
Editor's Notes

One of the more hopeful signs at present for mission in the United Kingdom is the revival of catechising as an evangelistic strategy. For isn't that what is happening with the proliferation of courses intended to introduce people to the Christian faith? The most notable of these is the ubiquitous Alpha Course. With all its faults (and they should not be understated), the Alpha Course has shown us how catechising is still an important weapon in our armoury. There are, of course, other courses such as Christianity Explained which are better but show the same thing. This form of catechising has been adapted culturally and pedagogically, but is fundamentally the same thing as that known by our forefathers. The Christian faith is systematically taught in a structured and memorable way. A few years ago I was in a ministers' meeting where this approach to evangelism was being discussed. The point was made that it was not preaching with the implication that it was not an inappropriate form of evangelism. I disagreed and said that it was a form of preaching and that certainly I felt that I preached when I taught the Discover Christianity course in my church. But perhaps a better response would have been to say that it was a form of catechising and as such was a very appropriate form of evangelism.

That this is so should not surprise us. The early church and later the Reformers and Puritans used catechising extensively in their evangelism. It was the appalling ignorance of the people that moved the Reformers to revive the ancient practise of systematically teaching the faith in this way. Later the Roman Catholics picked up the practise and sadly today catechising is more usually associated with Catholicism than Protestantism. But as with the Reformers, does not the ignorance of people today cry out for a return to catechising? Of course the pedagogical method has to be adapted. The rote question and answer format of traditional catechisms needs to be adapted to the way people learn today. I am convinced that careful instruction in an hospitable setting can be used by the Holy Spirit to open hearts to the gospel. In his magisterial history of Protestant Nonconformity, *The Dissenters* (2 volumes, Oxford University Press), Michael Watts makes the point that the remarkable growth of Nonconformity in the period 1790-1830 was largely due to Nonconformist preachers reaping the harvest sown by Anglican catechising. While we may be seeing little advance today could we not be living in a time when we should be patiently teaching the faith in a culturally appropriate form so that our children and their children will, by God's grace, reap a harvest in years to come. Perhaps we will see something of that harvest ourselves.

All this ties in to the theme of several articles in this issue, namely mission. John Nichol's article on Thomas Chalmers reminds us of the importance of urban mission today. Chalmers was something of a pioneer in this area, as John Roxborough makes clear in his book *Thomas Chalmers: Enthusiast for Mission* (Paternoster/Rutherford House, 1999). The book has the feel of a thesis, but it is nevertheless an inspiring introduction to this great man and his passion for both "the Christian good of Scotland" and of the world. In Part 1 Roxborough puts Chalmers in context and then recounts how he moved from a moderate to an evangelical position and in the process picked up a passionate concern for the intensive evangelisation of a fast industrialising Scotland.

With all his limitations Chalmers's vision and concern has much to teach us in a far more urbanised world today. In Part 2 Roxborough turns to Chalmers's concern for world missions. It is impossible to be unmoved by the bigness of the man. What struck me was that Chalmers was far bigger than many of the men around him. Roxborough perhaps overstates this, but it made me wonder whether Chalmers would easily fit into many of our churches or groupings.

One of the most effective mission movements in British history was Welsh Calvinistic Methodism. Again I would recommend Watts's volumes for the statistics involved. For a warm-hearted and inspiring account of what happened I recommend William Williams's (not Pantycelyn) *Welsh Calvinistic Methodism* (Bryntirion Press, 1998). First published in 1872, this account conveys something of the remarkable move of God's Spirit that transformed Wales spiritually and culturally. Whatever strategies we develop and methods we adopt what we need above everything else is for the Holy Spirit to be sent from heaven on preachers as happened then. Something of the kind of spirituality this produced can be delightfully tasted in the more famous William Williams's (this time of Pantycelyn) *Theomorphus*. Selected, edited and translated by Eifion Evans and entitled *Pursued by God* (Bryntirion Press, 1996), this is one of the classic works of the Great Awakening now made available to English readers. Like John Bunyan, Williams pictures the Christian life as a great drama of universal significance. Space prevents me from illustrating the point, but suffice it say that I think that in portraying the Christian life many of us preachers miss this dramatic element. Was not one of the characteristics of the evangelistic preaching of Whitefield and others their ability to describe in such a vivid way the working of God on the souls of ordinary people. Surely this is biblical as we can see so clearly in Paul's letters.

Of course, preaching has not always been like that of the Calvinistic Methodists. In the third volume in a remarkable, and as yet incomplete, history of preaching, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), the American scholar and pastor, Hughes Oliphant Old, covers the medieval period. This volume is a real eye-opener. Here are great preachers I have never heard about and those I have were often far greater than I ever imagined. Contrary to what I understood there was a great deal of expository preaching going on right through the history of the church. Sadly in this period much of it was undermined by the dominance of the allegorical method of interpretation and much of that preaching took place behind the doors of monasteries. The preaching also tended to be moralistic and even at its best, with the notable exceptions of a few preachers like Wycliffe, the note of justification by faith was missing. But that said the missionary preaching of the Celtic church and the missionaries from Britain to Germany was remarkable in what it achieved. In spite of their flaws, one cannot but be moved by the spirit that animated the great preaching orders, such as the Dominicans, in their concern to instruct the peoples of Europe in the faith. Indeed one of the surprises of this book is its account of the catechetical preaching of Thomas Aquinas. In 1273 great crowds gathered in San Domenico Majori in Naples to hear this theologian teach the Apostle's Creed in beautifully clear, well illustrated and practically applied sermons. With this fascinating book Old has put us in his debt by opening what to most of us is unexplored territory and whetting our appetite for what he has to say about the preaching of the Reformation era.

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