 (which, incidentally, Iain Murray says is the clearest statement of Lloyd-Jones's approach to evangelism anywhere in his published works), Lloyd-Jones has this to say – and his words, spoken in the mid-1950s, seem just as relevant today as they were then: There is a section of evangelicalism, he says,

'who do believe in the wrath of God; they accept it because it is in the Scriptures. These believe in it and accept it in theory, but they deny it in practice ... 'Oh yes', they say, "we believe in the wrath of God, but you have got to be careful, you know, and especially in these days. You don't put that first, because if you put that first, people will not come and listen to you. Modern young people would be put off by that. You must attract", they say. So, in the interests of evangelism, in the interests of attracting people, they deliberately do not start, as Paul does, with the wrath of God...

"Perhaps you could do that sort of thing one hundred years ago [they say], but you just cannot now; you must make the gospel attractive to people."

Sadly, that advice has not, I think, on the whole been heeded by evangelicalism. And so we have a situation today in which the philosophy is: we have to get people to hear this gospel; but to get them to hear, we must attract them in; and so the entire event, to which we invite them, must be planned on this basis – it must be attractive, it must make people feel comfortable. The last thing we must do, according to this philosophy, is to make newcomers to our meetings feel uncomfortable. But, argues Lloyd-Jones, that is precisely what we must do, if we are to be faithful to the biblical pattern for evangelism. Of course, this does not mean that we are not to be welcoming to newcomers, or that we do not seek to make the facilities in which we meet comfortable and attractive, or that we are obscure or antiquated in what we do in our meetings. But we must be absolutely clear about our first objective in evangelistic preaching, which is to bring home to our hearers the reality of sin and of their terrible state of danger before a holy and wrathful God, and therefore of their urgent need for salvation.

And so there is no place, it seems to me, for the razzmattazz – the jovial master-of-ceremonies, the jaunty tone, the jokes, the over-emphasis upon music, the downright entertainment – that sadly seems to be so often associated with evangelistic events today. No, we urgently need a whole-hearted return to serious gospel preaching, with a clear and prominent emphasis upon the awful holiness of God and the terrible condition of the sinner.

This has consequences, too, for those who are not preachers, in this sense: what kind of preaching do you want to bring your unsaved friends to? If you are embarrassed by too much preaching on sin, if you feel uncomfortable with the idea of inviting your friends and acquaintances to preaching which, if it is successful, will make them feel very

uncomfortable indeed, in order to do them good, then you need to examine your own approach to this whole question. A true and loving concern for your neighbour, coupled with a right desire for the glory of God, will overcome these fears and cause you to desire in your pastor and in those who preach in your church the kind of evangelistic preaching that Lloyd-Jones both taught and himself exemplified.

Second: Lloyd-Jones held that the great objective of evangelistic preaching was to bring sinners into a right relationship with God. The aim is not simply to fill their heads with right doctrine; nor is it to bring them to make some kind of decision; it is not about trying to persuade them to conform to certain evangelical church practices, or to adopt a particular kind of morality; and it is certainly not about trying to reform society. Lloyd-Jones was always concerned to show that sin was more than a matter simply of what we do wrong. It is a much deeper and more serious issue than that. The sinner's problem is that he has no living relationship with the living God. This is the essence of sin – man in rebellion against God. People will accept that they may have done wrong, but they hate to be told that they are all wrong in their relationship with God – that the root of their problem is in fact a hatred of God. Lloyd-Jones tells of a man who used to attend his preaching.

‘He did not mind my condemning particular sins’, said Lloyd-Jones, ‘he knew he was guilty of them. What he could not stand was hearing me say that quite apart from what he did, he was a sinner, that he was in the wrong relationship to God. He was ready to improve himself, but he did not like the idea that he needed to be born again.’

That is precisely the point – we may preach about sins, but we do not get to the heart of the matter until we begin to address the root problem of sin, of man's position before God – man in rebellion, in a state of hostility toward God. That is the problem. Time and again, in his evangelistic preaching,

Lloyd-Jones will impress this on his hearers – that the true nature of the problem that faces them is that, without Christ, they have no living relationship with God. This, he argues, lies at the root of all their other, more obvious problems. In a sermon on Jacob and Esau, he deals with this. He is preaching on Genesis 32, the period prior to the great meeting and re-union between the two estranged brothers. With great eloquence, he shows that Jacob thought his problems lay in his relationship with Esau. The application is obvious – the world is beset with problems which it thinks are its real problems, but in fact the true problem lies much deeper, and the world does not see it – nor did Jacob, until he was ‘left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day’. Then he knew – the real issue in his life was not his relationship with Esau, but his relationship with God. And that is the problem that lies at the root of every one of us, until we come to faith in Jesus Christ.

It is the business of the preacher to draw this out, in the minds of his hearers. The entire thrust of a gospel message should be to cause the sinner to see this and to seek reconciliation with God through Christ alone. Lloyd-Jones's sermon on Naaman, printed in the Banner's volume of his Old Testament evangelistic sermons, shows how he did this. He argues there that the Bible is really all about man's relationship with God. Sin spoils life, because it destroys that relationship. That is what happened in Eden, and ever since man has been plagued by the consequences – trying to live without God, but in rebellion against God. Man at his best is utterly unable to deal with this. He is powerless to do so and anyway ignorant of how to begin to resolve it. It is only the death of Christ that can bring the reconciliation that we need.

Again, we must all of us think this through for ourselves. Do we see Christianity first and foremost in terms of relationship – relationship with God?

Doctrine and theology, though of course essential, are not ends in themselves. Being a Christian is not, in its essence, about holding to certain truths, though of course it necessarily involves that. No, the believer is a believer first of all because he is in a living and personal relationship with the living God – we remember Christ's own words: 'This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' Is that how we understand the Christian faith? Is that how we preach it to sinners?

Third: and very importantly, is the way in which Lloyd-Jones structured his evangelistic sermons. Here, I believe we can easily get entirely the wrong idea. Most of us, I suspect, imagine that Lloyd-Jones always preached in the style that we see, for example, in his Romans series. There, he generally takes as his text a verse or two, or even part of a verse, and expounds it in great detail. Every nuance of meaning is examined, conflicting interpretations are considered, and one is argued for over the others. The introduction to the sermon is brief, consisting usually of reference to the text and a summary of what was considered last time. However, if we imagine that Lloyd-Jones's evangelistic sermons were like that, we would be utterly mistaken.

We must remember, again, that the Romans series was essentially Bible studies delivered on a Friday evening. They were designed for Christians, and they were not part of a Lord's Day service. To understand how Lloyd-Jones approached evangelistic preaching, we have to go elsewhere – to the published volumes of evangelistic sermons that I have already referred to, or to tapes or CDs of his preaching. There we find a completely different picture.

Lloyd-Jones understood that, in addressing the unbeliever, the preacher has to work a great deal harder than when he addresses the believer. The believer has a reason to listen – he wants to hear the Word of God, because he has the Spirit of God

dwelling within him. This is not true of the unbeliever. The preacher therefore has to make considerable extra effort to engage the attention of the unbeliever, when he comes to preach evangelistically. Otherwise, all his work will be in vain. In the first volume of his biography of Lloyd-Jones, dealing with his time as minister at Sandfields in South Wales, Iain Murray recounts a most interesting explanation that Lloyd-Jones gave of this point. This is his report of what Lloyd-Jones said:

'I felt that in preaching' – he means evangelistic preaching – 'the first thing that you had to do was to demonstrate to the people that what you were going to do was very relevant and urgently important. The Welsh style of preaching started with a verse and the preacher then told you the connection and analysed the words, but the man of the world did not know what he was talking about and was not interested. I started with the man whom I wanted to listen, the patient. It was a medical approach really – here is a patient, a person in trouble, an ignorant man who has been to quacks, and so I deal with all that in the introduction. I wanted to get the listener and then come to my exposition. They started with their exposition and ended with a bit of application.'

I fear that, too often, we also start with our exposition and end with a bit of application – even when we are trying to preach the gospel to the unbeliever. This is tremendously important, in my view. We urgently need to learn the art of drawing our hearers in, of speaking to them in such a way, at the beginning of the sermon, so that they want to hear more. We might put it like this – let us assume that it is the accepted practice in our churches, five minutes into the sermon, for anyone who does not want to listen further to get up and leave. How many would remain in our congregations, to hear us out? That is the test, really. If they remain only because custom and natural courtesy force them to stay in their seats, you can hardly be said to have caught their attention. No, we must learn to interest

our hearers – our unbelieving hearers – in what we have to say.

Of course, for Lloyd-Jones this most emphatically did not mean telling a series of jokes and personal anecdotes (though he was not totally averse to the occasional amusing comment or story). Our intention is of the utmost seriousness, and our preaching therefore must be in keeping with that intention. How did he go about it? Are there things we can learn from him, on this matter?

Lloyd-Jones believed that Christians need to be aware of what is going on in the world. This is how he put it:

You and I, you know, tend to live sheltered lives, and many of us don't know what's happening in the world in which we are living. We are not to become little ghettoes. We are living in the world and we are to know its condition. We are to be aware of what is happening.

And so, in his own ministry, he spoke a great deal about contemporary issues and events – the war and its aftermath; hopes for world peace; fear of nuclear attack. He spoke of the kind of moral and religious thinking that was current in those days, and with which his hearers would have been familiar from newspapers and radio broadcasts, as well as from general conversation. These were the things that dominated the outlook of the people he was addressing at Westminster Chapel in the late 1940s and 1950s and Lloyd-Jones brought them into his sermons – he was determined to show that Christianity is real and relevant and down-to-earth – not in the sense that it provides a direct answer to the world's problems, but in the sense that it gets to grips with the true problem that underlies all the others – the problem of man's sin. But he takes people there with him – he does not expect them to see what he sees, without his carefully demonstrating his case to them. He takes them, in other words, from where they are and brings them to where he believes they need to be. We urgently

need to learn to do the same.

Then he would use his text to the full. Often he would take an Old Testament narrative passage, from which to preach evangelistically – the story of Naaman, Jacob and Esau, the Philistines and their god Dagon, and so on. He would re-tell the biblical narrative in a gripping manner, demonstrating as he did so its great relevance to his hearers, despite the cultural and chronological divide between them. So, as Moses stands in awe before God at the burning bush, we the hearers are also brought to that same point of awe in the face of the holiness of God. We are made to feel the guilt and shame of David's sin, as we see in it our own sin; we tremble with Felix, as the preacher reasons with us of righteousness, self-control and judgment to come; we are rebuked with Naaman as we realise that our pride in our own abilities and remedies for our problems is hateful to God, and we submit humbly to the healing that only God can bring. Lloyd-Jones made his hearers feel the reality of the experiences of the men and women of the Scriptures, as they come into contact with the word of the living God, and either reject it or submit to it. Again, we must learn to do the same.

Lloyd-Jones used illustrations. It is extraordinary that it is sometimes suggested that he avoided illustrations, or that he was not very good at them. Such views are overturned by his evangelistic preaching, which is full of illustrations, even including personal anecdotes. In a sermon delivered in 1972, on 1 Timothy 1 verses 12 and 13, Lloyd-Jones illustrates the nature of unbelief from a visit that he and his wife made in Northern Ireland, where they were taken to a point from which Scotland ought to have been visible. It was not, because of mist. The fact that they could not see Scotland did not mean, said Lloyd-Jones, that Scotland did not exist. The problem lay with the mist. So it is with the unbeliever, he went on. The unbeliever (he was speaking of the apostle Paul,

before his conversion) does not believe the truths of Scripture. But the problem does not lie in Scripture and its truths; the problem lies in the atmosphere, the condition of unbelief in which he lies – which shrouds his understanding and prevents him from seeing the truth. Lloyd-Jones went on, with another illustration of the same point, quoting the aphorism ‘all seems yellow to the jaundiced eye’. That is quite literally true, he said, but there is nothing wrong with the eye or the brain; the problem lies in the jaundiced blood which contains a pigment which gives everything an apparent yellow tinge. So it is with the unbeliever and unbelief. Then he gives yet another illustration of the same point, this time taken from poetry and music. Read his evangelistic sermons for yourself, or – even better – listen to them on tape or CD and see how much illustration he puts in.

We also, then, need to learn to interest our unbelieving hearers – to draw them in, to give them solid reasons for wanting to listen to what we have to say. We must sustain their interest, by demonstrating how relevantly the Bible speaks to their situation, and we must make our meaning plain and interesting by illustrating the truths which we are seeking to expound with illustrations and stories taken from everyday life. This takes time and thought and effort. It means that we may need to take longer over the preparation of our evangelistic sermons than we do over other sermons – that was certainly true of Lloyd-Jones, at the start of his ministry, when he would write out his evangelistic sermon each week. We too need to take great pains in our efforts to reach the unbeliever with the gospel.

Fourth: and following on from that point, Lloyd-Jones believed that evangelistic preaching, like any other kind of preaching, must be in strong in propositional content. Or, if you like, it must be doctrinal preaching. I do not want to stay long on this point, but I make it because I believe it to be an

important corrective to much that goes on today in the name of evangelism. Lloyd-Jones was very clear that gospel preaching had to have real, substantial content. The truth had to be presented. It was not just a matter of giving a few testimonies, telling a few stories about the personal journeys that different people have made to find Christ. The church, said Lloyd-Jones in a sermon on Paul’s encounter with Felix and Drusilla, is resorting to all kinds of methods to interest and attract men, thinking that that is the way to do it. But what did Paul do? He didn’t engage in dialogue or discussion with them. He didn’t just give them his testimony. He didn’t tell them stories, sing choruses or pop music to them. He preached the truth to them. He reasoned with them, and made them think. The unbeliever is ignorant, argued Lloyd-Jones. He must be confronted with the truth; the preacher must make him think it out, must reason with him, and drive him to the conclusion that the Bible draws, that he is a man under sin who needs the salvation that only Christ can provide.

What are the great truths that the evangelistic preacher, in particular, must present to his hearers?

‘Our first call’, said Lloyd-Jones, ‘is to declare in a certain and unequivocal manner the sovereignty, the majesty, and the holiness of God; the sinfulness and the utter depravity of man, and his total inability to save and to rescue himself; and the sacrificial, expiatory, atoning death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on that cross on Calvary’s hill, and His glorious resurrection, as the only means and only hope of human salvation.’

Our evangelistic preaching, too, must be strong in the presentation of biblical truth, and these are the truths that it must present.

Fifth: finally, any assessment of Lloyd-Jones’s evangelistic preaching must emphasise his biblical conviction that all our preaching is useless without the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit. Lloyd-Jones never assumed that the Spirit would accompany his preaching – he never took that for

granted. He recognised that the preacher is to seek the Lord for the blessing of his Spirit on the preaching. The preacher is to be a man who is himself wholly submitted to the Lord, in heart and life, and who seeks to be so filled with the Holy Spirit that he may preach the life-giving words of the gospel to the salvation of souls. He recognises that, without the help of the Spirit, the task that the preacher faces is utterly hopeless. It is entirely beyond him. We can see this simply by considering the nature of the task. We have a message that first of all demands that man humbles himself. But that is the last thing that man in his sin will do. And so the sinner finds the message of the gospel impossible to accept. Lloyd-Jones put it like this:

What men find intolerable and insulting in the gospel is that it demands repentance and admission of wrong and of sin at the very outset. ... There is nothing that the natural man so hates and detests as the biblical view of sin... We do not dislike a gospel that talks of love and of forgiveness but we dislike a gospel of grace because that tells us that we are utterly undeserving of that love and mercy... The trouble about the gospel is that it regards us all as condemned helpless sinners.

And so the work is hopeless, without the power of the Spirit. However, it is only when we see something of the true depth and difficulty of the problem that we are compelled to cry out to God to pour out his Spirit upon us. So, in the address to the Crusader leaders that I mentioned earlier, Lloyd-Jones says this:

The only power that can really do this work is the Holy Spirit. Whatever natural gifts a man may possess, whatever a man may be able to do as a result of his own natural propensities, the work of presenting the gospel and of leading to that supreme object of glorifying God in the salvation of men, is a work that can be done only by the Holy Spirit.

This is a vital point. Unless we grasp it, we shall fall into the trap of an unbiblical evangelism. If we are not constantly conscious of our absolute dependence

upon the work of the Spirit, two things will happen. First: we will trim our message to what we think our hearers might accept. That is inevitable. Second: we will begin to rely upon methods and approaches to evangelism that we have devised, as the effective means to success. Our dependence upon the Lord will lessen; our prayers for God's blessing upon our efforts will reduce in both frequency and fervency; and we will become much more interested in questions of technique and details of what is to be done at evangelistic events and of how it is to be done, than in the much more important question of what message is to be conveyed at those events. That road leads to disaster – and sadly I fear that we are already quite a way down it.

No, we must be convinced in our own hearts and minds that we will achieve nothing without the work of Christ by his Spirit – that the entire exercise is utterly futile without that. We must, of course, think carefully about how we go about the work of evangelism – that is the whole point of this lecture. Of course, we must plan and organise and not simply do things in a particular way because we have always done them that way. We must be innovative and imaginative in the ways in which we seek to bring this message to those who need to hear it today. We must think of them, and seek to ensure that we really do communicate to them the gospel message, in their circumstances and situations. But above all, we must have this sense of utter inadequacy in the face of a humanly hopeless task, and that must drive us urgently to seek the help and blessing of the Spirit of God, who is the only agency able to make our efforts effective to the salvation of souls. Then we must go out in utter dependence upon him, to preach in all its glory the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who alone saves sinners.

Introduction

In Dan Brown's best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*, the villainous scholar called Teabing refers to 'the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great'.¹ We also find it to be a recurring theme in Muslim publications, such as *Before Nicea*, a recent publication by two Western converts to Islam:

Remember, these same Romans would later preside over the *Council of Nicea*, headed by the Pagan Roman Emperor, Constantine, who was himself considered to be an incarnation and embodiment of the sun god!! The Council of Nicea and other "councils" lead to the "official" and "orthodox" doctrines of which books should be placed into the Bible, the trinity and Jesus' date of birth being fixed to the 25th of December.²

Muslims believe that Jesus actually taught a unitarian doctrine of God and an ethical/soteriological system in keeping with that of Muhammad, but that Christian teaching was later distorted by people such as Paul and that the Council of Nicæa was the vehicle for the ultimate paganising of Christianity, where the canon of Scripture was fixed by excluding supposed unitarian gospels and by institutionalising Trinitarian doctrine. The belief that Constantine was a pagan who enforced this matter through the Council is a central focus of this conspiracy theory. In different ways, we also find Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and to some extent Seventh-Day Adventists also echo this accusation. Indeed, many Evangelicals do so, ranging from the bizarre Chick Publications-types who view Constantine as a pagan conspirator and corruptor of Christianity, to others who simply see him as confused, such as Ben Witherington III in his otherwise excellent book *The Gospel Code*, which attacks Brown's book.³ What therefore was Constantine's faith and how genuine was his Christianity? By 'Christian' we are not alleging that Constantine would necessarily qualify

for membership in a contemporary Evangelical church.

Did Constantine have ulterior motives in declaring himself to be Christian?

The first issue to consider is what motive would Constantine have to declare himself a worshipper of the Christian God? Conspiracy theorists, such as the Muslim polemicist Misha'al al-Kadhi has this to say about Constantine:

On the one hand, Emperor Constantine, the pagan emperor of the Romans, began to notice the increasing number of converts to the new faith among his subjects. They were no longer a petty fringe sect of no great concern to the empire, rather, their presence was becoming increasingly noticeable.⁴

In fact, Christians were very much a minority: 'At the time of Constantine's conversion (312) Christians made up a small minority of the empire's population, say 10 per cent'.⁵ Thus, there was no political incentive for Constantine to convert to an often-despised minority faith – in fact, by doing so, he endangered his support among the overwhelmingly pagan population. Moreover, the one group he needed to maintain his position as Emperor in the West and extend his power was the *army*, who had proclaimed him Emperor in York after the death of his father in 306. The army was amongst the *least* Christian sectors of Roman society. All that Constantine needed to do to gain Christian support – if he needed it at all – was to promise religious toleration, especially pertinent to the position of Christians after what they had suffered in the recent Great Persecution. This he did along with his ally (at the time) Licinius in the Edict of Milan:

Perceiving long ago that religious liberty ought not to be denied ... we had given orders that every man, Christians as well as others, should preserve the faith of his own sect and religion ... we have granted to these same Christians freedom and full liberty to

observe their own religion ... And we decree still further in regard to the Christians, that their places, in which they were formerly accustomed to assemble ... shall be restored to the said Christians.⁶

What about Constantine's conversion and vision/dream?

Constantine's conversion is usually dated to 312 prior to the battle at the Milvian Bridge by Rome. The earliest reference is found in the work of Lactantius (died c. 320), a tutor to Constantine's son Crispus, and therefore arguably an authoritative source both in terms of dating and of proximity to the person of Constantine himself:

Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the *heavenly sign* to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of Christ.⁷

This sign is known as the *Labarum*, the Chi-Rho symbol, after the Greek letters x r, the first two letters in name xristov *Christos*, the Greek for Christ. Lactantius presents the battle very much in terms of a supernatural conflict, with Constantine's pagan enemy Maxentius consulting the Sibylline books, a pagan Roman oracle, which apparently told him that 'On the same day the enemy of the Romans should perish'.⁸ The next witness is Eusebius of Caesarea, the famous church historian:

Being convinced, however, that he [*Constantine*] needed some more powerful aid than his military forces could afford him, on account of the wicked and magical enchantments which were so diligently practiced by the tyrant, he sought Divine assistance, deeming the possession of arms and a numerous soldiery of secondary importance, but believing the co-operating power of Deity invincible and not to be

shaken. He considered, therefore, on what God he might rely for protection and assistance. While engaged in this enquiry, the thought occurred to him, that, of the many emperors who had preceded him, those who had rested their hopes in a multitude of gods, and served them with sacrifices and offerings, had in the first place been deceived by flattering predictions, and oracles which promised them all prosperity, and at last had met with an unhappy end.⁹

Eusebius then declares that Constantine informed him of a miracle from the Christian God that provided guidance and aid. Eusebius was a member of Constantine's court. Thus, whilst we should not ignore possible propagandistic elements, the narrative has some authority:

Accordingly he called on him with earnest prayer and supplications that he would reveal to him who he was, and stretch forth his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven ... He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, Conquer by this. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle.¹⁰

As with the report from Lactantius, Eusebius informs us that a dream was then sent to Constantine:

in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.¹¹

The fact that Lactantius and Eusebius, both close

to Constantine, separately relate this narrative indicates that Constantine really believed that he had received some sort of supernatural indication from Christ.

Eusebius specifically claims that Constantine told him about the supernatural guidance, and also indicates that after receiving these supernatural manifestations, Constantine sent for Christians to understand more about the faith.¹² Eusebius then presents Constantine's conquest of Rome, where the Emperor indicated his faith in the Deity who supported him:

Accordingly, he immediately ordered a lofty spear in the figure of a cross to be placed beneath the hand of a statue representing himself, in the most frequented part of Rome, and the following inscription to be engraved on it in the Latin language: *by virtue of this salutary sign, which is the true test of valor, I have preserved and liberated your city from the yoke of tyranny. I have also set at liberty the Roman senate and people, and restored them to their ancient distinction and splendour.*¹³

In his earlier work *Church History*, Eusebius does not go into such detail, perhaps because he was much less personally acquainted with Constantine at that point, but nonetheless, he once again presents the conflict between Constantine and Maxentius as a supernatural battle

2 Constantine ... first took compassion upon those who were oppressed at Rome, and having invoked in prayer the God of heaven, and his Word, and Jesus Christ himself, the Saviour of all, as his aid, advanced with his Whole army, proposing to restore to the Romans their ancestral liberty.

3 But Maxentius, putting confidence rather in the arts of sorcery than in the devotion of his subjects, did not dare to go forth beyond the gates of the city.¹⁴

The pertinent factor is that Constantine directed prayer to the Christian God, and believed himself to have been guided and aided by this deity, as opposed

to one of the Roman pantheon.

The other indication that Constantine believed himself to have been directed and assisted by the Christian God is his conduct upon entry into Rome, where he overthrew the tradition of sacrificing to the Roman pantheon in a very public manner:

Constantine's next act did nothing to reassure anyone: in a scandalous break with tradition, he did not ascend the Capitoline Hill, where victorious generals were supposed to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods in the giant Temple of Jupiter Maximus.

Why did he not sacrifice? We may be sure that the Christian clergy with him had sternly warned him not to participate in any sacrifices to the Roman gods...

Constantine went straight to the palace, where he offered private prayers to the Christian God.¹⁵

It is hard to explain such extraordinary behaviour unless Constantine was convinced that he owed his triumph to the Christian God, and so he was prepared to listen to the servants of that God about attitudes to the pagan pantheon. Moreover, we should consider the logistics and strategic character of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge itself. Constantine had 'inferior forces', whilst Maxentius could easily have remained behind its indomitable walls.¹⁶ Instead, Maxentius left the security of Rome's walls to confront the enemy, even rasher when we consider that he had the river Tiber at his own back. Chadwick comments: 'It was such unaccountable folly that Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge (312) seemed a signal manifestation of celestial favour.'¹⁷

Pagan accounts of Constantine's conversion and faith: the Roman Senate

Of course, both Lactantius and Eusebius are Christian sources, and so the historical method will look for corroborating evidence from *antagonistic* i.e. pagan sources. The earliest pagan indication of

Constantine's belief in the Christian God is found in regard to the erection of the Arch of Constantine in 315 by the Senate of Rome to commemorate his victory. The inscription read:

To the emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus Maximus, Pius Felix Augustus, the Roman Senate and the People have [lit., has] dedicated [this] arch, [as] the mark for triumphs because, by the inspiration of divinity [and] by the greatness of [his] mind, he with his army has avenged with just weapons the republic at one time as much from the tyrant as from all his party. To the liberator of the city. To the founder of quiet.¹⁸

What is significant is that the pagan Senate ascribed Constantine's victory to *Instinctu Divinitatis* – the 'inspiration of divinity'. Professor Hall has suggested that a parallel, known to Constantine, is to be found in the phrase *instinctu divino* in Cicero's *De divinatione*, referring to prescience of future events.¹⁹ She continues:

The connotation of the phrase was preserved into late antiquity, not only by the continued study of Cicero but also through such authors as Livy, Seneca, the panegyrists, and Lactantius. Constantine demonstrated his knowledge of Cicero's text in a speech given in 324. The senate's appropriation of this term for the arch-inscription suggests that even pagans may have accepted some version of the "vision" of Constantine as early as 312–315.²⁰

Hall notes that the unusual character of the phrase indicates that the story of Constantine's vision/dream in 312 was current in Rome before the time of the erection of the Arch in 315:

Because an expression like *instinctu divinitatis* ... does not conform to the usual expressions of praise on triumphal arches, one is prompted to inquire further into the ideas that would have resonated in the minds of contemporary readers. A careful analysis of the contemporary implications of the term *instinctu*, as used in the arch inscription and other accounts,

suggests that the story of Constantine's "vision" (or "inspiration" by *divinitas*) was already current in Rome at a time close to the victory over the "tyrant."²¹

The fact that the story of the Emperor's vision was generally known to the Roman populace, of whatever religion, in the crucial period 312–315 indicates that the narrative of the supernatural guidance given to Constantine was not the invention of later Christian writers such as Lactantius and Eusebius, but most certainly goes back to Constantine himself. In connection with this, we should note that Hall also quotes a pagan panegyric (oration of praise) from 313, the year following Constantine's victory over Maxentius, which also indicates popular belief in a vision/dream that enabled the successful outcome:

According to the panegyrist, Constantine won a victory that was "divinely promised" by communicating in some way with God and disregarding unfavorable predictions given by soothsayers.

What god (*deus*), what majesty so immediately encouraged you, when almost all of your comrades and commanders were not only silently muttering but even openly fearful, to perceive on your own, against the counsels of men, against the warnings of soothsayers, that the time had come to liberate the City? ... It was plain to those who pondered the matter deeply ... that you sought no doubtful victory but one divinely promised.

Constantine's reliance on divine inspiration, rather than on soothsaying, coincides with the Ciceronian hierarchical categories of ways of foreknowing the future. Soothsaying was an artificial means, but dreams and visions were natural conduits of messages from divine forces. It is worth noting that while soothsaying had pagan connotations, dreams and visions were considered acceptable in the Christian tradition as ways to receive advice from God about future events.²²

It follows that Constantine's account of the vision/dream given by Christ must have been communicated to the general public. The Senate, being pagan, might have balked at naming Christ as the author of the victory over Maxentius, and so a more nebulous phrase such as the 'divinity' was employed: 'The inscription was carefully worded in terms that would not only honor the victor but would also be in harmony with the religious and cultural beliefs of the pagan senate.'²³

It should be noted that in Græco-Roman religion the god who acted as the object of divination and the giver of supernatural guidance, such as at the Delphic Oracle, was *Apollo*. Had Constantine believed that Apollo was his guide at the 312 battle, it is hard to imagine the Senate being reticent about naming that particular deity. Hall comments: '...the senators must have congratulated themselves on the ambiguity of expression that not only did not offend the *imperator*, but could also leave open avenues of further discussion of the exact nature of *instinctu divinitatis*.'²⁴

Pagan accounts of Constantine's conversion and faith: Zosimus, Eunapius and Julian

An important, though highly biased and polemical pagan source is found in the *Historia nova* by Zosimus, 'the early Byzantine pagan historian and civil servant'.²⁵ This is how Zosimus, writing about the late fifth and early sixth centuries, presents the Battle of Milvian Bridge:

Constantine, advancing with his army to Rome, encamped in a field before the city, which was broad and therefore convenient for cavalry. Maxentius in the mean time shut himself up within the walls, and sacrificed to the gods, and, moreover, consulted the Sibylline oracles concerning the event of the war. Finding a prediction, that whoever designed any harm to the Romans should die a miserable death, he applied it to himself, because he withstood those that

came against Rome, and wished to take it. His application indeed proved just. For when Maxentius drew out his army before the city, and was marching over the bridge that he himself had constructed, an infinite number of owls flew down and covered the wall. When Constantine saw this, he ordered his men to stand to their arms.²⁶

We see the same indications of a supernatural conflict, with Maxentius invoking the Roman gods and consulting the Sibylline oracles. However, rather than the vision and dream given by Christ, in this account Constantine sees a descent of owls, the species of bird associated with ill omens by Romans, notably in battles, and the fact that a flock of owls purportedly descended on Maxentius' geographical position for Romans would have spelled his doom. Zosimus was writing much later than our two previous sources, and his work has the polemical motive of showing that disaster followed the abandonment of the old religion.²⁷ He used as one of his sources the work by the pagan sophist Eunapius of Sardis called the *Lives of the Sophists*, written c. 395.²⁸ Whilst not examining the conversion of Constantine, he leaves no doubt that he considered Constantine to be a Christian, referring to the sophist Sopater trying to 'wean Constantine away from Christianity by the force of his learned arguments' and of the Emperor 'pulling down the most celebrated temples and building Christian churches'.²⁹

The other figure to consider is that of Julian the Apostate, a relative of Constantine, who later became Emperor. Julian wrote a satire entitled *The Caesars*, where he mocks Constantine trying to find a deity who would accept him:

There too he found Jesus, who had taken up his abode with her [*Pleasure*] and harangued all comers:

'Whosoever is an adulterer, whosoever is a murderer, whosoever is accused and wicked, let him be of good cheer and come; for I will wash him in this water and

at once make him clean, and, if he falls into the same sins again, I will allow him to smite his breast and strike his head and come clean.' To him Constantine came gladly, when he had conducted his sons forth from the assembly of the gods.³⁰

The important point is that Julian, as with Zosimus and Eunapius, considered Constantine to be a Christian. At this juncture we should refer to an allegation made by Julian and Zosimus in relation to the motivation of Constantine's conversion, although the only important fact for our consideration is that Constantine was considered to be a Christian. That allegation, implied in Julian's satire, and explicitly stated by Zosimus, is that Constantine only converted because of guilt over the death of his son Crispus and his own wife Fausta.

Zosimus claims that Crispus was suspected of an affair with Constantine's wife Fausta, and that subsequently, and successively, both were executed.³¹ In fact, the crisis seems to have been a dynastic dispute, with Fausta questioning the loyalty of Crispus, and after his execution herself dying, whether deliberately as a result of Constantine's anger at her false accusation or otherwise being unclear.³² Zosimus then makes some extraordinary claims about the aftermath and the reasons for the founding of Constantinople:

As he had these crimes on his conscience, and moreover, had paid no attention to his promises, he went to find the priests and asked them for expiatory sacrifices for his misdeeds; the latter had replied that no method of expiation existed which was effective enough to cleanse such impieties.³³

This seems a very fanciful notion: Roman Emperors before Constantine had often been very bloodthirsty, such as Nero and Caligula, and it does not seem that the pagan religious authorities had much problem accommodating them! Zosimus then states that an Egyptian from Spain, probably meaning Bishop Hosius (Ossius) of Cordoba, a close confidant of

Constantine, then met the Emperor and informed him that 'the Christian belief destroyed all sins and included the promise that unbelievers who were converted would immediately be purged of all crimes.'³⁴ Hearing this, Constantine 'detached himself from the ancestral rites' and converted.³⁵ Zosimus then states that 'When the traditional feast-day arrived, during the course of which the army had to climb up to the Capitol and carry out the traditional rites, Constantine ... withdrew from the holy ceremony and aroused the hatred of the senate and people.'³⁶

One major problem with this presentation is that Zosimus seems to have a very confused view of the historical timeline. The execution of Crispus occurred in 326 – whereas, as we have seen, there are already indications of Constantine's Christian faith as early as 312. This is the very point made by the early church historian Sozomen:

I am aware that it is reported by the pagans that Constantine, after slaying some of his nearest relations, and particularly after assenting to the murder of his own son Crispus, repented of his evil deeds, and inquired of Sopater, the philosopher, who was then master of the school of Plotinus, concerning the means of purification from guilt. The philosopher – so the story goes – replied that such moral defilement could admit of no purification. The emperor was grieved at this repulse, but happening to meet with some bishops who told him that he would be cleansed from sin, on repentance and on submitting to baptism, he was delighted with their representations, and admired their doctrines, and became a Christian, and led his subjects to the same faith.³⁷

We can see how the story was essentially a pagan polemic, and that the tales could not even agree with each other, with Zosimus claiming that Constantine approached the Roman pagan priests, whilst others claimed that the Emperor approached

Sopater. Sozomen refutes such claims by pointing to the problem with the timeline:

It appears to me that this story was the invention of persons who desired to vilify the Christian religion. Crispus, on whose account, it is said, Constantine required purification, did not die till the twentieth year of his father's reign; he held the second place in the empire and bore the name of Caesar and many laws, framed with his sanction in favor of Christianity, are still extant. That this was the case can be proved by referring to the dates affixed to these laws, and to the lists of the legislators.³⁸

Sozomen rightly points out that Constantine's pro-Christian legislation – framed together with his son, who was his second in command, *ante-dates* the killing of Crispus, which totally undermines any pagan polemic about Constantine embracing Christianity after the death of Crispus. Moreover, Sopater seems to have come into contact with Constantine subsequent to the Emperor's move to Byzantium, as Eunapius indicates in his work, and Sozomen also observes:

It does not appear likely that Sopater had any intercourse with Constantine whose government was then centered in the regions near the ocean and the Rhine; for his dispute with Maxentius, the governor of Italy, had created so much dissension in the Roman dominions, that it was then no easy matter to dwell in Gaul, in Britain, or in the neighboring countries, in which it is universally admitted Constantine embraced the religion of the Christians, previous to his war with Maxentius, and prior to his return to Rome and Italy: and this is evidenced by the dates of the laws which he enacted in favor of religion.³⁹

Finally, Sozomen makes the same point that we observed earlier – that the idea that Hellenistic religion could not provide expiation from grievous sin was simply not true:

But even granting that Sopater chanced to meet the emperor, or that he had epistolary correspondence with him, it cannot be imagined the philosopher was

l ignorant that Hercules, the son of Alcmena, obtained purification at Athens by the celebration of the mysteries of Ceres after the murder of his children, and of Iphitus, his guest and friend. That the Greeks held that purification from guilt of this nature could be obtained, is obvious from the instance I have just alleged, and he is a false calumniator who represents that Sopater taught the contrary.

I cannot admit the possibility of the philosopher's having been ignorant of these facts; for he was at that period esteemed the most learned man in Greece.⁴⁰

Zosimus further alleges that such was the uproar in Rome about the deaths of Crispus and Fausta that Constantine decided to quit the city to search for a new capital.⁴¹ Again, Zosimus gets the timeline wrong. Crispus was killed in 326; Constantine had already decided to establish Byzantium as the new capital in 324, following his victory over Licinius at Adrianople and Chrysopolis.⁴²

Did Constantine actually consider himself to be Christian?

Both the Christians and pagans of Constantine's era considered him to be a Christian and not a pagan. The final question is therefore: how did Constantine consider himself? Again, we are not investigating whether Constantine's conduct was in keeping with New Testament ethics, nor whether he would be successful in an application to join a modern Evangelical congregation. Our sole concern is whether Constantine believed himself to be a Christian.

We have already seen indications from the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius that Constantine stated that he had been guided by the Christian God at the 312 battle against Maxentius, and the pagan panegyric of the following year and the Senate's inscription on the Arch of Victory also point towards Constantine claiming supernatural guidance from Christ. The important point is that these all

derive from Constantine's personal testimony. Among the evidences in this regard are his letters: 'his letters from 313 onwards leave no doubt that he regarded himself as a Christian whose imperial duty it was to keep a united Church.'⁴³ The first we will examine is his *Second Letter to Anulinus* (the proconsul of Africa), issued in 313:

it is my will that those within the province entrusted to thee, in the catholic Church, over which Caecilianus presides, who give their services to this holy religion, and who are commonly called clergy men, be entirely exempted from all public duties, that they may not by any error or sacrilegious negligence be drawn away from the service due to the Deity, but may devote themselves without any hindrance to their own law. For it seems that when they show greatest reverence to the Deity, the greatest benefits accrue to the state.⁴⁴

This indicates that Constantine saw the proper worship of the Christian God as essential to the public welfare – a notion difficult to understand if he considered himself to be a pagan. In 314, Constantine sent a letter to Aelafius summoning the Council of Arles to resolve the Donatist controversy, which points to his own faith in the Christian deity:

since I am well aware that you also are a worshipper of the most High God, that I consider it by no means right that contentions and altercations of this kind should be hidden from me, by which, perchance, God may be moved not only against the human race, but also against me myself, to whose care, by His heavenly Decree, He has entrusted the direction of all human affairs, and may in His wrath provide otherwise than heretofore. For then shall I be able to remain truly and most fully without anxiety, and may always hope for all most prosperous and excellent things from the ever-ready kindness of the most powerful God, when I shall know that all, bound together in brotherly concord, adore the most holy God with the worship of the Catholic religion, that is His due.⁴⁵

Constantine here expresses the belief that he owes his reign to the providence of the Christian God, and that the Almighty might act in judgment against him and all humanity if the peace of the Church is disturbed. Parallel to this letter is another sent to Chrestus, bishop of Syracuse, inviting him to Arles concerning the same issue:

some, forgetful both of their own salvation and of the reverence due to the most holy religion, do not even yet bring hostilities to an end ... on account of all this it has happened that those very ones who ought to hold brotherly and harmonious relations toward each other, are shamefully, or rather abominably, divided among themselves, and give occasion for ridicule to those men whose souls are aliens to this most holy religion.⁴⁶

The significance of this letter is that Constantine seems to distinguish himself from 'those men whose souls are aliens to this most holy religion', implying that his own soul is not 'alien' to Christianity. The aftermath of the Council of Arles in 314 caused Constantine to issue this letter, which is explicit in its testimony of Christian faith:

Constantine Augustus, to his dearest brothers, the Catholic Bishops, Health! The everlasting and worshipful, the incomprehensible kindness of our God by no means allows the weakness of men to wander for too long a time in the darkness. Nor does it suffer the perverse wills of some to come to such a pass as not to give them anew by its most splendid light a saving passage, opening the way so that they may be converted to the rule of justice. I have indeed experienced this by many examples. I can also describe it from myself. For in me of old there were things that were far from right, nor did I think that the power of God saw anything of what I carried amongst the secrets of my heart. Surely this ought to have brought me a just retribution, flowing over with all evils. But Almighty God, who sitteth in the watchtower of Heaven, hath bestowed upon me gifts

which I deserved not. Of a truth, those things which of His Heavenly kindness He has granted to me, His servant, can neither be told nor counted.⁴⁷

Note that Constantine addresses the Bishops as 'brothers', that he acknowledges that he previously wandered in 'darkness', but that now he was 'converted to the rule of justice' through the kindness of Almighty God. He continues in this theme, again addressing the Bishops of 'Christ the Saviour' as 'my dearest brothers', and referring to those who separated themselves from the Catholic Church as having been turned by 'the wickedness of the devil'.⁴⁸ He refers to Christianity as 'the truth', and those who reject affiliation with the true Church as having 'joined themselves to the Gentiles' (i.e. pagans). Constantine comments that he himself awaits 'the judgement of Christ', and then makes a very clear distinction between how Christians ought to act, and how pagan conduct themselves:

Why then, as I have said with truth, do wicked men seek the devil's services? They search after worldly things, deserting those which are heavenly... They have made an appeal, as is done in the lawsuits of the pagans. For pagans are accustomed sometimes to escape from the lower courts where justice may be obtained speedily, and through the authority of higher tribunals to have recourse to an appeal. What of those shirkers of the law who refuse the judgement of Heaven, and have thought fit to ask for mine? Do they thus think of Christ the Saviour?⁴⁹

Again, Constantine explicitly differentiates himself from the pagans in this passage. A couple of years or so later, Constantine sent a letter to the bishops and people of Africa, in which he described Christianity as 'our faith': 'In no way let wrong be returned to wrong, for it is the mark of a fool to snatch at that vengeance which we ought to leave to God, especially since our faith ought to lead us to trust that whatever we may endure from the madness of men of this kind, will avail before God for the grace

of martyrdom.'⁵⁰ If we jump a few years, to the situation following the defeat of Licinius in the East, we find in a letter that the Emperor sent to the people of Palestine, that Constantine emphasises the difference between Christianity and paganism, notes how pagan oppressors such as (by implication) Maxentius and Licinius have suffered defeat, expresses belief in one God, and urges everyone to worship him:

To all who entertain just and sound sentiments respecting the character of the Supreme Being, it has long been most clearly evident ... how vast a difference there has ever been between those who maintain a careful observance of the hallowed duties of the Christian religion, and those who treat this with hostility or contempt ...

(And by Divinity is meant the one who is alone and truly God, the possessor of almighty and eternal power: and surely it cannot be deemed arrogance in one who has received benefits from God, to acknowledge them in the loftiest terms of praise.)...

it remains for all ... to observe and seriously consider how great this power and how efficacious this grace are, which have annihilated and utterly destroyed this generation ... of most wicked and evil men ... both to honor the Divine law as it should be honored.⁵¹

It is difficult to reconcile these passages with any idea that Constantine considered himself to be a pagan. Further evidence at this time comes from a letter to the people of the Eastern provinces, where he refers to the Great Persecution being the result of the oracle of Apollo declaring that '*the righteous men* on earth were a bar to his speaking the truth', the 'righteous' being identifies with the Christians, hence their persecution, and Constantine goes on to refer to this 'impious deliverance of the Pythian oracle' which 'exercised a delusive power' over the persecuting Emperors.⁵² Remember that Apollo was the Sun-god, and here Constantine refers to a major supposed function of this deity – oracular guidance

– as being ‘impious’ and ‘delusive’. In contrast, Constantine identifies with the Cross of the Christ:

Not without cause, O holy God, do I prefer this prayer to thee, the Lord of all. Under thy guidance have I devised and accomplished measures fraught with blessings: preceded by thy sacred sign I have led thy armies to victory: and still, on each occasion of public danger, I follow the same symbol of thy perfections while advancing to meet the foe.⁵³

Constantine also expressed his belief that Mankind was fallen in sin, and that God sent His Son to overcome the ‘powers of evil’ in the world, in words reminiscent of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: ‘And, although mankind have deeply fallen, and have been seduced by manifold errors, yet hast thou revealed a pure light in the person of thy Son, that the power of evil should not utterly prevail, and hast thus given testimony to all men concerning thyself.’⁵⁴

In a letter to Eusebius, Constantine hopes that people ‘will now acknowledge the true God’.⁵⁵ A letter to the churches following the Council of Nicæa has Constantine speaking about the observance of the date of Easter, in which he again clearly identifies himself with the faith of the Christians, referring to Christ as ‘*our Saviour*’, and His Passion, and ‘*our most holy religion*’:

it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin ... For we have it our power, if we abandon their custom, to prolong the due observance of this ordinance to future ages, by a truer order, which we have preserved from the very day of the passion until the present time. Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way. A course at once legitimate and honorable lies open to our most holy religion.⁵⁶

Following the Council, Constantine wrote a letter concerning Arius, where he compared the heresiarch

to Porphyry, the famous pagan writer who attacked Christianity, denoting him as ‘that enemy of piety’.⁵⁷

Had Constantine really considered himself to be a pagan, he would not have designated Porphyry in this way. In Constantine’s oration *To the Assembly of the Saints*, usually dated c.325, he refers to ‘the Spirit of the Father and the Son’, and attacks polytheism and idolatry, satirising the idea that the many gods breed to ‘excess’ and denouncing the sculptor ‘who idolizes his own creation, and adores it as an immortal god’.⁵⁸ He goes on to refer to ‘Christ, the author of every blessing, who is God, and the Son of God’.⁵⁹

One final point that is worthy of consideration is Constantine’s family. His mother Helena, was a Christian who helped to popularise pilgrimage to the Holy Land by her example, and his children were raised to be Christians. After all, Constantine secured the services of Lactantius – a Christian – to be the tutor of his children. If Constantine was actually a pagan, why would he do all this? There is thus a threefold testimony: the contemporary Christians considered Constantine to be a Christian, and not a pagan; the contemporary pagans considered him to be a Christian, and not a pagan; and Constantine considered himself to be a Christian, and not a pagan.

The Religious policy of Constantine

Chadwick notes that Constantine ‘even assigned a fixed proportion of provincial revenues to church charity’.⁶⁰ He gave the famous Lateran palace, formerly owned by his wife Fausta, to the Bishop of Rome.⁶¹ This probably happened in 313, and if so, coming so soon after his victory over Maxentius, it displays an extraordinary devotion to the Christians. In Rome, Constantine also ordered the construction of the original St. Peter’s basilica in c.326. In

Jerusalem, he had the Church of the Holy Sepulchre erected. On the Mount of Olives Constantine built the Church of the Ascension and at Bethlehem the Church of the Nativity. He also constructed major church buildings at Mamre and in Gaza.

Of course, it is the choice of Byzantium and the construction of the city of Constantinople that gives us further insight into the religious policy of Constantine. Constantine chose Byzantium as the site of his new capital in response to a divinely-sent dream:

God appeared to him by night, and commanded him to seek another spot. Led by the hand of God, he arrived at Byzantium... and here he was desired to build his ... In obedience to the words of God, he therefore enlarged the city formerly called Byzantium, and surrounded it with high walls.⁶²

Sozomen also observes – with evident glee – that the city had a definite Christian ethos, free from paganism:

As this city became the capital of the empire during the period of religious prosperity, it was not polluted by altars, Grecian temples, nor sacrifices; and although Julian authorized the introduction of idolatry for a short space of time, it soon afterwards became extinct. Constantine further honored this newly compacted city of Christ, named after himself, by adorning it with numerous and magnificent houses of prayer.⁶³

Eusebius also happily records the Christian character of the 'New Rome':

And being fully resolved to distinguish the city which bore his name with especial honor, he embellished it with numerous sacred edifices, both memorials of martyrs on the largest scale, and other buildings of the most splendid kind, not only within the city itself, but in its vicinity: and thus at the same time he rendered honor to the memory of the martyrs, and consecrated his city to the martyrs' God ... he

determined to purge the city which was to be distinguished by his own name from idolatry of every kind, that henceforth no statues might be worshiped there in the temples of those falsely reputed to be gods, nor any altars defiled by the pollution of blood: that there might be no sacrifices consumed by fire, no demon festivals, nor any of the other ceremonies usually observed by the superstitious.⁶⁴

Hence, Constantinople was a 'New Rome' indeed – resembling the old in terms of being the Imperial centre, having a Senate and so forth, but entirely innovative in its religious character:

A visitor to Constantinople soon after its foundation would have been struck by the fact that there was no public sign of pagan worship. The gods of Greece and Rome were conspicuously absent. If he were a pagan, he might walk to the Acropolis and gaze sadly on the temples of Apollo, Artemis, and Aphrodite, in which the men of old Byzantium had sacrificed, and which Constantine had dismantled but allowed to stand as relics of the past. From its very inauguration the New Rome was ostensibly and officially Christian. Nor did the statue of the founder, as a sun-god, compromise his Christian intention. In the centre of the oval Forum, which he laid out on the Second Hill just outside the wall of the old Byzantium, he erected a high column with porphyry drums, on the top of which he placed a statue of Apollo, the work of an old Greek master, but the head of the god was replaced by his own. It was crowned with a halo of seven rays, and looked towards the rising sun.⁶⁵

At this point we should recall the claim of *Before Nicaea* that 'The Pagan Roman Emperor, Constantine' was 'himself considered to be an incarnation and embodiment of the sun god!!' This may be based on a misunderstanding about the statue to which the quoted passage refers. The very fact that that it was originally a statue of Apollo, but was in a sense desecrated (from a pagan perspective) by being transformed into a statue of the Emperor militates

against this understanding. That Constantine was opposed to any pagan worship of himself is demonstrated by 'his rescript to the people of Hispellum (AD 337) where he allows them to establish a cult temple to his family but refuses to let it be "defiled by the conceits of any contagious superstition."' ⁶⁶ That is, Constantine was willing to have a *building* dedicated to his family, but not that pagan liturgical practices should be directed toward him.

The actual evidence suggests that the statue of the sun-god, transformed into the likeness of Constantine, was simply part of the decoration of Constantinople: 'Statues plundered from pagan shrines were used to adorn its squares and building, thus being secularized or even given a Christian interpretation.' ⁶⁷ A classic example is the fact that Constantine placed in the forum 'a statue of the mother goddess Cybele', although 'she was represented in attitude of prayer, which caused an uproar among the pagan populace.' ⁶⁸ Zosimus complains about this:

As there was at Byzantium a very large market-place ... at the end of one of them ... he erected two temples; in one of which was placed the statue of Rhea, the mother of the gods ... through his contempt of religion he impaired this ... changing the position of the hands. For it formerly rested each hand on a lion, but was now altered into a supplicating posture, looking towards the city. ⁶⁹

Again, by this action, Constantine was indicating that Rhea-Cybele was not a proper object of worship. In contrast, Eusebius eagerly reports the Christolatry of Constantine in his new capital:

On the other hand one might see the fountains in the midst of the market place graced with figures representing the good Shepherd, well known to those who study the sacred oracles, and that of Daniel also with the lions, forged in brass, and resplendent with

plates of gold. Indeed, so large a measure of Divine love possessed the emperor's soul, that in the principal apartment of the imperial palace itself, on a vast tablet displayed in the center of its gold-covered paneled ceiling, he caused the symbol of our Saviour's Passion to be fixed, composed of a variety of precious stones richly inwrought with gold. This symbol he seemed to have intended to be as it were the safe guard of the empire itself. ⁷⁰

One major change that Constantine enacted was that henceforth, the Lord's Day, i.e. Sunday, ceased to be a normal day of work, but received the public sabbatarian character that was typical of Britain until the closing decades of the twentieth century:

He also enjoined the observance of the day termed the Lord's day, which the Jews call the first day of the week, and which the pagans dedicate to the sun, as likewise the day before the seventh, and commanded that no judicial or other business should be transacted on those days, but that God should be served with prayers and supplications. He honored the Lord's day, because on it Christ arose from the dead, and the day above mentioned, because on it he was crucified. ⁷¹

Against any idea that Constantine set apart Sunday because it was 'the day of the Sun' in the sense of honouring the Sun-god, it should be noted that he also honoured other Christian festal days:

A statute was also passed, enjoining the due observance of the Lord's day, and transmitted to the governors of every province, who undertook, at the emperor's command, to respect the days commemorative of martyrs, and duly to honor the festal seasons in the churches: and all these intentions were fulfilled to the emperor's entire satisfaction. ⁷²

The Cross which he claimed to have supernaturally viewed and which he saw as the sign of victory was apparently special in his estimation, to the extent that he forbade crucifixion as a practice, and also employed the symbol of the cross on his coins:

He regarded the cross with peculiar reverence, on account both of the power which it conveyed to him in the battles against his enemies, and also of the divine manner in which the symbol had appeared to him. He took away by law the crucifixion customary among the Romans, from the usage of the courts. He commanded that this divine symbol should always be inscribed and stamped whenever coins and images should be struck, and his images, which exist in this very form, still testify to this order.⁷³

Often, the fact that initially Constantine retained Roman gods on his coins is suggested as evidence of hybrid religiosity. However, it is noteworthy that these disappear following his victory over Licinius – that is, after he became sole Emperor, and was less inhibited about ignoring pagan opinion: ‘Little more than a decade after Constantine’s conversion the ancient gods and goddesses of the Graeco-Roman pantheon ceased to appear upon the official coinage and public monuments of the Empire. The personifications – Victoria, Virtus, Pax, Liberatas, Securitas, etc., and the ‘geographical’ figures of Res Publica, Roma, Tellus, cities, countries, and tribes-remained.’⁷⁴ The reason these were retained was not *theological*: the fact is that no one really conceived of these entitles as ‘person s existing objectively and independently of men, activities, states and places’ in the sense of the Roman pantheon.⁷⁵

Increasingly, Constantine undermined paganism, without forbidding it altogether. He forbade the practice of private sacrifice, for example.⁷⁶ He used Licinius’ harassment of Christians as the *casus belli* to launch what amounted to a religious war against him.⁷⁷ One of most indicative aspects of Constantine’s reign in this regard is his preparation for his death. He was only baptised as he lay dying, but at the time this was common practice.⁷⁸ He had wanted to be baptised in the river Jordan, like Jesus

Himself. However, it is Constantine’s resting place that is most suggestive of his faith:

The Church of the Holy Apostles stood in the centre of the city, on the summit of the Fourth Hill. It was built in the form of a basilica by Constantine, and completed and dedicated by his son Constantius. Contiguous to the east end Constantine erected a round mausoleum, to receive the bodies of himself and his descendants. He placed his own sarcophagus in the centre, and twelve others (the number was suggested by the number of the Apostles) to right and left.⁷⁹

Constantine wanted to be buried, symbolically at least, with the Apostles, just as he had wanted to be baptised in the Jordan in emulation of Christ.

CONCLUSION

The threefold cord we have observed – the testimony of Christians, that of pagans and of Constantine himself display that he was seen by all – including himself – to be a Christian. His words and actions towards Christians and pagans point to his belief in Christ. Moreover, everything he did in relation to religion was open and forthright. The idea that he was some kind of pagan conspirator is completely devoid of evidence. Whether it was right for the Church to get so close to the State is a different matter altogether.

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John Williamson Nevin, an American Reformed theologian of the 19th century, is someone whose writings I go back to periodically. As a mature Christian adult, Nevin made a quite striking confession of the sins of his youth. His greatest sin, he confessed, was that as a young Christian man, he had had 'an inappropriate posture towards the facts of church history'. Quite an unusual confession; I am not at all sure what a psychologist would make of it. The thing that troubled Nevin, and lay heavy on his conscience with regard to his youth, was not lust, drunkenness, worldliness, or unbelief. It was that as a young person, preparing himself to serve his Saviour in the world, he had had a mind that failed to appreciate the meaning and significance of the history, the life-story, of his Saviour's church. This, Nevin later felt, was not just an intellectual defect; it was a spiritual sin. His lack of historical consciousness had (he felt) damaged his spiritual growth and usefulness, and warped his whole understanding of the faith. It was a sin that he needed to repent of in the sight of God.

Now we may perhaps not agree with Nevin's assessment of the exceeding sinfulness of not having a lively church-historical consciousness: or we may not agree with him yet. But Nevin's confession does give us a useful point of departure for our study. We are considering the matter of learning from tradition. I shall take the liberty of understanding tradition here in its broadest sense. As you may know, the Greek word for tradition – *paradosis* – means literally 'what has been handed down'. I shall be approaching our topic, then, by way of what the ages of Christian history have handed down to us. If we imagine the ongoing life-story of the church as a stream of water bursting from a fountain, and making its way towards the sea of eternity at last, we who are alive today are on the very tip of that

stream. What can we learn from the long flow of spring-water that has preceded us and indeed carried us to our present position?

Or to put it in the shape that Nevin gave it: Is church history an optional extra in the Christian life? Is it just a hobby that some Christians are entitled to have, but which can never rise above the level of a leisure pursuit which happens to be interesting to some of us? Or is there, as Nevin felt, something spiritual about the cultivation of a church-historical consciousness? Is there something arising out of our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ which makes the history of his church a necessary and vital concern of believers? I intend to argue that Nevin was right and that this is indeed the case. There is something unnatural and self-impoverishing, even dangerous, about Christians who try to live their Christian lives divorced from any real consciousness of the history, the life-story, of the spiritual community to which they belong, the church of Jesus Christ. And this is a trap into which, I think, vast sections of the Evangelical world have sadly fallen.

I remember vividly that one of the first fruits of my own conversion in 1976 was a new and absorbing interest in history – specifically church history. Prior to my conversion I had had no interest in any kind of history. It was a subject I dropped as soon I could at school. But how different everything suddenly looked now that I was in Christ! I felt that by becoming a Christian, I had become part of a great spiritual community which stretched back through the landscapes of time to Christ himself. I wanted to know all about it. In the providence of God I swiftly discovered Henry Bettenson's two volumes on *The Early and Later Christian Fathers*, and G.R.Elton's book on *Reformation Europe*. So I was immersed almost from the word 'go' in the early church fathers

and the Reformers. Those people and their deeds and writings came alive for me, taught me, challenged me, inspired me; I acquired a host of new friends and mentors: Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, Peter Martyr, John Calvin.

But how disappointed I was to be when I found that hardly any of my fellow Christians knew to whom or to what I was referring. 'Cyril of Alexandria? The Monophysites? Philip Melancthon? The Augsburg Confession? What are you talking about?' I encountered a general absence of history among others: an almost complete mental vacuum, where the historical consciousness of the church's life-story ought to have been. The basic Evangelical outlook seemed to be limited to the individual and his personal relationship with Christ, coloured by local church life and the latest Christian paperbacks. But as for the universal and historical church – she did not seem to be much in evidence. What had gone wrong? Had anything gone wrong? What was the value of a historical consciousness?

Let us pursue our reflections on this matter with a quotation from C.S. Lewis. Lewis was speaking about the study of literature, but his comments have a strong bearing on church history too.

The true aim of literary studies,' Lewis wrote, 'is to lift the student out of his provincialism by making him the spectator, if not of all, yet of much, time and existence. The student, or even the schoolboy, who has been brought by good teachers to meet the past where alone the past still lives, is taken out of the narrowness of his own age and class into a more public world.'¹

'Provincialism'. 'The narrowness of our own age and class'. Surely one of the greatest dangers in the Christian life is to allow ourselves to be swamped by the present. We are constantly bombarded from every side by propaganda on behalf of the values,

beliefs, and practices of whatever happens to be the present fashion. Francis Schaeffer used to speak about 'the present form of the world spirit'. Most people are dominated by that spirit of the present; all of us are affected by it, whether we like it or not. We might have thought that the remedy was to read the Bible and allow the unchanging truths of the Gospel to cleanse and shape our minds. Of course, that is indeed at least part of the remedy. Yet there is a fashion in the church as well as in the world. And we tend to read the Bible through the distorting lens of whatever happens to be the present Christian or Evangelical or Reformed fashion. So unless we are endowed with an extreme independence of mind, even our understanding of the Scriptures is likely to be cramped, censored, and skewed by what C.S. Lewis calls the provincialism and narrowness of our own age and class.

You may know the humorous but rather devastating criticism that was made of the liberal theologians of a previous generation, those enlightened scholars who set aside the Jesus of the Scriptures and went off on a quest for the real Jesus, the so-called historical Jesus. One critic remarked that these liberal gentlemen, in their search to discover, the real Jesus (whom they supposed to be different from the Biblical Jesus) were like men peering down into a deep well trying to see the 'true Jesus', and merely seeing at the bottom a reflection of their own faces. The terrible danger for us in reading the Bible as Christians, of whatever colour on the Christian spectrum, is that all we will find in the Bible is a reflection of our own faces – a reflection of what our brand of church life already believed and practised. And so Scripture merely serves to confirm all our prejudices.

This is where I think a historical consciousness of the church's life-story can be very liberating. By

exposing ourselves to other periods, other ages in the history of the church, we can – doubtless not perfectly, but to a large degree – be set free from the tyranny of present-day spiritual fashions. As those who have visited the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, we come back to our own century with a new sense of poise and perspective. We look at our own Christianity and our own church life, no longer as prisoners of the present, but as freemen of history: seasoned travellers, who have seen and heard many marvellous things, and who can now evaluate the peculiar customs of our own time-zone from a larger standpoint. By learning how other Christians in other very different epochs understood and applied the faith, we are empowered to see aspects of Biblical truth or practice that simply never struck us before, but which were blindingly obvious to a previous age; we are inspired to ask questions we would never have thought of by ourselves, but which in a previous age were the burning questions of the hour; we are provoked and stimulated to reflect on what in our Christianity really is timeless truth, and what is just a passing fashion of our own day, which perhaps future generations will be amazed at.

Let me quote from C.S. Lewis again. He is speaking about our choice of Christian books to read:

‘Our upbringing and the whole atmosphere of the world we live in make it certain that our main temptation will be that of yielding to winds of doctrine, not that of ignoring them. We are not at all likely to be hidebound: we are very likely indeed to be slaves of fashion. If one has to choose between reading the new books and reading the old, one must choose the old: not because they are necessarily better, but because they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful. The standard of permanent Christianity must be kept clear in our minds, and it is against that standard that we must test all

contemporary thought. In fact, we must at all costs not move with the times. We serve One who said, Heaven and earth shall move with the times, but My words shall not move with the times.’²

Lewis here argues for the value of reading the old books because ‘they contain precisely those truths of which our own age is neglectful.’ Surely he is right. Indeed, we could extend his argument to cover morality as well as truth. Just as different ages tend to emphasise some truths and neglect others, they equally tend to emphasise some virtues and neglect others. If we plucked an outstanding saint from our own segment of time, he would probably embody some Christian virtues at the expense of others, owing to that inevitable provincialism of one’s own age. We need the corrective of beholding Christian virtue as it is bodied forth in outstanding saints of other ages. To take our pattern of godliness from a Gresham Machen or a Martyn Lloyd-Jones is good as far as it goes, but it is not enough; we need to see the light of Christ’s perfection refracted through a Robert E. Lee, a Gaspard de Coligny, a John Wyclif, a Bernard of Clairvaux, a Maximus the Confessor, an Athanasius, in all their abundant variety of times and circumstances. We will of course be struck by the similarities; the same fragrance of holiness exudes from all the saints. But we may also be struck by the differences, as one era catches some glimmering of Christ’s glory missed by another. Now, to bring this down to earth, let me give you an example from my own life of the benefit of reading the old books and communing with the saints of another age. My favourite period in church history is the early church, the first five or six hundred years of the church’s life-story. When you read the theological writings of the early church fathers, you find that the great thing that concerned them, to which they devoted their minds and hearts,

their discourses and their songs, for which they were ready to fight and split the visible church and even die, was the doctrine of the person of Christ. Their thinking, their spirituality, revolved around who Jesus Christ is. Not so much what Christ did, or our personal experience of Christ, although these things are by no means absent from the fathers; but the central focus is on who Jesus Christ is – his person, his true deity and authentic humanity, the relationship between them, and the relevance of all this to our salvation. Sometimes this is even made a ground for criticising the early church fathers, that this was their emphasis. But I have found it very helpful.

Let us turn to Matthew chapter 16, verses 13–16: ‘When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”’ Here we have the great confession of faith by Peter, in response to the Lord Jesus Christ’s question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He is the long-promised seed of the woman who will bruise the head of the serpent, the seed of Abraham in whom all nations will be blessed, the seed of David whose kingdom will last for ever. And he is also the Son of God, the divine and heavenly Son of his divine and heavenly Father, the eternal Word who has become flesh. The Lord then tells Peter that this confession of faith in his divine-human person has been granted to Peter by the Father; it is a gracious gift of spiritual illumination, by which the Father has enabled Peter to grasp the true meaning of what he has seen and heard in Jesus. And then comes verse 21: ‘From that

time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and rise again the third day.’

It was only after Peter and the other apostles had been brought to understand who the Lord Jesus was, that the Lord began teaching them about his atoning work, his redemptive self-sacrifice on the cross and his life-giving resurrection. A proper appreciation of the Lord’s person preceded the Lord’s own teaching of the apostles concerning his saving work. In our day and age, when the majority of unchurched people have completely lost their Christian heritage and have no clue as to the person and work of Christ, surely the appropriate thing for us to do in communicating to them what the Gospel is (those who will listen), is to follow the Lord’s own example. It seems to make little sense to ask unbelievers to respond to the cross if they do not know who is hanging there.

Who is He on yonder tree,
Dies in shame and agony?

Most have no clue who he is. And so the writings, the approach, and the theological spirit of the early church fathers suddenly come into their own again. We find ourselves on the same wavelength. Their task of 2000 years ago has become our task today. The fathers focused on the person of Christ: Who is he?

Who is He in yonder stall,
At whose feet the shepherds fall?
Who is He in deep distress,
Fasting in the wilderness?
Who is He that stands and weeps,
At the grave where Lazarus sleeps?

Who is he? ‘Who do you say that I am?’ That was the royal star of knowledge around which the minds

of the early church fathers revolved, as they sought to communicate the Gospel to their pagan society. Surely it should be our guiding star too, in our preaching and teaching today, as we follow the fathers in seeking to communicate the Gospel to the unbelievers of our increasingly pagan society. In presenting the good news of salvation in Christ to them, we must begin by laying solid foundations in his person, before raising up the temple of his work. Christology precedes and undergirds soteriology.

(I do not mean that we should absolutely begin with Christology. In our day it is probably better to start with God as Creator, humanity as creature, and the fall. But when we specifically present the Gospel, the message of salvation, let us first teach people to give a right answer to the question, 'Who do you say that I am?' before declaring the salvific death and resurrection of that Person.)

One of the most destructive weaknesses in much modern evangelism is that evangelists call upon people to give their hearts to a Jesus about whom those people know nothing. Once upon a time, when our culture was at least nominally Christian, evangelists could more or less assume in their hearers some basic working knowledge of the Gospel story. There was a real picture in people's minds of who Christ is, formed by the drip-drip effect of such agencies as Sunday schools and church services, at a time when a high proportion of the population attended church, where (for example) the New Testament Scriptures were read and the apostles' creed was recited. All of that has now vanished. A friend of mine in Edinburgh, who is by no means extreme in his theology, once attended an evangelistic event, and commented to me afterwards that in spite of all the appeals to people to come to Christ, nobody ever bothered to explain to them who Christ was. The people, he felt, might just as

well have been walking forward to give their hearts to Buddha, Muhammad, or Mickey Mouse, for all that was said of who the Lord Jesus Christ actually is. Little wonder that much evangelism today runs out into a sort of content-free mysticism; people have emotional and even life-changing experiences of something or someone – but is it the Christ of the Scriptures?

Perhaps I should also say that we who are evangelicals often seem to have a better grasp of what Christ did than of who he is. Now, it is indeed crucial to grasp what Christ did – but surely not at the expense of who he is. That seems topsy-turvy. Does it stem from a sort of religious selfishness, perhaps? What Christ did for me, the personal benefits I get out of him – I grasp those eagerly. But as for who my benefactor actually is – well, I'll let the theologians argue about that. As long as I'm saved, that's all that matters. I judge no one's heart, but I do wonder sometimes whether something of that attitude may lurk at the bottom of some evangelical piety. Has our heritage of revival led to a one-sided dwelling on the personal, the emotional, the subjective dimensions of salvation, to the detriment of the objective dimension of the divine-human person of the Saviour? Perhaps we ourselves need to expose our minds and hearts to the robust and bracing objective focus of the early church fathers on the person of Christ.

Now all these thoughts about the need today to give a fresh prominence to the person of Christ in our evangelism, and the general perspective which these thoughts embody – this has all crystallised in my mind largely through my reading of and about the early church fathers. My study of the past has helped me to see something which I believe is of crucial importance in the present, in the church's mission to a society that no longer has a clue about

Christianity. That is just one concrete personal example of the sort of service that 'tradition', a church-historical consciousness, can perform for us. Thus far I have been suggesting the benefits that can come to us from a knowledge of our Christian past, the liberating effect it can have on our minds, the way it can give us a sense of breadth and perspective from which to view the spiritual challenges and fashions of the present. Now I wish to take the argument to a higher level. I shall suggest that a proper understanding of the nature of the church must lead to a concern for knowing its life-story. Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying that salvation is individual but not individualistic. When we are united to Christ, we are by the same token united to his church. As the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:4, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling.' The same Spirit who dwells in the Head dwells in all the members, making the members one with each other as well as with the Head. Salvation, therefore, does not bear upon us as isolated individuals; it means becoming part of the church, being caught up into the community in which the life of the risen Saviour works. Now the church with which we become spiritually one is not only spread across the world, embracing every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. It is also spread across the centuries: a historical community linking one epoch with another. We are one with the saints in all ages. That is part of the very nature of our salvation. If so, it is surely an unnatural violation of what we are in Christ to say, 'I am not interested in the life-story of the community to which I belong.' To say that, or to feel it, is (I think) to reveal a deeply serious failure to grasp what the church is and what salvation is. Permit me to put it like this. Can you imagine a godly Jew in the Old Testament saying, 'I am not

interested in the life-story of my people Israel. The history of Israel does not concern me. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, King David – who are they to me? That's just dusty old history. All that matters to me is my personal relationship with Yahweh'? Can anyone seriously imagine a godly Jew taking such an attitude? If anyone can, their imagination is certainly more exotic than mine. God's people in the Old Testament knew that they were part of an ongoing spiritual movement in history. They were steeped in that history – the story of their community's relationship with the Lord of time and history.

Surely it is the same with us. That Old Testament river of salvation history flows on into the New Testament and broadens out through incarnation and Pentecost to embrace all the tribes of Adam. We are now part of that history. We too are bound together in Christ with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and King David – and with Justin Martyr, Augustine of Hippo, the Venerable Bede, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Huss, Martin Luther, Richard Hooker, and Asahel Nettleton. This is the spiritual family into which we are baptised in Christ. The Saviour has bonded our souls, not just with those few believers we happen to be in physical contact with, but with all the saints in all ages. And as I suggested earlier, we need the wisdom and experience of the saints in all ages if we are to rise above the spiritual narrowness and provincialism of our own age and class (to borrow C.S.Lewis's language). If we fail to appreciate this, I think we fail to appreciate both the doctrine and the reality of the church. The apostle Paul's words about the local church in 1 Corinthians 12, 'The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you', these words apply also to the universal church. We cannot do without the saints who have gone before us.

In addition to the general vitalising atmosphere of the universal and historical church into which Christ incorporates us, there are quite specific ways in which I think we need the saints who have gone before us. Let me outline three of these ways that relate to theology, or what the church believes. We could look at things like worship and morality, but let us just look at theology as the most obvious example. How do we need the historical church in our theology?

(1) We have the accumulated fund of the church's wisdom in interpreting the Bible. If I come up with an interpretation of a Scripture passage which none of the great preachers or commentators have ever held, and which has serious implications and repercussions for Christian faith and life, it is highly unlikely that I alone am right and the historical church wrong. I suppose it is possible that the church had to wait 2000 years for me to come along and deliver the goods; it is possible, but not very plausible. When I am wrestling with a text, I generally like to consult a historical range of commentaries and sermons to give some kind of ballast to my wandering mind. I like to look at Augustine and John Chrysostom from the early church period, Calvin from the Reformation era, Matthew Poole from the Puritan era, John Gill from the 18th Century, and Jamieson, Fausset and Brown from the 19th.

This is an area in which I think Evangelicalism, especially in its charismatic form, tends to be rather weak. I clearly remember, in my early Christian days within the charismatic movement, being solemnly warned not to read commentaries. Just read the Bible and let the Holy Spirit speak to you directly through the Bible alone, I was told. There and then, as it seemed to me, the entire doctrine of the church was blown away. The assumption was that the

believer is an isolated individual, locked up (as it were) in a room by himself with a Bible, expected to work it all out on his own. Yes, the Holy Spirit would help – but he would only help the individual on a private basis. Apparently everything the Holy Spirit had said to other (and possibly wiser) Christians down through the ages, as they read the Bible, was of no account. I must cut myself off from all that and start again all by myself. In such a view, what place is there even for listening to preaching? Surely the Bible is the church's book, before it is the individual's book; we read and study God's Word, not as private individuals in spiritual solitary confinement, but as members of Christ's body, a community submitting itself corporately to the Word which its Lord has spoken to us as a people.

J.I.Packer puts it like this:

The Spirit has been active in the church from the first, doing the work that He was sent to do – guiding God's people into an understanding of revealed truth. The history of the church's labour to understand the Bible forms a commentary on the Bible which we cannot despise or ignore without dishonouring the Holy Spirit. To treat the principle of biblical authority as a prohibition against reading and learning from the book of church history is not an evangelical but an anabaptist mistake.³

By abandoning this perspective in favour of a radical individualism, in which everything tends to be reduced to 'me and my Bible' (which itself soon melts down into "me and my feelings and impressions"), large sections of the Evangelical world have opened the floodgates to everything that is cock-eyed, insubstantial, and weird in their understanding of what the Bible teaches. In fact, in some forms of Evangelical spirituality, the Bible becomes little better than a sort of magic book of personal guidance, divorced from historic, doctrinal,

and linguistic norms, in which my interpretation might utterly conflict with yours, but no matter, for that is how the Holy Spirit was 'speaking to me personally' through that verse, and we mustn't limit the Spirit, must we? And so professing Evangelicals can end up as thorough-going relativists. Here is the bitter long-term fruit of not having a church-historical consciousness.

(2) We sometimes find ourselves struggling, not so much with a verse of Scripture, but with a theological theme, a doctrinal conundrum. There is precious little point expending time and nervous energy trying to thrash out some personal solution of our own to the problem, if Gregory of Nazianzus or John Owen has already done it. Especially in the fundamental matters of Christology, we have the great ecumenical creeds – the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Chalcedon – to help us. These represent, not the wisdom of one man, but the mature deliberations of many men in the church's formative years. We would be wise to take the Creeds as providential landmarks.

(3) We can test our own positive theological ideas by their harmony with the past. By this I do not mean that we should only ever repeat what has already been said. But is there a continuity, a coherence, between what we are saying and what the church has previously taught? Or are we creating a sheer chasm, putting forward beliefs or interpretations which, in important areas, simply negate the past? If so, we ought to think twice and thrice, and fast and pray, before drawing God's people into something so untried and untested. The church is not a laboratory, and God's people are not guinea pigs. We need to beware of what C.S. Lewis called 'chronological snobbery': the arrogant presumption that our generation knows better than any that went before it.

When Martin Luther found himself at the storm centre of the Reformation, he agonised over whether he was right to bring controversy and division into the church over issues where so many opposed him and could bring strong arguments from tradition against him. The simple fact that Luther did agonise over this puts him head and shoulders above many others who just go shooting off in all directions, fragmenting the church without a single qualm or a sleepless night. Not so Luther. He agonised. He fought demons of doubt.

However, Luther derived courage and comfort from discovering his own deeply felt insights in the writings of others who had gone before him. Chief of these was Augustine of Hippo; in so many ways Luther was merely standing on Augustine's shoulders. But Luther also gained strength from the writings of Jolm Huss, the great Bohemian priest and martyr. 'We are all Hussites without knowing it'. Luther exclaimed as he read Huss's writings. 'St Paul and St Augustine are Hussites!'

He also derived much inspiration from the writings of the 15th Century Dutch spiritual writer, Wessel Gansfort – relatively unknown today, but well-enough known in Luther's time. Luther said of Gansfort,

If I had read his books before, my enemies might have thought that Luther had borrowed everything from Gansfort, so great is the agreement between our spirits. I feel my joy and my strength increase, and have no doubt that I have taught correctly, when I find that someone who wrote at a different time, in another land, and with a different purpose, agrees so totally with my views and expresses them in almost the same words.

There are three ways, then, in which I suggest we ought to frame our theological beliefs in the context of church history: the accumulated fund of the church's wisdom in interpreting the Bible; the great

minds of the past blazing a trail for us through the dark forests of doctrinal difficulties; and the 'pause and consider' safeguard of continuity and coherence with the past when exploring new paths.

Now all of this is so important that I may be forgiven for dwelling on it a little longer. What I am suggesting in effect is that the broad century-spanning tradition of the historic church forms the proper and indispensable setting for our hermeneutics – our interpretation and understanding of biblical texts, theological dogmas, and any and all proposed doctrinal development. I am aware that this may sound unProtestant to some; and so I intend to spend a little time putting it to you that, so far from being unProtestant, it is in fact the genuine and historical Protestant view, commended to us by the Reformers of the 16th century, and by their successors and codifiers in the 17th century. The Reformers, in formulating the hermeneutical canon of *sola scriptura*, were far from advocating a lawless individualism of interpretation when it came to expounding the message of Scripture. Although Luther, Calvin, and their colleagues were clear that the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice in the church, they were also convinced that this sole *infallible* rule must never be *interpreted* according to the whims and vagaries of the private self. The sole infallible rule must be interpreted from within the wholesome environment of the community of faith.

Biblical interpretation, in other words, whether text or dogma, is in the last analysis a corporate, not a solitary exercise. It can be conducted with safety only in the context of the church and the church's historic understanding of the Bible's meaning. To claim that I can go it alone in interpreting Scripture is the sin of compounded arrogance and foolishness. The Bible is the book of the community before it is

the book of the individual. We need one another, we need our fellow Christians, we need the church, as the proper God-given setting in which to understand and interpret God's Word. This includes the church of the comprehensive time-bridging past, not just the church of the narrow present. In seeking to understand the biblical message, we consult not only present helps, but also the accumulated wisdom of the past – what someone has called 'giving your ancestors a vote'.

This whole attitude is an integral aspect of the historic Reformation-Protestant view of Scripture. My contention may seem suspect, and so I will spend some time examining it.

As a number of historians have pointed out, there were broadly three attitudes to tradition in the religious controversies of the 16th century. By 'tradition' here we mean the theological tradition of Christianity, the historically accumulated weight of Christian understanding of the Bible and of the Bible's gospel. These three attitudes have been summarised by the historian Jaroslav Pelikan (perhaps the greatest single practitioner of the discipline of church history in the 20th century) as Tradition 1, Tradition 2, and Tradition 0.

First we have Tradition 1: *Critical reverence for history and tradition*. This was the position of the more conservative non-Anabaptist wing of the Reformation, the so-called magisterial Reformers, which includes our own Reformed constituency. The church's theological tradition was treated with care and respect, although not given a blind or uncritical allegiance. In particular, the great creeds of the early church – the Apostles' creed, the Nicene creed, and the creed or definition of Chalcedon – were all strongly affirmed. The conservative Reformers regarded the early church's *regula fidei* (rule of faith) as the proper framework for all biblical

interpretation. This *regula fidei* was of course most famously summed up in the Apostles' creed.

Then we have Tradition 2: *Authoritarian reverence for history and tradition*. This was the position of most if not all Roman Catholics in the 16th century. The theological tradition – or as the Reformers claimed, a biased reading of it – was elevated into untouchable status. It was a kind of all or nothing approach. No development of doctrine was permitted to undergo critical scrutiny, and therefore nothing could be corrected. Reformation on this model of course becomes impossible. One just has to swallow everything: the papacy, Mariology, saint worship, transubstantiation, indulgences, and all.

Finally we have Tradition 0: *Total contempt for history and tradition*. This view found its home among the Radical Reformers, the Anabaptists as they were called in the 16th century. According to this approach, any appeal to the wisdom of the past was in principle rejected. Rather than reading the Bible from within the historic community of faith, one stepped outside, and read the Bible with fresh eyes, as if no one else had ever read it before. The theological tradition was regarded as a hindrance, not a help.

This third position, Tradition 0, is so different from Tradition 1, the authentic Lutheran and Reformed position, that the difference should perhaps be briefly illustrated. Martin Luther, for example, argued that, 'The decrees of the genuine councils must remain in force permanently, just as they have always been in force'.⁴ As Alister McGrath correctly argues, for Luther 'it is the *regula fidei* of the church which determines the limits within which the interpretation of Scripture may proceed'.⁵ Alongside Luther's normative regard for the *regula fidei* went a surprisingly high estimate of the broader theological tradition flowing from the early Church fathers into

and through the medieval Church. He says:

We do not act as fanatically as the sectarian spirits. We do not reject everything that is under the dominion of the pope. For in that event we would also reject the Christian Church ... Much Christian good, nay, all Christian good is to be found in the papacy, and from there it descended to us.⁶

Anyone who reads Luther's writings knows the huge esteem in which he held Augustine of Hippo, appealing to the Augustinian tradition (Luther's own monastic tradition: he was an Augustinian friar) as a wholesome corrective to contemporary errors in the church. Luther, then, was not a Tradition 0 radical Anabaptist, but a Tradition 1 conservative Protestant.

It was Luther's right hand man, Philip Melanchthon, however, who articulated the Lutheran position with greater precision and clarity. Warning us against heresies of all kinds, Melanchthon says:

Let pious people take note of these examples of rash opinions of every age, let them heed the voice of those who teach correctly, let them embrace with both hands and with their whole heart the prophetic and apostolic writings that have been committed to us by God, and let them attach themselves to the interpretations and testimonies of the pure church, such as the apostles' creed and the Nicene creed, that they might retain the light of the Gospel and not become involved in these raving opinions that, as I have said, follow when the light of the Gospel is extinguished. Those who read the prophetic and apostolic writings and the creeds with pious devotion and who seek the opinion of the pure church will easily conclude afterwards that they are aided by these human interpretations, and they will know what usefulness is afforded by correct and skilful expositions of Scripture written by pious believers and by sermons drawn from the fountains of Scripture.⁷

Clearly Melanchthon sees the Creeds and what he calls 'the interpretations and testimonies of the pure church' as having an indispensable role to play in our understanding of the biblical message. So again we find that Tradition 1, not Tradition 0, is the position adopted.

John Calvin too, while recognising infallible authority in Scripture alone, nevertheless concedes a lofty place to the councils and creeds of the church as subordinate authorities:

The name of SACRED COUNCIL is held in such reverence in the Christian church, that the very mention of it produces an immediate effect not only on the ignorant but on men of gravity and sound judgment. And doubtless, the usual remedy which God employed from the beginning, in curing the diseases of his church, was for pious and holy pastors to meet, and, after invoking his aid, to determine what the Holy Spirit dictated. Councils therefore are deservedly honoured by all the godly.⁸

In the Institutes, Calvin deals at some length with the authority of councils. The fact that he firmly, even forcefully subordinates the authority of councils to that of Scripture, he says, 'does not mean that I esteem the ancient councils less than I ought. For I venerate them from my heart, and desire that they be honoured by all. But here the norm is that nothing of course detract from Christ.'⁹

Thus councils would come to have the majesty that is their due; yet in the meantime Scripture would stand out in the higher place, with everything subject to its standard. In this way, we willingly embrace and reverence as holy the early councils, such as those of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and the like, which were concerned with refuting errors – in so far as they relate to the teachings of faith. For they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture, which the holy fathers applied with spiritual

prudence to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen.¹⁰

Even apart from these statements, Calvin's unceasing interaction in his writings with the early church fathers, and even with medieval theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux, demonstrate that Calvin stood fundamentally in the Tradition 1 camp.

William Bucanus, a late 16th century Reformed theologian, applies the Tradition 1 approach specifically to the task of exegesis. We must, Bucanus says, interpret particular texts of the Bible only in harmony with 'the constant and unchanging sense of Scripture expounded in plain passages of Scripture and agreeing with the apostles' creed, the decalogue and the Lord's prayer'.¹¹

The great 17th century Puritan Richard Baxter too has a healthy appreciation of the church context for biblical interpretation:

Take nothing as necessary to salvation in point of faith, nor as universally necessary in point of practice, which the universal church in every age since Christ did not receive. For if anything be necessary to salvation which the church received not in every age, then the church itself of that age could not be saved; and then the church was indeed no church; for Christ is the Saviour of His body. But certainly Christ had in every age a church of saved ones who openly professed all that was of common necessity to salvation.¹²

Daniel Wyttenbach, one of the last of the Reformed scholastic theologians, puts the argument for Tradition 1 quite succinctly:

Be it noted, moreover, that Protestants do not reject outright all tradition: they admit historical tradition, if it is certain. This consists in the consent of every age of the Christian church, or in its testimony as to what it has believed, what books it has received as divine, how this or that passage of Scripture was understood, etc.¹³

These representative theologians of Reformation Protestantism, then, manifestly operated within the Tradition I framework of critical reverence for history and tradition. They accepted the Bible as the sole infallible rule of faith, but they did not *interpret* the Bible as self-sufficient individuals – rather, as baptised members of the community of faith, in perpetual reverential dialogue with the church's great creeds and theologians. To portray the very different perspective of Tradition 0, let us consider the views of one of the greatest and most influential of the Radical Reformers, Sebastian Franck. Franck expressed in a sharp, shocking manner the view that lay hidden at the heart of many an Anabaptist:

I believe that because of the breaking in and laying waste by antichrist right after the death of the apostles, the outward church of Christ, including all its gifts and sacraments, went up into heaven and lies concealed in the Spirit and in truth. I am thus quite certain that for 1400 years now there has existed no gathered church nor any sacraments.¹⁴

Just to make sure we get the point, Franck says of the early Church fathers:

Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather they were all apostles of Antichrist.¹⁵

So for Franck, there was simply no history of the church's understanding of Scripture. The believer was thrown naked on the Bible, as if it had been written yesterday. Franck saw this as a wonderful privilege. The results demonstrate that it was a disaster of the first magnitude, as Franck himself and all too many other Tradition 0 Anabaptists repeated one early church heresy after another: Franck himself held a Modalist view of the Trinity and a Gnostic view of the incarnation. And he was

by no means alone. Having dumped history, these naïve radicals of the Reformation were doomed to relive its errors, in their engagement with an unchurched naked, Scripture.

So there we have the marked contrast between a Tradition 1 and a Tradition 0 approach to understanding and interpreting the Bible. In popular Evangelicalism today, Tradition 0 – 'me and my Bible' – often passes for the Evangelical and Protestant view of Scripture. History surely demonstrates that it is not. It is a radical Anabaptist view, not the view of Luther or Calvin, or of the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

Let me close by mentioning one of the greatest problems that many Evangelicals have in fostering a church-historical consciousness. The problem I have in mind, and I have met in myself as well as in others, is an inability to see the church in its official history. What do I mean by that? A while ago I saw the latest booklist from a certain well-known Evangelical bookshop. I turned to the part of the booklist dealing with church history. What did my eyes behold? It was divided up into sections. Section 1 was headed 'Early church to 1500' – the first 1500 years of Christian history, from the apostles to the Reformers. That section had a sum total of two books on sale. Two books for the first 1,500 years of the church – which makes up the largest part of the Christian story. The next section was I think headed 1500–1600, and it contained books too numerous to count. So did each of the other sections, covering the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Apparently, then, the Christian church ceased to exist pretty soon after the apostles, went into some sort of time warp or rapture, and re-appeared as if by magic on October 31st 1517 when Martin Luther nailed up his 95 theses. 1,500 years of Christian history written off! That is the problem:

an inability among many Evangelicals to see the church at all in the period of the early church fathers and certainly in the Middle Ages.

The result is surely a falsification of the Lord's own promise, 'I will build My church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18), not to mention many other Biblical promises of the perpetual and indestructible nature of Messiah's kingdom (e.g. 2 Chronicles 17:11–14, Isaiah 9:7, Daniel 7:14).

In one sense, I can sympathise with this. Much of the patristic and mediaeval period does look alien to our modern eyes. Take for example Bernard of Clairvaux, the celebrated French Cistercian monk of the 12th century. We come to Bernard and look at him. What do we see? For a start, he is a monk; that puts most Protestants off. But then we read some of his hymns, or hymns attributed to him –

Jesus Thou joy of loving hearts; O sacred head sore wounded; O Jesus King most wonderful; Jesus the very thought of Thee. Clearly a spiritually-minded monk.

We read some of the writings he undoubtedly wrote, and find rich food for our souls. But then we read his ardent advocacy of the Virgin Mary as our intercessor whose prayers we should seek. We frown again. But the frown instantly softens as we see Bernard in the next breath writing against the (then novel) doctrine of the immaculate conception. Mary, he asserts vigorously, was just as much conceived in sin as the rest of us. Then we look at his life and are touched and impressed by his moral character. But then we see him acting as the great papal publicity agent of the 2nd Crusade, and once more shake our heads. Finally we see the Reformers themselves praising and extolling Bernard for his Augustinian theology and his penetrating moral and spiritual insights.

What do we make of the strange theological and

spiritual mixtures, hybrids, and coalescences that we find in the history of the church, especially in the Middle Ages? If we are to discern the Lord's body there, as it surely was there, we need some sort of angle of approach. Let me suggest five steps to sanity:

1. We remind ourselves that we often find the same weird mixtures in the Evangelical world of today. I say no more.

2. We follow Luther and Calvin in gladly recognising theological truth and moral goodness wherever and whenever we see it – whether in Sava of Serbia, Raymond Lull, Thomas Aquinas, or whoever.

3. We reflect that the visible church in many ways is like a Christian writ large: a baffling blend of strength and weakness, truth and error, integrity and duplicity. Or if we prefer a corporate analogy, the visible church has often been like Israel in the Old Testament: a multi-coloured mixture of every shade of fidelity and apostasy, with its many seasons of revival and backsliding. We do not therefore despise Israel. The visible church in the Middle Ages may in various ways have gone off in tragically misguided directions in theology, morality, and worship. But we remember that it was the same church that nurtured an Aidan of Lindisfarne, a Bernard of Clairvaux, a Bernard of Cluny, a Gregory of Rimini, a John Wyclif, and ultimately a Martin Luther. The Reformation was really the best elements of the medieval church trying to correct the worst elements. That, incidentally, is the most helpful and historical way of viewing the Reformation: not a heavenly bolt from the blue, shot down into utter darkness, but the best elements of Western medieval Christianity trying to correct the worst elements.

4. We realise that we may be misunderstanding

what a theologian or spiritual writer of a bygone age is saying: seriously misinterpreting his language and theological intentions. Calvin has a classic passage in the *Institutes* (3:12:3) in which he quotes at length approvingly from Bernard of Clairvaux and asks the reader not to be offended by Bernard's use of the term 'merit'. All Bernard meant by merit, Calvin says, is virtue or good works, without any implication of earning salvation by moral self-effort.

5. We acknowledge that some of the strangeness may be our own fault. I suppose if you gave the very best of the writings of a Puritan like Richard Baxter to a modern-day Evangelical, he might be bewildered or shocked by some of it, simply because of that perennial problem of the provincialness and narrowness of one's own age and class which C.S.Lewis highlighted. When we find something strange in an early church father or a medieval monk, it may just be that the defect is on our side, and that he is uttering a truth or revealing an attitude that we have sinfully or ignorantly neglected.

If we take these five factors into account, I would suggest we will be able the more easily to see the living features of the church in the midst of its often depressing official history.

Let us close with the quotation from C.S.Lewis with which we opened, only this time altering it slightly to suit our theme: 'The true aim of church history is to lift the student out of his provincialism by making him the spectator, if not of all, yet of much time and existence in the church's life-story. The student who has been brought by good teachers to meet the Christian past where alone the past still lives, is taken out of the spiritual narrowness of his own age and class into a more public world.' May God help us to discover this for ourselves.

1. C.S.Lewis, 'Is English Doomed?' in *Compelling Reason* (Fount Paperbacks: London 1996), p.50.
2. C.S.Lewis, 'Christian Apologetics' in *Compelling Reason*, p.67.
3. J.I.Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (London, IVP, 1958), p.48.
4. Cited in Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Canon Press 2001), p.101.
5. Cited in Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2004), p.146.
6. Cited in Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (T.and T.Clark: Edinburgh, 1992), p.285.
7. Philip Melancthon, in Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* (trans. J.A.O.Preuss, Concordia: St.Louis, MO, 1989), vol.1, p.36.
8. John Calvin, 'Antidote to the Council of Trent' in *Calvin's Tracts* (Edinburgh, 1861), p.30.
9. John Calvin, *Institutes* 4:9:1.
10. *Ibid.*, 4:9:8.
11. Cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker Book House, 1978), p.35.
12. Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory* (Soli Deo Gloria: Carlisle, PA, 2000) p.594.
13. Cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp.30 – 31.
14. Cited in G.H.Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), p.696.
15. Cited in Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993), p.146.

Through Western Eyes-Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective. Robert Letham. Fearn: Mentor Books, 2007. ISBN 1-84550-247-7.

Books concerning Eastern Orthodoxy abound. They represent quite a recent phenomenon, however, appearing late in the twentieth century. Previously, the Protestant, especially the evangelical world knew little of Orthodoxy, itself being a child of the West. The situation began to change beginning in the late 1960s, but then rapidly with the 1980s and the entry into Orthodoxy by high profile evangelicals such as Peter Gilquist and Frankie Schaeffer. This spawned a considerable number of books written by recent converts extolling the virtues of their newfound Orthodox spirituality. To these were added a flood of new books and reprints by Orthodox sources committed to engaging and even proselytizing the West. Much of the quality of these contributors was high, leaving the evangelical world to grapple with the 'new' old ideas of first-rate scholars such as Vladimir Lossky, George Florovsky, John Meyendorff, Alexander Schmemmann, Leonid Ouspensky, Christos Yannaras, Sergii Bulgakov, Dimitru Staniloae, John Zizioulas and Timothy Ware. Evangelicals were at first very slow to respond, given their general level of unfamiliarity. Along with a few highly polemical treatments, significant analyses such as those by Daniel Clendenin, Emil Bartos, Carnegie Samuel Calian, and most recently by Donald Fairbairn, began to provide evangelicals with additional information. To some degree, each of these was useful in acquainting us with different dimensions of Orthodoxy. At the same time, the highly differentiated, if not fractured, nature of evangelicalism itself left the reader with a bewildering array of opinions and perspectives. Some were tentative, while others were conciliatory. Calian's work focused on a 'bridging'

figure between Orthodoxy and evangelicalism, Cyril Lucaris. Bartos chose to closely critique one aspect of Staniloae's theology. Other works such as Fairbairn's and Clendenin's appear to be more comprehensive. Most attempted to explain Orthodoxy as it is in the present, while at the same time fully acknowledging Orthodoxy's tie to the past.

Robert Letham's offering is the latest and perhaps best in the line of serious responses. It may be the best compromise between comprehensiveness and depth. Letham himself represents a clear tradition, Reformed Christianity. This perspective carries with it several inherent strengths. It allows him to make clear theological statements because he only attempts to represent one perspective. An 'evangelical' response may now be difficult if not impossible given the wide diversity within its own ranks. In such a case, simplicity is also clarity. As a Reformed believer, Letham is also able to interact with Orthodoxy's traditional sources with an air of sympathy, given the Reformation's generally high view of the early church. He underscores Orthodoxy's long forgotten ties to the Reformation, citing both Calvin's reliance on early church Fathers, explored in depth by Tony Lane in his *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, and John Owen's interaction with Gregory Palamas.

Letham initiates his work by covering the structural and doctrinal development of Eastern Orthodoxy from Constantine's reign in the early 4th century to the influence of Palamas in the 14th. He weaves history, politics and theology together as he considers, step by step, the formation of the Orthodox ideal. Primary (and necessary) emphasis goes to the theological foundations laid by the first seven ecumenical councils. These highlighted the crucial development of the biblical concepts of incarnation, Trinity and Christology. The author

underscores the importance of seeing this as an organic recognition of biblical doctrines by the church. In other words, the councils did not see their remit including innovation. They were simply, in their own minds, carrying forward the received tradition of the apostles. 'The councils did not look upon themselves as introducing anything new but rather as reaffirming the faith once for all delivered to the saints.' In this sense, they did not distinguish easily the Word from tradition. Though they did distinguish Scripture from human opinion, not having an equivalent to papal infallibility, they still saw canon, tradition and the structure of the church as all part of one act of revelation.

Letham places the councils under careful scrutiny, criticising some for being notorious in their day (Ephesus 449) and others (Constantinople 381, Chalcedon 451) for being vague or ambiguous at points, leading to future problems. At the same time, he also furnishes eyewitness testimony highlighting attitudes present at the councils that demonstrated attitudes behind the rhetoric. For example, he cites Athanasius' recollection of Arius and his followers winking at each other when agreeing to terminology stating that the Son came 'from God'. While Athanasius and the Orthodox fathers accepted this to mean that the Son had no other source than the Father and was not a creature, the Arians construed the words to mean that all beings, including Jesus, had to be created by God. The point made by Letham is that the Orthodox Church formed as it confronted the limitations of biblical language, forcing it to develop a careful theology as a direct outcome of Scripture and in contrast to Gnostics, Arians and others who used scriptural language to develop theology in conformity to their philosophical presuppositions. His painstaking work also highlights a significant

difference with Western evangelicals. We have very little connection to the church fathers. On the other hand, the Orthodox continue to live with the thought world of the early church. Positively, the corrosive effects of modernism do less damage to them. Negatively, they seem to have bypassed hugely significant issues that the West was forced to wrestle with, such as Pelagianism and justification by faith alone.

As the author traverses through history, he not only covers great events; he also focuses on the theologians who have had the greatest impact on the Orthodox identity. Most of these represented the early church. People such as Clement, Irenaeus and Origen, the Cappadocians and Pseudo Dionysius were instrumental in framing Trinitarianism, Christology and mystical theology. Letham demonstrates, however, that later theologians such as John of Damascus and Gregory Palamas have also shaped Orthodoxy dramatically. The former was absolutely instrumental in articulating the church's iconography and even more importantly posturing it as a defender of tradition. The latter provided the strongest articulation of the theology of deification (*theosis*), a key development that propelled Orthodoxy away from evangelical Protestantism. In the early 17th century, Orthodoxy stood at a crossroads between the Reformation, with its emphasis on the cross and justification and incarnational *theosis* emphasising the incarnation, free will and synergy. As Letham describes, with the death of the Reformation's advocate, Cyril Lucaris, the church swung back to Palamas and away from the West. It was, unfortunately not the only opportunity squandered. Letham recounts the series of misunderstandings and missteps that characterised the division in the church that erupted concerning the insertion of the bilious clause in the

Nicene Creed by the Western church in the 6th century and its subsequent acceptance as dogma by the Council of Lyons in 1274.

Following his detailed analysis of the councils and early history, Letham addresses distinctive Orthodox theology. He frames his analysis by stating that the Orthodox emphasise the visual over the oral. As such, the entire visible church serves as a teaching tool or a sermon if you like. Icons are introduced as teaching tools for the church as they grant believers heavenly perspective. They serve, as Letham notes, as 'windows to heaven through which to perceive greater realities beyond'. He also makes a critical distinction that sets Eastern icons apart from Western representational, devotional art. In icons, the archetype, the thing represented, takes the initiative. In other words, God working through the icon takes initiative in sanctifying the believer as he or she venerates the icon. This is a solid contrast to Western spirituality where we, through faith, appropriate truth in visual representations, such as Catholic statues. Interestingly, by giving God the initiative, Orthodoxy positions itself closer in this way to Reformed Christianity rather than Catholicism. This fact, however, is undermined unfortunately by Orthodox soteriology. In any case, Letham provides a service in highlighting a strong distinctive of Orthodoxy.

Letham proceeds beyond this by justifying icons as objects of religious art. He first has to clear up an obstacle to their appreciation, namely the confusion between seeing icons as object of veneration, not worship. In order to do so, he compares the icon to a picture of Martyn Lloyd Jones. The picture of the Welsh saint provides us with a picture of faith and godliness. It inspires us in our Christian walk. It reminds us of how God filled his life and empowered it for service. More than that, it brings

our minds to contemplate the goodness and graciousness of God. We do not, however, worship Martyn Lloyd-Jones, living or dead. Neither do the Orthodox. Letham traces icons back to the Old Testament, noting the role of the cherubim as icons in the Temple. Behind his justification of visual, devotional art, is a larger objective. Letham seeks to promote the restoration of an appreciation of Christian esthetics within the context of worship. He declares, 'The church is not a lecture room'. So it isn't.

On the other hand, Letham distances himself from Orthodoxy with regard to iconography. He disagrees, for example, with Orthodoxy's insistence at placing icons as the most prominent feature of worship. As he notes, there is no evidence in the Bible that pictures of saints were placed in the place where the church worshipped. Additionally and crucially, using an icon of Christ as a representation of God is dangerously reductionistic, 'abstracting his humanity from his person, falling into the trap of Nestorianism'. As Letham advises, 'We have to worship Jesus as he is-as Jesus, the image of the invisible God'.

Letham clearly appreciates Orthodoxy and holds up its advantages to us. This is most helpful. For example, unlike our own evangelical worship that addresses a handful of biblical verses, the Orthodox liturgy is saturated with Scripture. This, he notes, is a 'stark contrast'. 'In Orthodoxy, the whole Psalter is read through every week'. The regular Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom contains 98 quotes from the Old Testament and 114 from the New. Special times of the year yield even more. I deeply appreciate Letham's point. There are right and compelling reasons for us to remain Reformed believers and not Eastern Orthodox, but that should not keep us from both appreciating the best in Orthodoxy and

recognising our own shortcomings. Allied to Orthodoxy's rich use of Scripture, however, is a singularly non-Western, non-modern disregard for time. Orthodox services are long-long enough for methodically working through Scripture. By contrast, we Western evangelicals appear to be slaves to the clock. In addition, Letham observes that our services appear to be 'something hastily cobbled together'. Before we disagree, how many of us have not experienced the moment when, in the interest of time, we sang verses and four of our favorite closing hymn, rather than the whole thing? So eviscerating *A Mighty Fortress* or *And Can it Be* is an altogether too familiar phenomenon.

On the other hand, Letham wisely criticises Orthodoxy's insistence on prayers to the saints. He correctly distances the practice from the reckless charge of necromancy, but he does not let Orthodoxy off the hook. Praying to dead saints is not diabolical, but it is completely useless and more importantly, it takes our attention away from Christ our mediator. He also takes great exception to Orthodoxy's marginalisation of preaching in favour of visual worship and the eucharist. Letham's explanation is hugely useful as he recounts Calvin's great contribution in championing orality in answer to the excesses of medieval nominalist devotion. He terms this 'Calvin's hermeneutical revolution'. In contrast to the medieval church's pursuit of a beatific vision of God, unobtainable in this life, Calvin proposed that God fed us through words, appropriated through faith, that granted 'direct auditive intuitive knowledge of God'. Though we could not see him in this life, we could know him and his love through his words. We, unlike the struggling medieval church, could have real assurance. In my own opinion, his short description merits the purchase of the book, even without all of the other advantages.

He also critiques Orthodoxy's understanding of soteriology. Rather than positing an exclusive reliance on God's loving sovereignty overcoming our complete fallenness, Orthodoxy relies on infusions of grace as we cooperate with God's grace. The difficulty is that the Orthodox erroneously do not accept original sin. They also do not believe that Adam fell from perfection, but simply from a state of 'undeveloped simplicity'. The fall was not that drastic, in other words. Humans are therefore not that impaired from seeking and finding God. Salvation also does not have to correct that much. It does not need to requite an angry God. It does not focus on Christ standing in the bar, taking the judgment of God in our place. Rather, the resurrection provides us victory over Satan and this world. In modern, psychological terms, it actualises us. While we would not wish to dismiss the truth of salvation as *Christus victor*, we also would not overlook the heart of Pauline theology, something Orthodoxy seems to have done. Letham correctly sees the seeds of the mistake in Orthodoxy's over-reliance on Athanasius and his drastically 'truncated view of the atonement'.

Letham camps out on this point, seeing it as the most serious difference between Reformed evangelicalism and Eastern Orthodoxy. On this point, the idea that we cooperate fully with God – what the Orthodox refer to as synergy, Reformed Christianity differs more profoundly than it does with Catholicism. Orthodoxy cannot tolerate any hint at election or predestination, both of which it almost completely misunderstands. The misunderstanding has far ranging consequences. Those attempting to enter Orthodoxy, for example, have to renounce any such beliefs, though the Orthodox themselves clumsily equate predestination with something more akin to Islamic fatalism than

Calvinism. Letham is quite right on this point. Not only do the Orthodox underestimate the devastating effects of the fall, they also misconstrue the Reformed position. This is for Letham as it is for us, an unavoidable barrier.

On the other hand, he also points out the enormous contribution made by Orthodoxy to our understanding of Trinity. Letham points out that for the majority of those in the West, 'it is little more than an arcane mathematical riddle'. How true. The author backs up his criticism of the West, noting how few hymns, for example, really address Trinitarian faith. Many accepted works to the contrary, present erroneous or sub-Trinitarian ideas. Not so with the Orthodox who promote Trinitarianism at every level of worship and life. Likewise, the Orthodox excel in promoting a central biblical doctrine—union with Christ and God. On the other hand, his comments concerning Orthodoxy's fidelity in holding the line against Islam and communism I find perplexing at best. He wishes to show that the Orthodox have been more faithful in holding the line against unbelief in their environment than Western churches have in theirs. Unfortunately for his point, the truth is more complicated than that. The church East and West has experienced a mix of fidelity and unfaithfulness. Orthodoxy is full of unholy alliances with the state, to include communist dictatorships and its relationship to early Islam was often ambiguous at best. Alain Becancon's work, *Trois Tentations dans L'Eglise* conclusively points out the less than consistent role played by the Byzantine church and state with regard to Islam. This does not absolve modernist Protestantism. It simply implies that Orthodoxy has no right to view itself as a paragon in this regard.

Additionally, the book is not easy reading. His

choice to start the working by plowing through detailed summaries of Orthodox doctrinal development, the history of early church councils, and doctrinal distinctives such as theosis, hesychasm etc., makes for slow, and for some, frustrating reading. The details do matter, but they often seem to serve as speed humps for the general reader. I do admire his reasoning. He intends to show the reader how, block by block, the Orthodox edifice was constructed. This serves a great purpose. One of Orthodoxy's claims is that it is essentially timeless; that it really did little to develop since the time of the apostles. Traditionally, Luke himself was considered the first icon painter, for example. Letham's careful work exposes the slow, careful, justifiable (in most cases) development of Orthodox doctrine and praxis.

I also remain unconvinced of his method. Letham defends his methodology by asserting that it is more understandable to his intended audience, Reformed readers, than a more Orthodox-centred approach. I am not sure that he is correct. Rather than jumping in with an intricate overview of the councils and the doctrinal disputes over which they contended, he could have coherently approached his material from the opposite perspective. For example, since Orthodoxy champions a visual theology, he could have started with worship and iconography, explaining their theology through these visual means. Perhaps this occurs to me because I have an Orthodox heritage. On the other hand, this is the approach that the Orthodox use when they proselytize the West. They do not simply address logical or historical categories when speaking to evangelicals. They bridge from the drama of liturgy and its confrontation of the world to a discussion of theology, not the reverse.

I simply suggest that their approach may work best

for us as well. In part, it may be that Letham is inadvertently proving his point. He points out persuasively that Orthodoxy has much to teach Reformed Christianity. Perhaps one of its gifts is teaching us to embrace a more visual, more liturgical means of communication. I am by no means suggesting embracing the Divine Liturgy or the Mass. I simply propose that the Word, more effectively supported by visual worship exemplified by the liturgy, particularly the sacraments, would be a much better way of teaching doctrine and theology. Furthermore, rather than treating subjects such as iconography as either a separate item of theology or an act of worship, explain iconography together as both and then use icons to teach theology, just as the Orthodox do. The whole point of Orthodoxy is to collapse the distinctives of theology, worship and life into one, integrated life. We tend to separate them, incorrectly in my view, and we explain Orthodoxy's treatment of them in a way that distorts them because we divorce them from each other. I greatly appreciate Letham's understanding of the theology. I learned a great deal from his penetrating analysis. A more Orthodox-friendly presentation would have been easily as comprehensible and less likely to squeeze Orthodoxy into a Western mold. In Letham's defense, I add that his approach has good company. Neither the other Protestant writers nor Orthodox theologians writing for Western audiences attempt anything like the integrated approach I just suggested. All approach their material by describing practice, theology or history. Perhaps it is time.

In general, I have to say that I am impressed by the work. It is the first effort that really engages Orthodoxy critically and carefully. Letham clearly affirms the good in Orthodoxy, highlights the contentious, unapologetically underscores

non-negotiables that divide Orthodox and Reformed evangelicals, and gives some perspective with regard for the future. While I do think that he has to strain hard to try and affirm some points, such as the equivalence of Justification by faith alone with the Jesus Prayer, etc., in most cases he hits the mark. I also think that one of his greatest contributions, whether deliberate or otherwise, is to point to Reformed Christianity, especially as it was expressed by Calvin himself, as a logical point positioned somewhere between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. If I am correct about this, it implies that Reformed Christianity serves as a distinct alternative to the other Christian alternatives – complete as a comprehensive world and life view. Given the increasingly fragmented evangelical world, it points the way to a viable, evangelical alternative to either Catholicism or Orthodoxy that has the foundational strength and distinctiveness to thrive alongside the other two.

Letham's work ends with a brief exposition of John 17 and its call to visible unity within the church, whatever the obstacles. The unity revealed that is based on the unity of the Father and the Son has characteristics that serve as imperatives for us. Unity must be observable, physical and spiritual, diverse, loving, personal, differentiated and emphatically imperative. 'The Son prays to the Father in the Holy Spirit for precisely this. It is not a matter peripheral or optional. To avoid it is idolatry – at best sectarian. The fragmentation of Protestantism is indefensible'. As a son of the Reformation, I say amen and amen.

In an article earlier this year in the *Guardian* on the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in the British empire in 1807 Simon Jenkins wrote that the 'point of history is to find out what happened and why, and thereby gain wisdom'. What is true for all history is true for church history. However, for the evangelical Christian historian the task is even more challenging than for others. The 'what' of history may seem straightforward enough, but what is he or she to select? There is far too much cover within the limits of a book, article or lecture. Not only so, but not all that purports to be Christian is Christian. There is much that traditionally comes under the umbrella of church history that an evangelical would want to disown as contrary to the Bible or an historic understanding of what genuine Christianity is. Even more problematic is the 'why' of church history. Why has what happened in the history of the church happened? There are many factors – personal, social, economic, political, cultural as well as spiritual. Church history can legitimately be told on the level of human explanation, but there is also the level of what God has done. But how can we know what God has done in history? The Bible is our standard, but we have to admit that even those events or movements that we think are most of God are mixed with much that is human. In any case, a biblical doctrine of providence means that we can acknowledge the unseen hand of God in everything that has happened in history however directly or indirectly he has chosen to work.

A stimulating and important book that looks at this whole matter is *God's Judgments – Interpreting History and the Christian Faith*¹ by Steven Keillor. Keillor was perplexed by the failure of evangelical Christians to say anything particularly Christian about the events of 9/11. In former generations Christians would have been unafraid to speak of

God's judgment on the nation. Of course some Christians such as the late Jerry Falwell did, but were roundly criticised and staged a hasty retreat. However Keillor believes that we need to take the Bible's teaching on God's judgment seriously. He is very critical of 'worldview thinking' that tends to mute the concrete teaching of the Bible with abstractions. I think he overstates his case, but he has a point. The Bible speaks of God's concrete judgments in history. Keillor prefers the category of witness or testimony in understanding and relating the Bible's message. After looking at the Bible's teaching he looks at the burning of Washington DC by the British in 1814 and the American Civil War as test cases. In both he discerns God's hand in judging the nation or groups within it. God's judgments are not easy to discern and facile identification is unhelpful, but the Bible demands that God judges nations today, Keillor writes as a serious academic historian and a Christian and what he says is well worth considering.

All this we need to bear in mind as we survey some of the church history books published over the past few years. There is a vast amount in the market and therefore I have been very selective.

General History

The big event in church history literature in the past few years has been the publication of the first volumes in the new *Cambridge History of Christianity*. I would say these are must have books, except that at £105 each (and there are nine volumes in the series), the average minister would have to be starving his family or else have a very generous and thoughtful congregation. I would however recommend that all theological college libraries procure copies. They are excellent and whatever caveats one may have they will be an indispensable resource for years to come. I believe that five

volumes have appeared so far. All the volumes depart from the traditional organisation of church histories. They have narrative sections, but also have sections dealing with regions, practices, theology and so on. There is also a great and welcomed emphasis on the social and communal aspects of church history. So while the great men (and occasionally women) and events are covered, there is much attention paid to how Christianity was practised on the ground and on the margins. The first is *Origins to Constantine*,² edited by Margaret Mitchell and Frances M. Young which personally I found less satisfying than the others. It has a slightly arcane academic feel to it. Also the earlier chapters are the weakest in the series in their handling of the New Testament material and growth of the church. It is very much a 'this is how Christians understood things to have been' approach rather than a 'this is what happened or didn't happen' approach. Volume 5 on *Eastern Christianity*³ is utterly fascinating as it opens up an area of church history with which most of us are unfamiliar. In one volume we have an historical narrative of the history of the Eastern churches, beginning with the Ecumenical Patriarchate based in Constantinople and moving on to the Greek, Russian and other Orthodox churches to the Monophysite churches of the Copts, Melkites, Armenians, Jacobites and Nestorians. The remarkable missionary reach of the latter is recounted. What is particularly instructive is the way the churches under Islam survived and adapted but also how Islam was influenced by the large Christian minorities and often majorities under its rule. There is also much here on art and liturgy in the Eastern church.

The last three volumes to have appeared cover the modern period. *Enlightenment, Reawakenings and Revolution, 1660–1815*⁴ edited by Stewart J. Brown

and Timothy Tackett is a very insightful book on this critical period in the western church. The first section deals with church, state and society in Europe. J.C.D. Clark's chapter on Britain and Ireland is especially good. The second section looks at Christian life in Europe with chapters on Protestant and Catholic clergy, sermons, education, popular religion and architecture. In the third section, movements and challenges, the impact of science, the enlightenment, the evangelical awakenings and toleration is dealt with. W.R. Ward's chapter on the awakenings distills much of his learning and wisdom and merits attention, especially in his exploration of the links between what was happening on the continent and Britain. The fourth section takes up the expansion of Christianity into the non-European world. Mark Noll writes on North America and Lamin Sanneh on Africa. This section highlights a key theme in all these volumes and that is the globalisation of Christianity that began in this period. The last section takes up the matter of the revolutions in Britain, America and France. The threefold theme expressed in the title shape the volume and highlights its impact on Christianity in the succeeding two centuries.

This becomes clear in *World Christianities, c.1815–1914*⁵ edited by Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley. Gilley's introduction is a magisterial survey of Christianity in this period. He highlights the social, cultural and intellectual challenges it faced and how Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism in particular sought to confront them. It is interesting to note how conservative Christianity is recognised as a force resisting modernism and what that means for the future. Section one deals with Christianity and Modernism. Gilley himself writes about the papacy and David

Bebbington has a fascinating chapter on the growth of voluntary religion which in Protestantism became the dominant form in this period. Other chapters deal with patterns of worship, women, architecture, music, literature, social theology, science and the Bible. The second section deals with the theme of the churches and national identities with explorations of the relationship of Christianity to nationalism. John Wolfe's chapter on 'Anglicanism, Presbyterianism and the religious identities of the United Kingdom' is very good on the development of toleration and religious freedom as is Mark Noll again on the development of a Christian America and a Christian Canada. If you thought there was not much difference think again. In the third section there is the best and most useful survey of the worldwide expansion of Christianity since Stephen Neill. The volume ends with a fine chapter by Stanley on the outlook of Christianity in 1914 when everything was about to change beyond recognition.

The ninth and final volume in the series is *World Christianities, c.1914 – 2000*⁶ edited by Hugh Mcleod. In his introduction Mcleod identifies five themes that are later taken up in the book:

1. the development of Christianity from a mainly European to a worldwide religion;
2. the major challenge faced by Christianity in Europe and North America;
3. the diminishing importance of denominations and the increased interaction with other faiths;
4. the huge impact of war in the 20th century; and
5. the relationship of Christianity with oppressed and marginalised groups. To these he adds a possible sixth theme which runs through them all: that is the communications revolution. In the rest of the book these themes are woven through the chapters whether in dealing with Roman Catholicism,

Protestantism, ecumenism, missions, Pentecostalism and the independent churches of Africa. All of this is put in its political, cultural and social context. This volume is less of a classic church history than the previous one, but then it is dealing with a period of even greater change. Perhaps most significant has been the decline of Christianity in Europe and its growth elsewhere.

For anyone teaching church history one of the perennial quests is to find a good one volume church history. Renwick and Harman's *Story of the Church* is still useful, but it is short and lacking in analysis. The old Lion Handbook *History of Christianity* has been an invaluable resource. Its replacement *The New Lion Handbook: The History of Christianity*⁷ by Jonathan Hill is an excellent piece of work that just might fit the bill for a one volume history. Unlike the previous version the new handbook is largely written by one author, but with some short essays by experts such as the Calvinist Carl Trueman and the Catholic Thomas Weinandy. The whole of church history is covered with a generous amount of space given to the east and the developing world. My reservations are in relation to the section on the beginning of Christianity which attempts to be too detached. Can it really be said that 'The question of the resurrection is one of the most vexed in the study of the early Christians, if only because the sources seem very hard to interpret'? I often wish that general church histories would simply begin from the end of the apostolic era. Also there is hardly any recognition given to conservative evangelicalism in the 20th century. The growth of fundamentalism in America and Pentecostalism is recognised, but there is no mention of people like John Stott, D.M. Lloyd-Jones, Carl Henry or Francis Schaeffer. Even Gresham Machen only gets a mention at the end of a paragraph on Harry

Emerson Fosdick. I think that the author is missing something as often happens in histories of the modern church. Eternity if not time will reveal how much the worldwide expansion of the church and indeed its survival in Europe has been due under God to classic evangelicalism. Nevertheless even with these caveats I think this is the best one volume church history available.

Jonathan Hill has also written *The History of Christian Thought*⁸ which is briefer and more of a reference work than the previous volume. Until the modern period all the key figures, doctrines and movements are given short articles. Each theologian has a section each on his life and thought. Again like the previous volume this one falls down in its treatment of the 20th century. While we need to know about Barth, Tillich and Rahner nothing is said about evangelicalism. The 20th century may not have been evangelicalism's strongest period theologically, but it has become a significant force and in recent decades has recovered something of its theological confidence even as liberalism has collapsed. Stephen Tomkins has written *A Short History of Christianity*.⁹ Vividly written, the book is not however judicious in its assessments and genuflects too much to the mainstream. For children *The History Lives* series by Mindy and Brandon Withrow is to be recommended. *Peril and Peace* on the early church and *Monks and Mystics*¹⁰ are very good and reliable introductions to young readers. The Banner of Truth has published a helpful workbook for S.M. Houghton's well-loved Sketches from Church History.¹¹ This would be useful for a small study group, especially young people. Unfortunately it ends with the 19th century when the worldwide advance of the gospel only really gets going.

Early Church

Augustine of Hippo is a fascinating character. There are many excellent biographies, but one of them is definitely not *Augustine, Saint and Sinner*¹² by James J. O'Donnell. O'Donnell is a leading Roman Catholic Augustine scholar, but this book, while interesting, is something of a hatchet job. Augustine comes off as a pre-New Labour master of spin. His famous *Confessions* is simply a brilliant PR job that hides a much less attractive figure. Stick with Peter Brown. Much more reliable and a good and informative read is *Defence of Truth – contending for the faith yesterday and today*¹³ by Michael Haykin. In six short chapters Haykin focuses on different early church fathers and how they defended the faith against its opponents with relevant application for our defence of the faith in an increasingly similar culture. In *Contending for our All*¹⁴ by John Piper introduces us to three great defenders of the faith, Athanasius, John Owen and Gresham Machen. As there is so little readily available on Athanasius I mention the book in this section. Theological controversy is never pleasant, but is sometimes necessary as Athanasius discovered in his battle with Arius. How much we owe to him and can learn from him, not least in thinking theologically for the good of the souls of people. Piper is a master at these cameo portraits.

Reformation

Protestants are accused of jumping over the medieval period to the Reformation. I have to plead guilty for the simple reason that I do not have any books for that period to review. May Nick Needham (see his article) forgive me. There is however a number of good books dealing with the Reformation period. Nick Needham's third volume in his series

2000 *Years of Christ's Power* dealing with the *Renaissance and Reformation*¹⁵ is magisterial and will be used for a long time as a text book in this area. As well as a thorough and well-paced narrative there is doctrinal exposition and documents. With the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth on the horizon in 2009 there is an increasing flow of books about the Genevan reformer. Christian Focus has republished Williston Walker's 1906 classic biography of *John Calvin*.¹⁶ This remains one of the best biographies. Two short books demand our attention. *Let Christ be Magnified*¹⁷ is the series of lectures that the 19th century church historian Merle d'Aubigne delivered in 1864 on the 300th anniversary of Calvin's death. This is an excellent and heart warming introduction to Calvin's theology and spirituality. Also short and excellent is Steven J. Lawson's *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*.¹⁸ Calvin was first and foremost a preacher and Lawson captures something of what this must mean for those who are his spiritual heirs. The book covers the familiar aspects of preaching, but illustrates them from Calvin's practice. The book is a delight that every preacher should prayerfully read in order to renew his own spiritual life and preaching. Perhaps a British publisher will make it more readily available in the UK. For a taste of Calvin's preaching read his *Sermons on the Book of Micah*¹⁹ newly translated and edited Benjamin Wirt Farley. Farley's translation brings out the freshness and vitality of Calvin's language as he expounded the text of Scripture and applied to his congregation. The book is worth having as a commentary as well as an example of instinctive Christ-centred preaching from the Old Testament. Another Old Testament book that Calvin famously preached from was Job. In *John Calvin – Suffering – Understanding the Love of God*²⁰ Joseph Hill brings together and annotates passages on suffering from

Calvin's sermons, commentaries and theological writings. The result is a wonderful work on suffering in the Christian life, full of God-centred pastoral reflection and an insight into Calvin as a shepherd of souls. Very different in nature but also revealing of Calvin as a pastor is *Courtship, Engagement and Marriage*²¹ by John Witte Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, the first volume in Eerdmans's series *Sex, Marriage and Family Life in John Calvin's Geneva*. This is an academic book, but nevertheless intriguing in its description of how Calvin and his colleagues tried to apply biblical principles of sexuality, marriage and family in Geneva. Here we discover how the reformation worked itself out in the lives of ordinary people. Here too Calvin's writings on the subject are collected. Contemporaneous with Calvin was Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich. At the time he was as influential, especially in England where he had many correspondents and his writings were widely read. A collection of essays edited by Bruce Gordon and Emilio Campi and entitled *Architect of the Reformation*²² is a very insightful introduction to this overlooked but important reformer. The book acquaints us with the remarkable breadth of Bullinger's interests and influence, pastoral care and theology, preaching, civic and church leadership. Even more than Calvin, Bullinger was at the centre of a network of evangelicals. There is much we can learn from the quiet way he built upon and transformed Zwingli's earlier reforms. One of Bullinger's correspondents was Lady Jane Grey whose life Faith Cook retells in *Nine Day Queen of England*.²³ This is a very readable account not only of a young Protestant woman tragically caught up in the political maelstrom that followed Edward VI's death, but a testimony to her strong faith and an excellent introduction to this crucial period in English history.

17th and 18th centuries

For an excellent introduction to the Puritans and their kin consult Joel Beeke's *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*.²⁴ Not dissimilar to J.I. Packer's *Among God's Giants*, this book brings together a wide range of studies of British, Dutch and American Reformed theologians and pastors in the 17th and 18th centuries. Particularly useful is the material on Dutch Puritanism. The connecting theme is the concern of these writers to nurture godliness among Christians through the application of the gospel. Beeke could be a little more critical of some of the Puritans and the introspective piety that sometimes has characterised the tradition. More attention could also be given to the public dimension of their spirituality. But that said the priority of nurturing godliness is one that we need to reaffirm and the Puritans critically read have much to teach us. David Calhoun's study of John Bunyan in *Grace Abounding*²⁵ is a fresh and accessible introduction to the life and theology of this remarkable man who towers over our culture long after he died. The Banner of Truth has also published recently some works from and about this period. *The Letters of John Newton*²⁶ are always a dose of good spiritual sense. This volume, edited by Josiah Bull, is largely different than the previous Banner paperback and contains some letters not found elsewhere. Edward Morgan's *John Elias – Life, Letters and Essays*²⁷ is a reprint of an earlier republication that exposes us to the passionate Calvinistic evangelicalism that transformed not only 18th and 19th century Wales, but much of Britain and America. Elias's letters and essays are an example of clear gospel-centred thinking that we so desperately need to recover. A better known figure is the subject of *The Life and Times of George Whitefield*,²⁸ by Robert Philip. Here in one volume we have a sympathetic

biography of the great 18th century evangelist that makes considerable use of Whitefield's own writing.

The 19th century

In recent years 19th century architecture has been freshly appreciated, especially as our centre cities have been regenerated and the achievements of Victorian municipal fathers reassessed. Perhaps something similar will happen with 19th century Christianity. That it was the evangelical century is without doubt as the three volumes in IVP's *A History of Evangelicalism* series bears witness. The first volume, Mark Noll's *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, deals with the 18th century and has been reviewed in a previous issue. The early 19th century is dealt with in John Wolfe's excellent *The Expansion of Evangelicalism*.²⁹ This is a crucially important period as evangelical Christianity expanded phenomenally on both sides of the Atlantic. Weaving together a coherent narrative as well as delving into the way ordinary evangelicals lived, believed and worshipped, Wolfe is very good on the whole matter of revivals and understanding them on different levels. I think, however, he could have included more on the critique of Finney and the new measures from conservative Congregationalists and Presbyterians.

David Bebbington's *The Dominance of Evangelicalism*³⁰ is also excellent and very insightful. What he says about the impact of Romanticism is very helpful for understanding much of present-day evangelicalism. However I am always uncomfortable with the emphasis in Bebbington that evangelicalism is largely a product of the 18th century and that various developments in the 19th moved more conservative evangelicals to harden their doctrinal position. I prefer to see greater continuity with the Puritans and Reformers, although there was

development and change. This raises the issue that D.G. Hart and others have raised about evangelicalism. Is there such a thing in the way these historians think there is? Some of the people that Bebbington mentions, such as John Clifford, may have come from an historically evangelical denomination, but would hardly today be considered evangelicals. Or perhaps they would. That is the problem. I prefer to define evangelicalism as living orthodox Protestantism. It is classic Protestant Christianity (credally orthodox, catholic in the true sense of the word, the *solus* of the Reformation) that is experientially alive. The Protestantism of the Reformers was alive, but Protestantism can easily fossilise into lifeless moralism and needs to be constantly spiritually renewed. In this sense evangelicalism has deep roots, although it adapts to its context which can be either a bane or a blessing. Something of this adaptability can be seen in *What a Friend we have in Jesus*³¹ by Ian Randall. This volume is part of a series on Christian spirituality and Randall shows how evangelicalism has a rich and deep understanding of spiritual life. His canvas is broader than the 19th century and he includes everything from Calvinism to the charismatic movement. Again there is a problem of definition, but in these pages there is enough of a family likeness to give it coherence.

The easiest and most enjoyable way to understand history is through the lives of some of the key players. Here are some recent offerings in roughly chronological order. Daniel Webber's *William Carey and the Missionary Vision*³² is a fine and applied introduction to Carey's pioneering missionary theology with a reprint of his famous Enquiry and Andrew Fuller's sermon *On delays in Religious Concerns*. Thomas Chalmers was inspired by Carey and was a great encourager of mission at home and

abroad. His *Letters*³³ convey something of the spirit of his large-hearted Christianity. Whether he is dealing with the personal matters of his correspondents or the large issues of church and state there is always the spirit of Christ-exalting, God-centred Christianity. Chalmers as well as other 19th century worthies such as Horatius Bonar, John Macdonald and Robert Moffatt are the subjects of chapters in Ian Murray's *A Scottish Christian Heritage*.³⁴ John Knox and Robert Bruce as well as 'Scottish' themes such as eldership, preaching the theological decline of the old Free Church are dealt with. Murray has a rare gift of bringing out the spiritual essence of a man or movement. Whether you have any connection with Scotland read this book for its historical exposition of the evangelical Calvinism that can transform nations. My only criticism is that Murray could have said more about Chalmers' public engagement and concern for society. This was an important aspect of his Christianity. A man of similar spirit to Chalmers was Andrew Reed whose life Ian Shaw recounts in *The Greatest is Charity*.³⁵ Reed is a sadly neglected figure, but whose achievement is remarkable by any standard. As well as being a Congregational minister in the East End of London he founded several schools, orphanages and hospitals. In Reed we find the same characteristics that we find in other early 19th century men – a Calvinistic evangelicalism that was doctrinally orthodox, experientially alive and practically compassionate. Shaw retells Reed's story well in a way that will inspire us to follow his example. In the same line of faith was the later 19th century leader J.C. Ryle who is freshly appreciated by J.I. Packer in *Faithfulness and Holiness*.³⁶ The first half of the book is an excellent biography of Ryle in Packer's inimitable style. The second half is a reprint of the 1877

version of Ryle's classic *Holiness*. This version is shorter and was written for his family. This is good, sane, biblical Christianity. A younger contemporary of Ryle's was *F.B. Meyer*³⁷ whose biography has been written by Bob Holman. While well-researched, this book is a celebration of Meyer's remarkable ministry that embraced pastoring, preaching, missionary work, denominational leadership and social activism. It is the latter aspect that Holman emphasises in order to recover this aspect of evangelicalism's heritage. Meyer, like Reed and Spurgeon, had a great love for the lost people of London, especially the poor, and is a model for us today as we seek to reach our cities for Christ.

The United States

Though published five years ago I want to mention Mark Noll's *America's God*.³⁸ This is magnum opus of one of the most distinguished historians of evangelicalism. Covering the period from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln, Noll gives us what is in effect is a theological history of the 18th and early 20th centuries. His range is wide and scholarship deep as he shows how theology was adapted to the context of late colonial and early republican America. As a study in theological contextualisation this book cannot be surpassed. For contextualisation or lack of it on the mission field *North American Foreign Missions*,³⁹ a collection of essays on various aspects of missionary engagement by North American Protestants. The contributors are not all evangelicals, but the historical analysis is first rate. A much neglected field is that of the experience of Black Christians in America. In *Black Church Beginnings*⁴⁰ Henry H. Mitchell explores the roots of the Black American Christian experience beginning in the 17th century and continuing to the mid-19th century. He particularly focuses on the various secessions from Methodism and the

emergence of large Black Methodist Episcopal denominations.

Most readers are more familiar with Reformed Christianity in America. Presbyterian & Reformed are publishing a series of *American Reformed Biographies*. Well worth reading is D.G. Hart's biography of *John Williamson Nevin*.⁴¹ Nevin is a fascinating figure in that he moved away from the new school Presbyterianism of his upbringing and old school Presbyterianism of his training at Princeton to a form of high church Calvinism in his adopted home in the German Reformed Church. With the historian Philip Schaff he developed what became known as the Mercersburg theology that Charles Hodge so opposed. At one stage Nevin seemed to seriously consider converting to Rome, but didn't and maintained what he understood as catholic Calvinism to the end. There are many issues relating to his theology that space forbids dealing with, but the problem that concerned him throughout his life was the effect of the radical individualism in Reformed Protestantism and the consequent downplaying of the church in the Christian life. This continues to be a problem that Nevin continues to challenge us on. A more mainstream character was *Robert Lewis Dabney*⁴² whose biography by Sean Lucas is also very interesting. Many of us value Dabney's theological writings, but there is something about him that I find unappealing. Perhaps it was his aggressive defence of slavery and the bitterness that seemed to characterise him towards the end of his life. He was certainly a man of great stature, but as so often with such men there are great flaws. Lucas offers a nuanced life of Dabney in the context of the Southern culture he so loved and sought to defend. Was he an example of overly contextualised theology that in end was compromised by its defence of an

abomination? A voice from a region of the United States of which both Nevin and Dabney were wary is Ebenezer Porter whose *Letters on Revival*⁴³ offer wise advice on revival from his experience of them in the early 19th century. There is good material here, although there is much like it on the market, not least from Banner itself. But this is in short compass good Edwardsean stuff that Nevin would have seen as in part the problem. But it is a false choice between a churchly and an experiential Christianity. We need both.

Baptists

I don't try to be too denominationally biased in my reviews, but two authors have recently published books on Baptist history that merit out attention. Robert Oliver's *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists, 1771–1892*⁴⁴ is a very fine account of English Baptist life between John Gill and C.H. Spurgeon. While with narrative sections this is really a theological history as Oliver takes up men, controversies and movements and gives us a picture of how the Particular Baptists developed. Compared to other works more attention is paid to Strict Baptists. In many ways Tom Nettles takes the same approach except on a much larger scale in his three volume *The Baptists*.⁴⁵ Nettles' concern is to explore the matter of Baptist identity through various people and movements. In the introduction to the volume he outlines what he calls the coherent truth approach as opposed to the soul liberty approach. The latter identify the freedom of the Christian conscience as the true mark of Baptist identity whereas the latter sees Baptist identity as cohering with classic Protestant Christianity but with its own distinctive ecclesiology. Volume 1 deals with English Baptists from the 17th century to Andrew Fuller and William Carey at the beginning of the 19th century. His studies of Spilsbury, Kiffin,

Knollys, Keach, Gill, Fuller and Carey are excellent. Volume 2 takes up American Baptists from the beginning to the 19th century theologians of the Southern Baptist Seminary and the remarkable missionary Lottie Moon. The treatment of the early New England Baptists – Roger Williams, Isaac Backus and John Leland – is very illuminating. At the end of the volume are two chapters on the Haldane brothers and Gerhard Oncken respectively. Volume 3 brings us to the 20th century. There is a very fine chapter on A.H. Strong and another on E.Y. Mullins. The latter is very instructive on the problem of being a moderate evangelical in a time of theological decline. It would have been helpful (but is really too much to ask when there is so much) to have had more on what happened in the Northern Baptist churches and what happened in the UK. There is a chapter each on Spurgeon and his antagonist John Clifford, but nothing after that. These volumes are invaluable in establishing the historical basis of contemporary Baptist identity. I am convinced that this is something that not only Baptists, but baptistic independents in the UK need to give serious consideration to. Are we in danger of having no ecclesiology?

20th century

Someone who wrestled with these questions in the context of the 20th century was E.J. Poole-Connor, the founder of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. Poole-Connor sought to maintain the tradition of Spurgeon in the context of a non-denominational movement that would be distinctively evangelical in a way the older denominational bodies were not. Wakeman Trust has republished David Fountain's 1966 biography of Poole-Connor, *Contending for the Faith*⁴⁶ which gives us a good picture of the man. Poole-Connor saw more clearly than most other evangelicals of his time

what was happening in the churches and what needed to be done. The problem with this book is the rather tendentious postscripts at the back by Fountain and Peter Masters.

The latter attacks the FIEC and other things he doesn't like. This is not the place to refute this abuse of history, but suffice it to say that Masters' comments lacks the magnanimity that Poole-Connor and Spurgeon before him showed. But that is often the case with those who claim the mantles of the prophets. Poole-Connor lived to see the beginning of the Reformed resurgence in the 1950s and '60s. *The Banner of Truth*⁴⁷ played a key role in this. To mark the 50th anniversary of the magazine's founding issues 1 to 16 have been reprinted. The volume is well worth perusing to get a feel for the doctrines, people and events that helped to shape the thinking of men and women rediscovering the doctrines of grace. We can never get away from these basics and need to be constantly reminded of them. A key figure in this resurgence was *John Murray*, whose *Life* by Iain Murray Banner has also reissued with an appendix containing letters from John Murray. If not one of the most exciting lives, this biography offers us insight into one of the greatest Reformed theologians of the 20th century whose witness still bears fruit today. Murray participated in some of the early conferences of Tyndale House. In reading T.A. Noble's history of *Tyndale House and Fellowship*⁴⁸ it is interesting to note the Reformed emphasis in the early years, even to the extent of having a conference on the Synod of Dort. I can't imagine that happening today, which illustrates something of the changes in post-war evangelicalism in the UK. Dr Lloyd-Jones and others helped to inject Reformed theology into the blood-stream of the theological renewal of evangelicalism, but it didn't last as the movement expanded and as the focus turned more towards

biblical scholarship. There is no doubt that Tyndale House and Fellowship have had a significant influence on evangelicalism as now several generations of scholars have used its facilities and meetings and moved to academic positions. But while there have been many whose scholarship has been a great blessing to the church, there are others who have succumbed to the academic respectability that Dr Lloyd-Jones feared. The purpose of Christian scholarship must not be to gain influence and respectability in the world, but to serve the church in its mission of proclaiming the gospel.

Global Christianity

The remarkable growth in recent decades of evangelical Christianity in the developing world means that church history must take account of what has happened and is happening in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In a past issue I mentioned Philip Jenkins', *The Next Christendom – The coming of Global Christianity*. This book has put the growth of Christianity on the radar of the secular academy. Apparently the New York Times got in a panic about it, not having realised what was going on outside the secure walls of the secular East Coast of the United States. Jenkins has followed up his first volume with two more in what is now a trilogy on global Christianity. *The New Faces of Christianity – Believing the Bible in the Global South*⁴⁹ is a fascinating study of how the Bible is read and used in Africa. Jenkins' point is that the Bible is largely taken at face value which has implications for many areas of life – sexual ethics, attitudes to wealth and poverty, awareness of the supernatural and so on. The global implications are that as the church grows in the south that African and Asians will have a theologically conservative influence on the direction of the world church. This is already being seen in the struggle over homosexuality in the Anglican

Communion. In *God's Continent*, Jenkins takes up the theme of *Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis*.⁵⁰ Here Jenkins is somewhat counter intuitive. He dissents from many who see religion in general and Christianity in particular in terminal decline. While in many cases not healthy if not dead, in many other places Christianity is very much alive. He sees the church in a period of transition as it loses its privileged status and rethinks its mission. In the meantime immigrants are bringing more vigorous forms of Christianity with them and seeing Europe as a mission field. As for Islam it is not as strong as some think and here he dissents from those who see the future of Europe as Eurabia with growing Muslim minorities that threaten to become majorities in some places. Jenkins thinks that Muslims will become more secular as time goes on and a European form of Islam develops. Whether or not one agrees with everything in Jenkins' analysis he offers a stimulating overview of global Christianity in the early 21st century. We live in exciting times for God's kingdom and these books help us to understand a world in which he is at work advancing his kingdom. What that means theologically is the subject of *Globalizing Theology – belief and practice in an era of world Christianity*.⁵¹ This is a collection of essays in honour of the respected missiologist Paul Hiebert of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. This is not an historical book, although Andrew Walls contributes a fine chapter on globalisation and the study of church history. Church history, while dealing with the very important events that happened in Europe such as the Reformation, must become increasingly global in scope and missiological in nature. Europe is no longer the heartland of Christianity. The book is well worth reading and reflecting upon as every church becomes global as Charles Van Engen puts it, both local and catholic.

Reference works

Good biographical reference works are handy if you are doing research or want a bit of background on someone you are reading. IVP's *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*⁵² has articles on a wide range of leading evangelical by an impressive array of scholars. If you are a history buff this book is addictive. As is the two-volume *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, 1730 – 1860*.⁵³ The size and period mean that this is a much more detailed work with short articles on evangelicals you never knew existed. The importance of this dictionary is that it focuses on the crucial period of evangelical growth from the mid-18th to mid-19th centuries. IVP's *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*⁵⁴ is not a specifically historical work but it contains much historical material. There are a number of articles on the history of Christian apologetics as well as biographies of key apologists such as James Orr, Abraham Kuyper, and Cornelius van Til to name a few. But the main reason to buy this book is that it is an extremely helpful tool for doing apologetics. Many themes and topics are covered on various movements, religions and philosophies as well as six excellent introductory articles on apologetics as a theological discipline.

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