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1991 Congregational Studies Conference Papers

What Makes Churches Grow?

Andrew Kelly

Joseph Parker—The Immortal Thor of Pulpitdom

Rev. ES Guest

RW Dale: Standing Firm or Drifting Dangerously

Rev. Peter Seccombe

**Congregational
Studies Conference
Papers
1991**

**Andrew Kelly,
ES Guest,
and
Peter Seccombe**

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The papers are printed in the order in which they were given at the Conference; as usual each contributor is entirely responsible for the views expressed in his paper.

Foreword

Our 1991 Studies Conference began with a significant paper addressing the question ‘What makes churches grow?’ Andrew Kelly examined the history of Wiveliscombe Congregational Church, tracing the rise and fall of the membership over a period of 300 years and uncovering the reasons for the fluctuation. Altogether a fascinating analysis.

Joseph Parker, whose name is indissolubly linked with the City Temple in London, was by any standard a remarkable man. Stan Guest, in a lively paper, exposed his strengths and his weaknesses as a preacher and as a statesman for Congregationalism. Like Parker, RW Dale of Carrs Lane, Birmingham was a 19th Century man and Peter Seccombe ably and clearly revealed the man and his work, pinpointing areas of doctrinal weakness, such as the doctrine of scripture, which, though small, opened up the way for the rampant liberalism which was to sweep through Congregationalism.

In commending these papers to you may I underline the importance of holding fast to scripture as the inspired, infallible and inerrant word of God. Once that goes then everything goes.

Derek Swann

Conference Chairman

What Makes Churches Grow?

An examination of Church Growth Principles with special reference to the History of Wiveliscombe Congregational Church

Andrew Kelly

I would like to start by saying that I am not an expert in Church Growth. I am a layman with an interest in Church History and a desire to see growth take place in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. What I will be doing in this paper is sharing the fruits of my own historical research at Wiveliscombe and seeking to relate it to certain scriptural principles. My aim is to give food for thought and some ideas that you may find have practical application.

Church Growth is a subject which has seen a fantastic upsurge of interest recently, especially during the last ten years. Books and magazines dealing with the subject of Church Growth have proliferated but, when we examine what is actually happening in the life of the Church in the United Kingdom, there is actually no evidence that growth is actually taking place. It could be objected that there are some well known churches that have seen very considerable, and very fully documented, increases in their numbers. However for those that are increasing and growing there are sufficient that are currently declining, and sufficient that have actually closed down, to counterbalance them and to give overall figures of decreasing church attendance.

Our latest local statistics appeared in the Somerset County Gazette for 9 March 1991 under the heading 'FALL IN NUMBERS GOING TO CHURCH'. The article reads: 'A survey has revealed that one in eighteen adult churchgoers in Somerset stopped attending services over a ten year period.' The article continued with the information that the survey had also revealed a six percent decrease in church attendance between 1979 and 1989—DESPITE A GROWING POPULATION!

The question that we need to ask ourselves is 'Why?' Why, despite all the activity of the churches, with all the interest in the mechanics of church growth that now exists, and with all the church growth information now available, is no overall growth actually taking place?

I would suggest that in large measure this is due to the very methods which are being adopted, in many cases, in order to achieve growth! It is not my intention to go into detail about the modern Church Growth movement,

much of which is soundly based, but we will look at a few examples as a platform from which to launch our own thoughts this morning.

We will therefore look at three 'Principles of Church Growth' which some churches are now using, to a greater or lesser extent, in an attempt to bring about growth.

The first 'Principle' is the three-tier structure of Cell, Congregation and Celebration. The teaching is that each congregation ought to function at three levels:—

1. The Cell—Eight to twelve people in a small group for fellowship, encouragement and sharing.
2. The Congregation—up to about a hundred for teaching and other meetings.
3. The Celebration—over a thousand for large scale worship and inspiration.

The idea put forward is that if a church really wants to progress it must adopt this sort of strategy and provide these three levels of meeting. This approach has received strong support in many quarters, particularly from Spring Harvest, but we can see that there is an immediate and overwhelming objection to making it a Biblical 'Principle' of Church Growth. Where is it in the New Testament?

The second 'Principle' is the Homogenous Unit Principle, this is not held by all but is nonetheless still strongly present. This states that growth occurs most rapidly if you stick to one class or one type of person. For example a group of young West Indian Christians will see much greater growth if they stick to evangelising their own people. If they start to reach elderly white people then they will find that their presence will inhibit the influx of other young West Indians, who don't like to mix with elderly white people.

The third 'Principle' is of having attractive worship styles that will bring people in to the churches. However at least ninety percent of the people it attracts will be people from other churches who find it more attractive than their own worship. *This is not church growth!* It is the growth of individual congregations, often at the expense of other local congregations, but it is not growth of the body of Christ. We would more accurately describe it as *the redistribution of assets within the body of Christ*.

Now it can be freely admitted that all these principles will make your fellowship bigger. However we need to be cautious about what is actually being achieved. Roy Pointer in 'How do Churches Grow?', a valuable book which is recommended reading, instances one charismatic church which grew from 10 to 200 over a two year period. Investigation showed that 180, of the 190 new members, were already Christians transferring from other fellowships. Only 10 people had been converted and the total effect, in terms of real church growth,

was exactly the same as if that original group of 10 had doubled to 20. However the growth achieved will be rapid growth, short-term growth, and ultimately result in decline, as in the case of the church mentioned above, which has now again declined to a comparatively small number. The thesis that I want to put before you is that God has his own means and methods for bringing about the growth of his church, and that he also has his own ideas as to the nature of that growth. When we examine these subjects we will find that they have very little to do with man-made structures.

I also believe that these God-given principles are:—

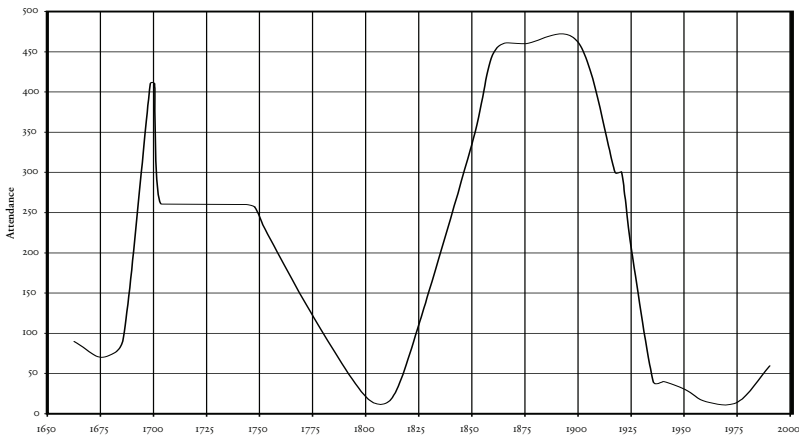
1. Taught in Scripture.
2. Demonstrated in History.

My method of approach to the subject will be to use the History of Wiveliscombe Congregational Church to highlight the patterns of growth that God has brought about, and then to draw your attention to the Scriptural principles that it demonstrates.

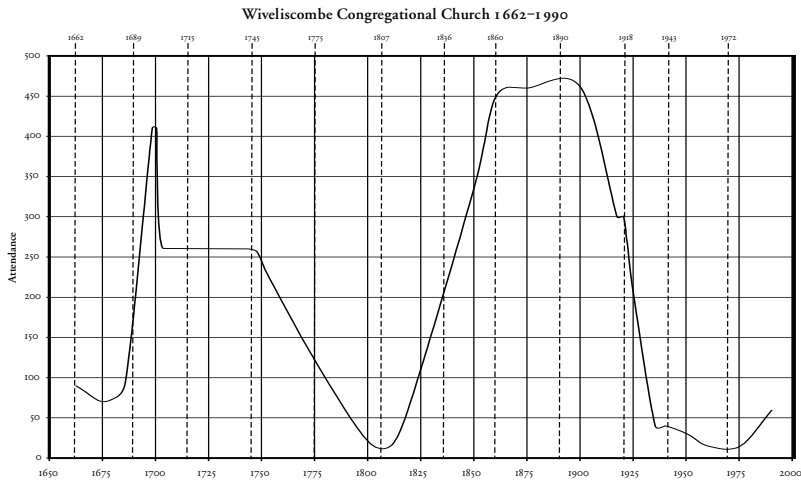
1. Patterns of Church Growth and Decline historically observed

This is an attendance graph for Wiveliscombe Congregational Church between 1662 and 1990. The first impression we have may well be that there is no particular pattern discernible. In fact there is and this will become a lot more evident if we mark against the same graph another one which shows major events in the life of the church. Some of these events are of national significance and some of them are of significance purely in terms of the life of

Wiveliscombe Congregational Church 1662-1990



the individual church that we are considering. Their significance will be pointed out as we proceed through the paper. The cycles of church growth which this second graph reveal are very significant



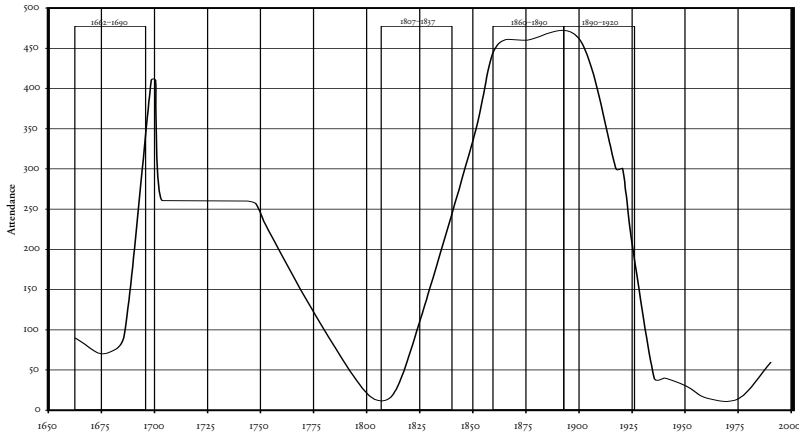
and show us an important aspect of church growth—a 25–30 year cycle—which appears to be either unknown or neglected in the analysis of church growth cycles in modern church growth literature. In modern church growth literature the usual pattern we are taught to look for is 3–5 year growth cycles. It was noticeable as I examined the history of our own church that the impact of a particular event would either last for 25–30 years or, on occasion, take 25–30 years to come to fruition. It will not escape you that the 25–30 year cycles each represent a generation and this is not without significance in the light of Exodus 20:6 (especially verse 6): ‘showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments’. Of course the 25–30 year cycle may be one of growth or of decline.

I want in the remainder of this paper to take this approach and apply it to particular periods in the life of Wiveliscombe Congregational Church. Three in which the church experienced considerable growth and one in which it experienced considerable decline. These are set out in the third graph.

Period One: 1662–1690

As we examine each period I want us to be aware of two things—cause and effect. The pressures and forces which were being exerted on church and people and the results at the end of the 25–30 year cycle. This first period began with opposition and with the passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662.

Wiveliscombe Congregational Church 1662-1990



We find that the local vicar, George Day, was ejected from his living and began to meet in a house with a few who had formerly been his parishioners. The persecution continued with the Conventicles Act in 1664, prohibiting religious gatherings of more than five people in a private house except for family prayers, and the Five Mile Act of 1665 which aimed to prevent any of the former ejected ministers from preaching within five miles of their former parishes.

The period was also one of great political instability and intrigue. In 1672 the Act of Indulgence, permitting non-conformist preaching, was passed but within a year it was repealed. In 1685 occurred the rebellion led by Charles II's illegitimate son the Duke of Monmouth. This was defeated at the Battle of Sedgemoor, taking place very close to Wiveliscombe, and was followed by Judge Jeffrey's 'Bloody Assizes'. These represented a thinly veiled attempt to stamp out non-conformity and anyone who has studied the history of the period will realise the lengths to which James II and Judge Jeffreys were prepared to go. Then, very suddenly in 1688, came the 'Glorious Revolution' when William of Orange sailed over from the Netherlands, James II fled to Ireland, and a bloodless revolution took place. In 1689 the Act of Toleration was passed and non-conformity was made fully legal.

Having looked at the 'causes' in our period we now turn to the 'effects' in the lives of the people. The first result of the persecution was that the church was driven underground. At the worst period they were meeting under cover of darkness, with no music or singing, with trapdoors ready for the preacher's escape, and with sentinels posted to warn of approaching troops. Naturally at a time like this the first result was the falling away of nominal believers. They

couldn't stand the heat and, consequently, got out of the kitchen! On the other hand it also led to a testing and maturing of the true believers who remained faithful. The pure, because purged and cleansed, church exercised an effective witness and as soon as restrictions were lifted, very much as the churches in Eastern Europe have experienced, there was a great influx into the church. This was as people in the surrounding areas, who had never been allowed to worship freely, began to come into Wiveliscombe which was the preaching centre for the locality. Within a year the congregation had to build a meeting-house for the numbers regularly gathering.

Period Two: 1807–1837

This period opens with the church in a very low state. The previous minister had left in 1799 and the congregation were unable to afford a replacement. There were very few meeting and they met extremely infrequently. However in 1804 someone, and we have no record of who this was, decided that something must be done and, as a result, the church contacted the Western Academy, a Congregational College near Axminster, and requested student supply for the Wiveliscombe pulpit.

This continued until 1807 when Joseph Buck, one of the students who had been supplying the church during the past few years, felt called of God to the pastorate at Wiveliscombe. Having come to Wiveliscombe he was to spend his entire life and ministry there. He died in 1837 while still pastor of the church.

What was seen in this period was growth that was both gradual and long-term. Remember that Joseph Buck had been coming to the church for three years before he became pastor. In 1810, three years after becoming pastor, they were able to commence a Sunday School. In 1821, fourteen years after becoming pastor, he was instrumental in the formation of a sister chapel in the next village, Milverton, which is three miles away. In 1825, eighteen years after commencing his pastorate, the church had grown to such an extent that the building needed enlarging. The preacher for the opening day was William Jay of Bath, one of the famous preachers of the day. In 1830, now twenty-three years into his pastorate, he commenced a tract society and in 1836, the evangelistic work having grown to such an extent that he couldn't cope with it alone, the church called an evangelist from the Congregational Home Mission Society. The next year, after a thirty year pastorate, he died rather suddenly. The thing to note is that the growth of the church had been gradual, long-term and step-by-step, the result of long-term commitment by Joseph Buck and no doubt by other people in the church.

Period Three: 1860–1890

This is another cycle of growth but, on this occasion, the cause was from more widespread revival. Everyone will have heard of the 1859 Revival which had extensive effects in the U.S.A. and Northern Ireland and far more widely. In 1859 there also occurred the 'East-Devon Revival' and by 1860 the effects had spread to Wiveliscombe. This is very well documented in the Church minute-books which, if you can decipher the old fashioned handwriting, make thrilling reading. In 1861 the effects spread to the area surrounding Wiveliscombe. Interestingly enough, in 1869 the minutes of the Church Meeting refer to 'another year of revival' and describe the packed prayer meetings and the numbers of people being converted.

It seems that the revival led to prayer and sprung from prayer. In 1860 they commenced joint meetings for prayer with the Wesleyan Methodists which were attended by 150 people, this out of a village population of 1500. These meetings went on for 10 weeks and resulted in revival. In addition to the emphasis on prayer there was also an emphasis on preaching. The Church records record the packed preaching meetings. In addition there was a strong emphasis on evangelism and, because Wiveliscombe is a market town, the message spread out into all the surrounding villages. In 1860 there was already a pattern of growth established for the Wiveliscombe congregation but the revival pushed the levels of growth still higher. As for the villages surrounding, we find that by 1890 there were four villages chapels built. The first in 1840, as a result of the labours of the church's evangelist, the last in 1888, growing from a cottage meeting established during the 1860 revival.

Going into more detail about the Wiveliscombe congregation, we find that they twice had to expand their buildings during this period. In 1872 an additional balcony was put in and in 1876 all the seats were removed and replaced to accommodate the growing numbers meeting to worship. In 1890, with 250 in the Sunday School, a Sunday School wing was added onto the Church Hall. At the end of this period we find that a quarter of the town's population were attending the church on a Sunday with attendances during the day of 1200. In the morning there were 400 worshipping. In the afternoon, in addition to the 250 Sunday School children, there was an attendance of 200 at the Adult Bible Class, run by the local vet who was a deacon at the church. And the evening service attendance was 400 plus. As an interesting aside, the minutes of the Church Meeting include the record of a discussion concerning the noise made by the young people sitting in the balcony. Would it be better if adults were to sit with them?

Also by 1890 we find that not only is there a pastor and evangelist but there is also a team of 12 preachers, all members of the Wiveliscombe Church,

who would take the services at the village chapels and lead the cottage meetings which were established where there were no chapels. The church were also active in social action, as was common in the Victorian era, in the fields of poverty, temperance and literacy. The pastor ran lessons to teach the converts to read, so they could study the scriptures for themselves and teach their families.

Period Four: 1890–1920

The final period we will examine provides us with a rather different picture. This time we will be looking at a cycle of decline rather than growth. The period opens with the church large and prosperous. Attendances are at a record level and all the chapels are packed. In one year alone we find that the Wiveliscombe Church admitted 45 new members, which with a peak church membership of 120, shows how quickly they were replacing members and offsetting the population drift to the towns. However there are bad signs and we are astonished by the rapidity of decline once it sets in. In 1907 the evangelist resigned and, with attendances at a record level, is not replaced. Complacency and stagnation has set in for, when the chapels are packed, what was there for him to do. In 1908 one of the village chapels closed. It is encouraging to say that years later it re-opened and is now the only one of the village chapels remaining open. It, the Brompton Ralph Chapel, is also in membership of EFCC.

The evangelistic vision was dying, for modernism and liberal theology had filtered down from the theological colleges, over the last 30 years, to the grass roots of local church life. In 1920 the Sunday School Wing became a caretaker's flat, within thirty years of it having been built. The First World War saw a little upward blip in attendance for a few years but afterwards rapid decline continued. By way of contrast, the first five years of the period we are studying saw 65 new members but the last five years saw only 20 new members. In the 1890s there was an average attendance of 40 at the monthly Church Meetings but by the end of the First World War it was down to about a dozen. By the 1920s it was down to single figures.

Summary

Summing up the picture given to us by looking at the four periods of growth or decline cycles we have studied, we find:—

1662–1690. Growth emerges from persecution and purging.

1807–1837. Growth comes from the 30 years of dedicated ministry given by a man whom God has raised up.

1860–1890. A period of very rapid growth which was sparked-off by Revival.

1890–1920. Spiritual and numerical abundance degenerates into stagnation and decline through complacency and through the infiltration of liberal theology.

2. Patterns of Church Growth and Decline interpreted by the Bible

We will now temporarily shelve the observable facts from the history of the Wiveliscombe Church and look at the Bible's teaching on Church Growth. In the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1–20) there are four types of soil and three experience growth. Both the speed of the growth of the seed falling on shallow soil and falling amongst thorns outstrips the speed of the growth of the seed falling on good soil. There is joy, there is excitement and then there is crop failure. Two lessons are learnt; firstly that short-term gains lead to long-term losses; secondly that the critical factor for growth is the state of the soil. We deduce that there are two elements, sowing the seed and preparing the soil, that are essential for a successful harvest.

We look secondly at the progress of the Church in Antioch as a pattern for the progress and growth of a church. This pattern, which can be traced between Acts 8:1 and 13:3, can be summed up in the stages:—

i) Persecution in Jerusalem leads to some of the scattered believers making their homes in Antioch. ii) As a result of the witness of these believers we find that others believe. iii) Barnabas is sent to lead the people and a church is formed. iv) The Church continues to grow. v) Barnabas gets someone, Paul, to help him with the growing church. vi) Paul and Barnabas teach and instruct for a year. vii) The growth of the Antioch Church attracts visitors. viii) The church is moved to give for the needs of those outside the Church. ix) A leadership team is built up. x) Missionaries are sent out.

Looking at the key elements of this progress, we find that they that are believers are personally committed, that they are engaged in personal witness, that the leadership is unselfish and not interested in personal prestige (Barnabas called the more talented Paul to cover his inadequacies), that there is a teaching ministry, and that the good of Christ's whole body has priority over the local success of the Church at Antioch. Ask yourself if, having seen such remarkable Church Growth and progress in your own church, you would be willing to part with leaders of the calibre of Paul and Barnabas? We are reluctant enough to part with those who are not leaders! Our interest must be the growth of Christ's whole body and not just our section of it.

Now if we put the two together, what we learn from history and scripture we find a series of comparisons between true and man-made growth. There is of course much that can be done to stimulate an increase in our own numbers

but that does not mean true growth in which the whole body of Christ grows. Revival rewrites the rules and gives long-term results but, of course, revival is not something we can organise but something only God can give. We can organise a mission for next year but not a revival.

True growth is long-term not short-term—it is not founded on gimmicks which will fail in their effects within a few years. True growth is permanent and not temporary—it involves permanent additions to the body of Christ not temporary additions to a congregation, who may be attracted by gimmicks or even a new minister. True growth centres on others, what is best for this fellowship and this community, not on self, which centres on ‘our congregation’—‘my ministry’.

We return to the question: ‘What makes Churches Grow?’ and I am convinced that the difference between success and failure in true Church Growth lies in a vital area. Are the people ‘givers’ or ‘getters’? If Church attendance is based on what you get, fellowship or style of worship, then you will not be part of God’s plan for true Church Growth. People are needed who will go because God has called them to serve him in that particular fellowship of his people.

The next mark will be that people are workers and not passengers. The passenger is along for the ride and will insist that everything is laid on for them. The need is for long-term workers who will work for long-term changes in the prosperity of the Lord’s work in the world.

Success depends also on people having a lifetime commitment to serve God, not implying that this all needs to take place in one village, rather than moving on when times are hard. It is noticeable that nowadays Missionary Societies are bemoaning the lack of long-term commitment amongst those who offer themselves for missionary service. Whereas formerly a man would feel himself called for life to, for example, Brazil and would expect to spend the rest of his days there with one or two short breaks, there are now many, not all wrongly, who spend only one or two brief periods in missionary service. However the Missionary Societies are calling out for men who will devote a lifetime, their entire generation, to a particular calling. If you don’t have this long-term investment, if you are not prepared to devote your life to building Christ’s Church, wherever God is calling you, then you won’t be part of God’s long-term plan for Church Growth.

Success is where the Church is outward looking and has an evangelistic vision. If a Church is inward looking, concentrating on the way things are done in order to suit everyone who is there, then that outward vision has been lost and you will be doing little to build the body of Christ.

Bible teaching is, and must be, central. We saw, from studying the Church

at Antioch, that it is as vital as evangelism. Where Bible teaching is minimal or peripheral you will be doing little to achieve true growth in the Church of Christ. Prayer is fundamental and we must realise that, although we can't make others to pray, if those willing to pray do pray then growth will result from God's work.

A last point is, in a day when people are trying to achieve personal peace and comfort, that we must be prepared to face challenges. You can go to a Church where there are no real problems and no real challenges but if you want to see Christ's Church grow you must seek, and face up to, challenges. Look at the apostles who sought rather than avoided challenges. Paul found the super-apostles of Corinth would happily build on his foundation but they didn't want to lay a foundation, or go where there was challenge, or go where there was no personal popularity. Paul himself wanted to go on to the unreached regions. The true success of the body of Christ depends on people who are prepared to accept and tackle the challenges God lays before them.

The difference then is what sort of people we are. What we are as individuals controls what we are as a fellowship. We cannot organise Church Growth by adopting principles and saying we will have different organisations or services. Of course changes will from time to time be needed in order to meet new circumstances but Church Growth occurs when we as individuals become the right sort of individuals.

This will mean that Church Growth takes place through the commitment of individuals. Am I committed to live and grow up in the Lord Jesus Christ? Am I committed to bring up my children to love and serve the Lord Jesus and not to try to push this duty onto my Church's youth policy? We are shamed by the Christians of Eastern Europe who so trained their children that many held the faith intact throughout years of separation and indoctrination in state orphanages. Am I committed to witness in life and word to the Lord Jesus? Will I aim to encourage and edify my fellow believers rather than always waiting for them to edify me and always relying on their encouragement? Will I put others and their needs before my own? Surely this is what 1 Corinthians 13 is all about? Am I prepared to do God's will whatever the cost? Not 'Is this challenge what I really want' but, 'If this is God's will, am I prepared to be obedient whatever the consequences? Am I committed to feed on God's Word and follow its teaching?' It is vital to ensure a Bible teaching ministry for a church but it will achieve nothing without individual obedience to it. Finally, earnest and constant prayer must start with me.

Conclusion

I have already pointed out that the Modern Church Growth Movement

advocates the adoption of certain methods. Modern Church Growth then depends on these methods. They are not working for, rather than experiencing, growth, the Church of Christ in our country is in decline. However they are right to stress that God does wish his Church to be growing wherever it is found. God wishes that every believer should actively participate in this growth and calls them to do so. Not just by doing things that will make their own congregation bigger but by being faithful and obedient servants. Servants who are fruitful, bearing witness to others in word and life and so leading and attracting others to the Lord Jesus Christ.

God is saying to us: 'You do what I call you to do and leave the results to me', 1 Corinthians 3:6: 'I (Paul) planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.' We can't make churches grow, for that is the work of the Holy Spirit. God uses us in that process if we will be vessels which can be used. Remembering the need for long-term commitment, I have Galatians 6:9 as my closing word: 'Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap if we do not give up.'

Joseph Parker— 'The Immortal Thor of Pulpitdom'

ES Guest

When our Chairman asked me to give a paper on Joseph Parker my first move was to open my copy of *Religion in the Victorian Era* by L. Elliot Binns. Yes, the index contained the name, so I turned to the page and read 'Another great preacher whose head was turned a little by his success was Joseph Parker of the City Temple'. Now the previous preacher referred to had been Charles Spurgeon, so that quotation probably tells us more about the historian than about history.

Certainly Joseph Parker has claims to greatness. Appointed twice as Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, persuaded by publishers Hodder and Stoughton to publish his autobiography, honoured with a special edition of the *British Weekly* at his death and with anecdotes about him still being recalled. For example, on 28 September 1990, *The Friendship Book* of Francis Gay told a story of Parker under the heading: 'Wise Words from a Great Man.' Parker's own belief in his greatness can be seen in his choice of telegram address: 'Preacher, London!'

Joseph Parker was born at Hexham-on-Tyne on 9th April 1830. His father was a stonemason and his mother was a gentle and retiring woman, simple in her faith. Both were members of the Congregational Church, where his father was also a deacon. Parker's first schoolteacher was also a deacon but he was a schoolteacher of the Squeers variety, thrashing boys all day long. That fact may explain something of Joseph Parker's later attitude towards deacons.

Parker's home was a sincerely pious one. In his autobiography he wrote:

I cannot remember the time when I did not in some degree know the love of God's only Son. From a child I knew the Holy Scripture, for it was the book most read in our house; from a child also, though sinning oft and sinning deeply, I have known something of tender spiritual experience. From my earliest recollection I have found supreme delight in prayer—prayer in that large sense which implies intimate and continuous communion with God.

Parker's youth was spent in a time of great excitement in the country with a number of speakers stirring up interest in social matters. There was Thomas Cooper the Chartist and Edward Miall the Liberationist. The latter, known as the 'Leicester Lunatic', had visited Hexham in about 1846 and expounded the principles of the Anti State Church Association. Joseph Parker was powerfully

impressed. He was particularly sympathetic to the Total Abstinence Movement and his gift of oratory came to light upon their platform. With a number of other young fellows he met for study and discussion in preparation for lay preaching. His first sermon, he recounts in his book 'Tyne Chylde', was from a sawpit on a village green four miles from home. His text was 'It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the Day of Judgement than for you'. Parker said that he hurled on the hundred or so astonished rustics: 'the thunderbolts of outraged heaven'. Already the 'Immortal Thor' was at work. They relished the strong meat and asked him to preach again the following Sunday afternoon. His local preaching also took him to Wesleyan churches and it was at one of these, Horsley, that he met, and in November 1851, married Annie Nesbitt, the daughter of a farmer.

Five months later, being very conscious of a call to the ministry, he wrote for advice to a leading Congregational minister, Rev. Dr John Campbell of Whitefield's Tabernacle. To his surprise the Doctor invited him to preach in his pulpit for three Sundays. The Doctor's throat had 'providentially failed'. The three weeks were considered successful and he was asked to become junior pastor. He thus had the immediate advantage of experienced pastoral oversight, guidance in his reading, opportunity for pastoral visiting and, every Saturday night, having to read his two sermons to Dr Campbell who would prayerfully commend him to God.

This experience, combined with his obvious great talent and, perhaps, the fact of his early marriage, led Dr Campbell to advise him not to enter a denominational college. Instead he took a course at University College in mental and moral philosophy and formal logic. Such subjects were hardly congenial to the young man who later said: 'All my life long I had been training for the ministry; I had never trained for anything else.'

Joseph Parker accepted a call to become the minister of the church at Banbury in 1853 and stayed there for five years. His ordinary morning congregation was less than fifty and, finding that ordinary folk were not attracted by ordinary methods to a church that was rather off the beaten track, he started a Sunday afternoon meeting in a large field known as the 'Bear Garden'. One day he spoke against Sunday excursions and this aroused the violent hostility of a rough mob who for many weeks tried to howl him down and even threatened his life. But he stood his ground and won the people's confidence. So much so that the old church became too small for the assembling congregation and a new building, accommodating six hundred people, was erected and soon crowded to the doors. Such success could not be hid. Parker was also contributing sermon outlines to the magazine *The Homilist*, which was edited by Dr David Thomas. People were asking: 'Who is

this Joseph Parker?’ To one such enquirer Dr Thomas wrote: ‘He is a young man who has more genius and moral stamina than any ten men I know.’

In 1858 there came an invitation to preach at the Cavendish Street Church in Manchester. The church had, in 1848, erected a magnificent building. It was of great influence in the city, numbering among its deacons a member of parliament, a Knight and a Senior Surgeon. When, after his visit, Parker received an invitation to the pastorate, neither he nor his wife were keen to accept. They had found the spiritual atmosphere rather chilly. ‘Every man’ Parker said, ‘seemed to be looking at me over the top of a money-bag.’ He turned the invitation down as he had the previous six he had received. One point of his concern was that Banbury still had a debt of £700 on its newly erected building. However Cavendish Street were persistent and sent a deputation to renew the invitation with an offer to clear Banbury’s debt. Parker agreed and began an eleven year ministry at what was known as ‘the Cathedral of Nonconformity in Northern England’. Its previous pastor, Robert Halley, had left to become the Principal of New College, London. To succeed him, the church had first invited RW Dale of Carr’s Lane, Birmingham, but he did not accept. Later, when Dale visited Manchester, Parker said of him: ‘He made gracious reference to Cavendish Chapel and myself saying: “When I was considering the invitation to Manchester, I said to my dearest earthly friend; ‘If I do go to Manchester, the man to succeed me at Carr’s Lane is Joseph Parker of Banbury.’”’

Within three months of Parker’s arrival at Cavendish Street, 240 extra sittings were let and even the large building became strained, with a membership of 1,000 and a Sunday School of 1,400. When considering such figures of growth, perhaps with a certain degree of envy, one should remember that these early years of Parker’s ministry coincided with a great movement of revival in the British Isles. This certainly had great effect in Manchester and one of the men used of God in this work was Joseph Woodhouse. Woodhouse was a student at Cavendish College, the seminary that Joseph Parker founded, which later became the Nottingham Congregational Institute.

Parker says little about his Manchester ministry in his autobiography. Maybe it was overshadowed by the death of his wife in 1803. However, in the following year, he married Emma Cannon, the daughter of a JP. Though with neither wife did he have a child, yet his marriages were extremely happy.

It would be wrong to suggest, however, that Parker’s ministry at Manchester was not a happy one for when, after eleven years there, a call came to move, he was most reluctant to accept. It was a call to the Poultry Church in London. This church had been founded by Thomas Goodwin, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, but it was in the heart of the city, near Mansion House, an

area virtually empty on the Lord's Day. 'Who else,' thought the church, 'could undertake the position with the slightest chance of success except Dr Parker?' But Dr Parker (he had been made a DD by Chicago University in 1862) was unwilling and refused. The Cavendish Church was so pleased, it presented him with an address and 700 guineas.

Fifteen months later the call came again, and an exciting call it was: to sell the old Poultry Chapel and build a new church in Holborn. There were many difficulties and it may have been these that finally persuaded Parker to accept. He had a tremendous faith in God and this, combined with a burning zeal for the Gospel, made him ready to face any challenge. The final link to assurance came when the very people who had presented him with the testimonial told him that, if they were in his shoes, they would accept.

His London ministry began on 27 June 1869. On Monday 19 May 1873, Thomas Binney, minister at King's Weigh House Chapel from 1829–1869, laid the memorial stone at the City Temple. It was opened on 19 May 1874 and from then on until a few months before his death in 1902 Dr Joseph Parker made the pulpit of the City Temple, according to his obituary in the yearbook of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, 'the greatest and most powerful centre of Nonconformist teaching that London or England possesses'. He had begun a Thursday noon-day service at the Poultry Chapel and at the City Temple this became a veritable oasis. Again quoting the Year Book obituary we read: 'Many a business man in the country regarded it as the week's most cherished engagement, and to many a minister it was a real Sabbath in the middle of the week. It attracted men of every creed and men of no creed at all. It was a national institution known all over the world.' Was he not truly 'The Immortal Thor of Pulpitdom'?

The title 'The Immortal Thor of Pulpitdom' is not the invention of the author of this paper. It came through a completely fortuitous discovery among the papers of a deceased lady. Her family had once been members of Cavendish Street Chapel. The Church had held a bazaar in 1909 and in their programme, some 84 pages long, there was printed a brief survey of the chapel's history. This is how Parker was described:

Of Dr Halley's great successor—with spiritual fell blows against the stoniness of unbelief, the immortal Thor of pulpitdom, author withal of a comprehensive Bible for the people—Dr Joseph Parker, what shall we say? National is his fame and natural our pride in the fact of his once 11 years' ministry in our midst. Epigrammatic oratory! Boanergic tone! O'erflowing congregations! High water mark attained!

Joseph Parker's second wife died in January 1889 and the loss of such a gifted and loved wife affected him deeply. Her last injunction to him was 'continue at

your work'. For more than three years he held on, preaching with more solemn urgency than ever, but he was a broken man. His address as chairman of the Congregational Union in 1901 closed with these deeply moving words: 'Brethren, I am hoping that God will grant me an early release from my long and arduous ministry—a ministry full of pain, black with darkest sorrow, yet now and again bright with all the glory and calm with all the peace of realised and sanctifying love. I hope soon to see the evening star, and then the summer morning of heaven.' His strength slowly ebbed and on Friday 28th November 1902 his prayer was answered. There was posted on his house in Hampstead a notice that said that Dr Parker had 'ascended'.

Within a week, the *British Weekly* published its 'Dr Parker Memorial Number' with five pages of reminiscences and appreciations of Dr Parker. The *Christian World*, on the same day, also published five pages in a similar vein, together with an account of his last days and funeral arrangements. The funeral was held on the actual day of publication and was reported fully in the next week's issues.

On the day before the funeral, the body of Dr Parker lay in state in the City Temple from noon until the evening. A queue of forty yards long had formed by noon and a steady stream of people from all walks of life passed through. For the funeral itself, the church was completely packed. Representatives from many church bodies were present as well as a number of members of Parliament. Among these, as a delegate from the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, was Mr Lloyd George.

The *British Weekly* report says: 'On Holborn Viaduct another and almost more remarkable multitude had assembled. Here were gathered working men and women, set free at mid-day, and resolved to have their share in honouring the great prophet of the City. As the procession slowly moved westwards, men stood bareheaded in the frosty air. At twenty minutes to two, the cemetery at West Hampstead was reached, and near the gates Dr PT Forsyth and the students of Hackney College joined the mourners. Here yet a third vast crowd was waiting. Only a few could approach near enough to hear Dr Adamson's final prayer, but long after the relatives had left, a patient, reverent company lingered near the grave, each awaiting his turn for a last look at Dr Parker's coffin.

We have included this in some detail because it surely illustrates the unique position held by our subject. What other minister of religion has departed in such a way? The newspaper reminiscences and appreciations ranged from those of the Earl of Roseberry, through ministers such as RJ Campbell and Silvester Horne, to the Novelist, Annie S Swan. They depict a person of immense

stature and also human frailty. He truly reflected both his father's stonemasonry and his mother's gentleness.

Dr Alexander McClaren wrote:

It would be folly to attempt to characterise in the few words which I can write, the remarkable personality, the force and magnitude of which may be measured by the gap which its withdrawal leaves. Sheer force of character, not intellect merely, nor of any one side of his nature, but of the whole—reason, will, love, daring disregard of conventionality, a gift of forceful, picturesque speech, the born orator's temperament, with its sensitiveness and quick response to every occasion, and perhaps its tendency sometimes to dramatic over-emphasis—all were his in over-flowing measure. He owed little to books; he was that rare thing—a voice not an echo. His tenderness was as great as his rugged strength; he could thunder and lighten; scorn and sarcasm from his lips blistered and burned. But he could melt and plead and woo as well; and the dramatic tone and manner, so characteristic of his oratory, were largely the expression of the swift alterations of his mobile temperament.

He had a wonderfully large and generous and tender soul. He had not a trace of jealousy or envy; he never detracted from other's merits as a sidelong way of asserting his own. Genial humour and large sympathies were his, and they who knew him best set him most high in their estimates and deep in their hearts. True, he had the defects of his qualities, and many surface eccentricities, to which it is easy to point. But these were small, and today we do not think of them, as we mourn over the loss of a great preacher and true friend, and linger by the grave where he lies with his few faults shut up as dead flowerets, and his great work remembered and blossoming in the dirt.

We must now go on to consider some particular aspects of Joseph Parker's life and ministry.

1. Preaching

Joseph Parker's telegraphic address was 'Preacher: London', and justification for this pours from the columns of appreciation. C. Silvester Horne, no mean speaker himself, said 'The most conspicuous and celebrated preacher in the country, and, indeed in the world, has passed away. Joseph Parker was without doubt the biggest figure in modern London.' Silvester Horne had chosen as his text Ecclesiastes 1:12 'I the Preacher, was King over Israel in Jerusalem,' and he said of Parker,

Now this man was a preacher: and his pulpit a veritable throne. He was King over Israel in Jerusalem.

He was one of those rare artists who could talk the English tongue like Bunyan. His gift of pithy, nervous, pregnant language was quite wonderful. There was no heart-string that he had not handled. Laughter and tears came

alike at his bidding. Men called him theatrical and sensational, and so he was. But I am satisfied that these things were not an end with him, but only a means to a higher end, and that he did care supremely to have, as the older preachers used to say, 'souls for his hire'.

Rev. George Matheson of Edinburgh said that to talk of Joseph Parker as dead seemed almost like a contradiction in terms.

Parker at peace—Parker in quiet—Parker laid to rest even for an hour—that is something as anomalous as the stillness of a child. He was the soul of animation—without exception the most animated presence I ever encountered. For the sheer power of mental activity, for mobility of spirit, for quickness of thought, for rapidness of transaction, for spontaneous flow of suggestion and alertness of verbal expression, I know not the equal of this modern Boanerges.

Again we quote the *Christian World's* account of Parker's life:

Like all original and masterful men, he had strong prejudices, and was in the habit of giving exaggerated expression to his feelings. No man, however, had a tenderer heart, or could appeal more irresistibly to the hearts of his hearers. Dr Parker's best utterance came from his heart rather than his head, and those utterances naturally clothed themselves in the most perfect diction.

He was always at his best when he trusted his intuition. When, on rare occasions, he preached an intellectual sermon, or attempted a piece of constructive logical argument, there were weak joints in his armour.

His pulpit manner was intensely dramatic. In another man his violent contrasts of intonation, his gestures, his long pauses, would have seemed exaggerated and theatrical, but with Dr. Parker the style was the man. Men who had little sympathy with religious work and no interest in theology—actors, journalists, lawyers, and even freethinkers—sat delightedly at the feet of Dr. Parker, and surrendered themselves to the spell of his eloquence.

His intuitive knowledge of human nature was often shown in the happy bits of characterisation, biting sarcasm, amusing sidelights on human weaknesses and vanities, and exquisite mimicry of tone and attitude. Dr. Parker's dramatic pauses were famous. Like a musical composer who increases his effects by 'rests' he would often pause for several seconds. The silence, more eloquent than speech, was punctuated by swaying of the body and Jupiterian nods of the head.

A personal friend of Dr Parker's explained his method of preparing sermons:

His is an extempore speaker, but not an extempore thinker. He never leaves his work until the last moment, the subject on which he discourses being considered more or less for days. If asked, 'Have you got your text?' his reply is 'I have many texts, and am never in want of them; my difficulty is to overtake

them all. They are ruminated over, looked at on every side, and through and through, until they become part of his spiritual self. After this process of assimilation has been gone through, Dr Parker puts down a few leading words widely separated from each other on two or three sheets of notepaper which he takes into the pulpit, toying with rather than using them when addressing the people. When he announces his text he does not know what his first sentence will be: it comes with the inspiration of the moment. By the same mental and spiritual movement he is carried along the course of his thought, every sentence complete, and every word in its right place.

Now two thoughts from Dr. Parker himself. First on the difficulty of the Pulpit in competing with the Press:

If the Press weakens the influence of the Pulpit, then the preachers themselves are to blame. They have no business to compete with books. Literature plays its valuable part in the education and uplifting of humanity; but the work of the preacher lies along a different line. Preaching should keep to its own function. The preacher should be a mighty talker, speaking his message out of the fullness of his heart, not pressing it down and trimming and constructing sentences. I never write my sermons. A comparison between the Press and the Pulpit ought never to be suggested. I believe that there should be variety in preaching, yes, and in every sermon too. A sermon should be an oratorio for variety, for colour, and for unity. If it proceeds upon a dead level, ten minutes may be too long, but if it be marked by living and sympathetic variety then the hearers will never think of the clock. Monotony is the great clock maker.

Secondly, although Dr Parker read widely and was alive and alert to what was happening in intellectual and scientific circles, he knew that his business was to preach Christ in his revelation as the God of redemption and renewal. In the days of his Banbury pastorate he had said,

The most monstrous sham is a Christless sermon. I care not if it be delivered with a Demosthenic fervour or Tully-like gracefulness; if it be adorned with poetic jewels, or a blaze with the fire of transcendent genius, if Christ be not its chief ornament it is an intolerable mockery of my best nature and my deepest necessities. What an empty well is to the wilderness-pilgrim, a Christless sermon is to the soul that thirsts for God.

2. Congregationalism

Joseph Parker was brought up in a family that attended a Congregational Church; he was nurtured towards the ministry by Congregational pastors; he served for all his career in Congregational Churches; but in spite of all this, it is not truly apparent that he acted upon fully Congregational principles. Independent most definitely, but Congregational, perhaps not so clearly.

In 1867 he was chairman of the Lancashire Congregational Union and two

years later he was the first chairman of the Manchester Congregational Board; he was chairman of the CUEW in 1884 and 1901, one of only three men ever to be appointed twice.

The Christian World account of his life stated:

It is true that the City Temple was not, in practise, a model Congregational Church. Dr. Parker was Dr. Parker, and believed emphatically in the efficacy of 'a committee of one', when the one was a man who did his work well and that work was justified by its success.

It was seen that the City Temple had problems from being a city centre church but, the account continues,

All the same, there were many who thought it would have been better for the church, and need not have cramped the minister, if the church ideal had been more closely realised.

It would have been interesting to research the City Temple records but they were destroyed in the blitz in the Second World War.

Joseph Parker reveals his principles in local church life in his letter of June 10th 1858 to Cavendish Chapel, in which he is replying to their invitation to become their minister. He writes:

Before replying to your invitation, I deem it right to acquaint you with my views in relation to the pastoral, ministerial, and diaconal offices, so that in the event of our union, no misunderstanding shall ever arise.

As a minister, I claim most perfect freedom of action. With regard to my conduct in the pulpit I must be the sole arbiter. Under a profound sense of my accountability to the great Head of the Church, I must adopt such modes of appealing to the people as may appear to my own judgement and conscience best adapted to promote the interests of truth. I promise no deference to usage or precedent; what appears to me to be right I shall do, and what appears to me to be wrong or insufficient I shall unequivocally reject.

As a minister, I must judge for myself what course I shall pursue out of the pulpit. I cannot promise to do as others do. What my labours may be through the press or platform I must determine by circumstances, it being understood that I hold every engagement subordinate to my ministerial responsibilities.

As a minister I shall consider it my highest duty and pleasure to promote the spiritual culture of those who wait on my ministry. I shall, under God's care, watch for their souls as one that 'must give an account'. My constant endeavour is, and shall be, to discover what I can best do, and to do it with all my might.

As a pastor, I cannot visit for the mere sake of visiting. At all times I am glad to obey the calls of the sick and the dying, or to guide the anxious Truth-seeker;

but in constant rounds of so-called Pastoral visitation I do not believe, and such I cannot promise. In connection with this point, it may be well to mention that I have been advised by a London Physician to select a residence outside Manchester in order to preserve, as far as possible, the health of Mrs Parker. Under these circumstances domiciliary visitation would involve an immense sacrifice of time.

I believe that the office of deacon is purely secular—that is, that the deacon's business is to 'serve tables'. With secular duties the deacon's office begins and ends. Believing this to be a scriptural view, I hold it most tenaciously.

As a minister, I claim an Annual Vacation of one clear month, the particular month I determine from year to year. During this vacation the Pastor is to provide the supplies, and the Church to remunerate them.

Such are my views. I solemnly assure you that with these views alone could I enter upon any scene of labour. I make no great promises. If you are prepared to abide by your invitation now that you know my principle, I shall, with strong trust in the Divine blessing, accept the same, *in the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

Joseph Parker commented further upon this matter in his autobiography. He wrote:

My chief controversy has been upon matters connected with the development of Congregationalism. My brethren and I have not always taken the same view of Congregational polity. Once and for all I may say that from the beginning until now I have been a member of the 'Independent' ministry. I do not believe there are any 'small' or 'weak' churches. I am more and more convinced that we should be very careful what epithets we attach to the term 'church'. In the highest interpretation of things, the Church of Christ is one, though the term 'churches' has apostolic precedent for its use. It is, in my judgement, impossible to amalgamate Congregationalism with any other form of Church government. Congregationalism is unique. It is neither isolated nor unneighbourly; it is destitute neither of sympathy nor of brotherhood, but it is bounded by certain lines which cannot be blurred without losing all distinctiveness and influence. Congregationalism has always seemed to be a spirit than a body—rather a principle than an organisation; and this I said in the Congregational Union, as can be proved from its own records, many years ago. Many brethren have taken another idea of Congregational polity. They have sincerely thought that Congregationalism should be organised and consolidated, and could usefully take upon itself some of the aspects and responsibilities of the highly organised Churches. But, as I have already pointed out, organised Churches have organised creeds, and an organised apparatus within which all denominational questions must be considered and settled. Each Congregational Church settles its own problems in its own way.

No Congregational Church has any authority over any other Congregational Church. The very uniqueness of this polity makes amalgamation absolutely impossible. But it does not destroy brotherhood, nor does it interfere, to any serious extent, with co-operation; it is one amongst many, but it is one, and its loss of oneness would be a loss of power.

After reading that, from a biography published in 1889, it is quite a mystery to note that, in 1901, as Chairman of the Congregational Union, Joseph Parker's addresses were on the subject of 'The United Congregational Church'. He stated, in his Chairman's address on 25 April 1901:

Instead of having a partially or loosely organised Congregationalism I wish to take part in the creation and full equipment of an institution to be known and developed as the United Congregational Church. I call attention to the name. It is simple and expressive. One day it may include both Independents and Baptists. And who knows that by and by our Presbyterian brethren, noticing our love of union and realising their own increased interest in Congregational liberty, may begin to ask whether it is not time to throw down dividing walls and each give up something for the Lord's sake and the World's?

His address in the Autumn Assembly was completely taken up with a detailed plan for the organisation of this United Congregational Church. He asked: 'What right has Congregationalism to stand outside the law of evolution?' and stated:

The United Congregational Church, being representative, will, with the hearty consent of the incorporated Churches, be clothed with the executive authority which properly belongs to democratic institutions, and will therefore when necessary form a Court of Appeal in all cases of dispute or difficulty, and its decisions in all cases shall be final.

In October 1972, the majority of the Congregational Churches in England and Wales, together with the Presbyterian Church of England, accepted a constitution whose final words are: 'The decision of the General Assembly on any matter which has come before it on reference or appeal shall be final and binding.'

3. Theology

Joseph Parker did not attend a theological college. Nor did he read many books. His whole theology was based upon his personal reading of the Bible. At the close of his first year's ministry at the City Temple he told his people that when he got tired towards the end of July and went away to the mountains he took the Bible with him and read it through. He then felt as if he had never seen the book before, it was so new, so rich, so varied. That

summer reading of the Bible he called 'tuning the instrument'. This is how he wrote of the Bible in his autobiography:

My relation to the Bible has never changed. That God has spoken to men is to me an unchangeable certainty, and that he has spoken definitely and more authoritatively in the Bible than elsewhere is a conviction that never lapses. I early came to see that I have not to invent a Bible, but to read one; that I have not to fabricate a gospel out of my own religious consciousness, but to preach a gospel personified in Christ and written in the four narratives of his life.

Two further quotations declare very clearly the result of his reading.

From first to last I have enjoyed the consciousness of the thorough steadfastness of faith in relation to the holy verities of the Christian religion. I have, like other growing and struggling men, had my doubts and fears, my momentary hesitation and scepticism, my misgivings and periods of self-examination; but my central faith in the Triune God, in the Atonement of Christ, in the Deity of the Holy Spirit, in the immortality of the soul, in the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, has never for a moment been shaken.

Personally I have accepted what is known as the Evangelical Interpretation of the Gospel, because I believe that the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, as evangelically interpreted, answers more questions, satisfies more aspirations, responds to more necessities, and supplies better motives to service than any other conception of the Kingdom of God.

Having read these words must raise a question for anyone familiar with the background of Parker's ministry in London. Why was he so out of favour with London's other 'prince of preachers', Charles Spurgeon? Parker had preached, at one time, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. The *Christian World* stated: 'The two men greatly admired each other, though they were far apart theologically.' Nothing is said in Parker's autobiography for, in it, there are just two general references to Spurgeon. That in itself, however, suggests there were problems. For, in his preface, Parker states his intention not to write about any controversies.

Perhaps we have a clue in a story about Parker that appeared in *The Friendship Book* by Francis Gay for 28 September 1990.

Do you ever have difficulty in understanding the Bible? I suppose that most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, would have to admit that there are some parts we find hard to comprehend or accept. A lady with just such problems found herself sitting next to Dr Joseph Parker, an outstanding preacher of the 19th century. So she aired her difficulties with him. They happened to be eating fish at the time, and Dr Parker asked her, 'What do you do with the bones of your fish?' 'Why, I leave them on the edge of the plate' was the

surprised reply. 'Well, do the same with the Bible,' said Joseph Parker, 'Eat the fish, and leave the bones.'

The Anecdote ends 'Wise Words from a Great Man'.

It would appear that among the difficult 'bones' of the Bible, for Joseph Parker, was the Bible teaching on 'election' and 'predestination'. An American preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, found both ideas very difficult to swallow but he was a personal friend of Joseph Parker and preached several times at the City Temple. Some months after Beecher's death, Parker delivered his eulogy at the Academy of Music, Brooklyn. There was even talk of Parker succeeding him, but the English preacher made it clear this could not be considered.

We return to the relationship between Joseph Parker and Charles Spurgeon, which is clearly revealed in correspondence which took place between them. On 23 February 1887 Parker wrote to Spurgeon: 'My dear Friend, There is nothing worth preaching but the old Evangelical faith ...' He went on to propose a public conference on the subject with Spurgeon preaching the opening sermon. Spurgeon replied the next day: 'Dear Sir, I agree with you that there is nothing worth preaching but the old Evangelical faith and I would gladly co-operate with all believers in the spread of it. But ...' and he went on to question Parker's consistency in the matter. Parker wrote again, saying that he did not understand what Spurgeon meant and suggesting a meeting between the two. Again the next day Spurgeon responded, refusing a meeting and, in his letter, making the very significant statement: 'The Evangelical faith in which you and Mr Beecher agree is not the faith which I hold, and the view of religion which takes you to the theatre is so far off mine that I cannot commune with you therein.' Parker's response, that same evening, was a postcard: 'Best thanks, and best regards.'

Three years later, on 25 April 1890, the *British Weekly* published an open letter from Parker addressed to 'My Dear Spurgeon'. It occupied two full columns of the paper. The immediate cause of the letter was that a young man had recently told Parker that Spurgeon had driven him into infidelity. The young man's mother, a most loving and kind woman, had died and the young man, then a member of a Baptist church, had gone to Spurgeon for comfort. On hearing that she had not made any profession of religion, all that Spurgeon apparently said was: 'He that believeth shall be saved, he that believeth not shall be damned.'

This is the opening paragraph of the letter:

I want to talk to you upon a matter which has been brought to my notice as a public teacher, and which concerns you mainly in your public capacity. I know I may speak frankly, because I am speaking to a man whose heart is big and warm, a heart that has an immense advantage over his head. When people ask

me what I think of Spurgeon, I always ask: ‘Which Spurgeon—the head or the heart—the Spurgeon of the Tabernacle or the Spurgeon of the Orphanage? The kind of Calvinism which the one occasionally represents I simply hate, as I hate selfishness and blasphemy. It is that leering, slavering, sly-winking Calvinism that says, bless the Lord that we are alright, booked straight through to heaven first class, and insured against both collision and explosion; as for those who have missed the train or been crushed to death, it is not for us to find fault with discriminating grace or arrest the action of the Divine decrees—brother, pass the salt, and shout allelujah till you are black in the face. That kind of Calvinism I will not condescend to hate. It is too far down in its native perdition to allow of a boot to kick and still retain a boot’s respectability. But when I turn to the orphanage all is changed. All is beauty. All is love. God bless you, Spurgeon, and all the little ones you have adopted in the name of Christ. That orphanage on Earth means a grand welcome into heaven.

In the closing paragraphs of the letter Parker calls on Spurgeon to widen the circle of which he is the centre, saying that he is surrounded by offerers of incense, who flatter his weaknesses, laugh at his jokes, and feed him with compliments.

Parker’s address to the Congregational Union in May 1884 had been entitled ‘Orthodoxy of Heart’. It is full of rich scriptural teaching on the importance of the heart being right. It would seem that, in spite of Parker’s constant reading of the Bible, he had not noticed that the apostle John, an apostle of the heart if there ever was one, had written in his third letter: ‘I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.’

4. Writings

During his time at Manchester, Joseph Parker published a number of books, the most important of which was *Ecce Deus* in which he upheld the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. He published this anonymously and this later gave him great amusement when, as he says, ‘I saw it on the table in the fine silk hats of men attending denominational committees, men who would never have read a word of it if my name had been on the title page’.

During his London years his pen was very active. His books included three volumes each of *The Inner Life of Christ* and *Apostolic Life*. There came also the twenty-five volumes of *The People’s Bible*, consisting of a series of sermonic expositions from Genesis to Revelation, and six volumes of ideas for sermons called *Studies in Texts*.

He also frequently wrote letters to *The Times*, many of which were of a light-hearted nature. One set out an imaginative scheme for the rebuilding of London—with magnificent avenues converging on the City Temple!

5. Finance

Although Joseph Parker had obviously had a good relationship to *The Times* it was in that paper's obituary of him that there is a most unhappy statement. It said:

It is needless to add that in a financial sense the City Temple has been an immense success.

There is no more 'going concern' in the ministry of the Churches of Dissent. For this successful embodiment of the 'Nonconformist Conscience' swallows the camel of high pew-rents, and in Dr Parker's case there were the publishing profits to be added, for you could buy his previous sermon at the door as you left. Certainly among those whom in exalted moments he would call 'self-conceited, pedantic, presumptuous priests' there is not one, from the Primate downwards, who can command anything like the personal profits which Dr Parker drew from his ministry.

There was strong condemnation of this, for nothing was further from the truth. Dr Parker was a victim of not letting his right hand know what his left hand was doing. Many a preaching fee that he received in other churches went straight to a minister known to be in need, and after his wife died he would accept no stipend from the City Temple itself. Once, to a minister with whom things had not gone well, he sent on his fifty-fifth birthday a bouquet of fifty-five roses and hidden in each rose was a sovereign.

6. Conclusion

Let our last words be Dr Parker's own in the epilogue to his autobiography:

And so we come to the quiet and glow of the sunset. We have never seen just this light on the hills before—this solemn purple, this crimson and gold. No; this is unique. There is no call to battle in this subsiding light. 'Sunset and evening star' are not the signals of war; they are signals under which we would, in our weariness, foregather with Christ, that he may break bread with us after the journey of disappointment and partial shame. What we missed at Jerusalem we may see at Emmaus. Who would willingly die in the furnace-like city? Better to die in green Bethany, or near the cool Siloam brook. It is even so that God often takes his workers away from the tumult and the noise and sends them into the quiet village, where they may all the more clearly see what I now call Yonderland. I like to think of it by that name. 'Yonder' is a Bible word, occurring where all the great words occur, that is to say in the book of Genesis, and 'land' is a word which occurs in the same infinite poem; so I put the word together and think of heaven as Yonderland, the summer city, the garden of God, the divine ideal of home. It is just over the coldest of all rivers—the last river—the Jordan, on whose thither banks stands the Tree of Life. 'Beyond the smiling and the weeping, I shall be soon.' When my Saviour

accuses me of sin and folly and unfaithfulness, owning the justice of the accusation I shall take him to Calvary, show him his own blood, and ask if that grace be not greater than my sin. 'Simply to thy cross I cling.' Mine has been a poor life, full of sin, red with guilt, marred by daily failures, the morning vow always lost in the evening shame; yet God, the gentle God, will pity me:

He will not leave my soul in hell nor suffer his penitent one to see corruption.

RW Dale— Standing Firm or Drifting Dangerously

Peter Seccombe

This is the second paper on Robert William Dale to be given since these conferences began ten years ago. This can easily be justified by the stature of the man, by his remarkable achievements as a pastor, theologian, author, denominational leader and political campaigner, and by the extraordinary influence he exerted within and outside Congregationalism in his own life time and beyond it.

When he was 50, *The Times* described him as ‘the most eminent of the local celebrities of Birmingham’ and the esteem in which he was held beyond the confines of his own church, city and denomination is indicated by the fact that, on the Sunday after his death, full and generous tributes were made to his life and work at St Paul’s Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. In his book *Congregationalism in England*, Tudur Jones describes him as ‘the most remarkable Congregationalist of the 19th Century’. Without doubt, RW Dale was a remarkable man and an outstanding servant of God. No-one should criticise him lightly. If the title of this paper suggests some criticism of him then it must first be acknowledged it is offered of a giant by a pygmy.

His Life

Let me begin with the bare bones of his life story. You can clothe them with some flesh by reading Geraint Fielder’s paper given at this conference in 1984—or by reading the very full biography by his son. He was born in Newington, London in 1829, the son of a dealer in beaver hat trimmings. His parents were members of Whitefield’s Tabernacle in Moorfields.

After a period of uncertainty about spiritual matters he was converted at the age of 14 when, in his words: ‘I ceased thinking about myself and my faith and thought only of Christ; and then I wondered that I should have been perplexed for even a single hour.’ He preached his first sermon a year or so later—a sermon in which he defended Calvinism but affirmed universal redemption.

He studied at Spring Hill College, Birmingham and proved himself an outstanding student.

In 1853 he became assistant to John Angell James at Carrs Lane Congregational Church, Birmingham. A year later he became co-pastor and on James’ death in 1859 he was confirmed as sole pastor. James had been pastor of

Carrs Lane for 54 years; Dale stayed on until his own death in 1895 at the age of 66.

During his years at Carrs Lane the membership of the church was over 1,000. In addition to his responsibilities there he was in constant demand as a preacher and lecturer all over the country; he served on various denominational committees; he was on the board of and lectured at the Spring Hill College and was deeply involved in its transfer to Oxford as Mansfield College; he was a leading protagonist in the non-conformist efforts to make education available to all and to free it from an Anglican stranglehold; he was an energetic campaigner for the liberal party in Birmingham until he fell out with it over the Irish question. He wrote 18 books and edited *The Congregationalist*, a monthly magazine.

How he managed to do all this without an assistant, apart from the last three years of his ministry, surpasses my comprehension and makes me wonder what I do with my time.

His Times

The Victorians referred to their times as an age of transition. Nowhere was this more obviously true than in the areas of Christian theology and church life. In the closing year of his life, the year of the 1859 Revival, John Angell James wrote a series of articles on the spiritual state of the churches. In his view they were poisoned with worldliness. He concluded that the very existence of evangelical religion was in jeopardy and that there was every likelihood that the battle of the Reformation might have to be fought all over again. He was to be proved right.

In 1846, the year before Dale entered theological college, the Congregationalist Edward White published a book called *Life in Christ* in which he rejected the doctrine of eternal punishment and propounded instead the view of conditional immortality, that is that only Christians would live forever. *The Evangelical Magazine* attacked this as a great and dangerous heresy but by 1887 White could become chairman of the Congregational Union. Throughout the second half of the century German liberalism, having at its heart the rejection of the supernatural elements in the Bible, increasingly influenced the thinking of many ministers, not least congregational ones. By the turn of the century almost all of them had rejected the inerrancy and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures.

Dale's ministry thus covered a critical period. It coincided almost exactly with that of CH Spurgeon, who came to Park Street, London three years after RW Dale became assistant at Carrs Lane and who died just three years before Dale. Strangely they seem to have had very little personal contact, although

both were regarded as outstanding evangelical leaders. Does this itself indicate that, although they doubtless had very much in common, their approach to the issues of their time was fundamentally different?

The question then that both alarms me and fascinates me is this; how did Congregationalism move from its generally robust evangelical orthodoxy in the mid-19th Century to the pallid liberalism which typified it in the early 20th Century? Or, to put it another way, how could a church like Carrs Lane move from the 50 year ministry of John Angell James to that of Dale's successor, John Henry Jowett? Jowett was looked upon as an evangelical and perhaps the greatest evangelical preacher of his day but his was a sentimental, emasculated evangelicalism, if it was evangelicalism at all. He managed to combine it with great respect for, and he claimed 90% agreement with, the arch-modernist RJ Campbell, Joseph Parker's successor at the City Temple. That succession was even more extraordinary and alarming!

I take it we are not here because we have some kind of esoteric interest in history. We want to learn from history and so we must ask what we can learn from the great ministry of Mr. Dale, as he insisted on being called, both by way of example and warning, as to how to stand firm for the truth in our generation?

In 1866/7 he wrote two articles on the atonement for the *British Quarterly*. Of the second he said 'I cannot but hope that it may do something to help some of our men who are drifting'. My question is: How far did he stand firm and to what extent, if any, did he himself drift?

His Evangelicalism

In many things he stood very firm indeed. A contemporary reviewer of his book *The Evangelical Revival and other sermons*, published in 1880, says: 'He is never unwilling to let it be understood on which side he is to be found. If Evangelicals are sneered at in some quarters, with Mr Dale that is a reason why he should make it clear that he is an earnest Evangelical.' He goes on 'Mr Dale is an old-fashioned believer and testifies with all his force of reasoning and earnestness of feeling against popular novelties'.

In 1889 he preached at the centenary of Argyle Chapel in Bath, where William Jay had been the minister earlier in the century. His subject was 'The Old Evangelicalism and the New'. This sounds like a leading article in the *Evangelical Times* doesn't it? It is interesting how a hundred years ago there were the same fears about subtle but significant changes as there are today. Dale identified four characteristic doctrines of Evangelicalism, which he roots in the 18th century Evangelical Revival, as:—

1. The death of Christ as the only ground of forgiveness.
2. Justification by

Faith. 3. The reality and the necessity of the New Birth. 4. The eternal suffering of those who have heard the gospel and rejected it.

He expresses concern that some evangelicals are now putting the incarnation at the centre of the Gospel rather than the Cross. And he fears that some, while continuing to speak of justification by faith mean by it something quite different to the Reformers: namely that it is through faith that we become personally righteous through our union with Christ and that it is this fruit of faith which is the ground of our righteousness. Dale protests that if this view is gaining hold then 'we have to fight the great battle of the Reformation all over again'.

An exact echo of John Angell James 40 years previously. 'Strike at the root of the Roman doctrine of justification by inherent righteousness and good works and Romanism has received a mortal wound and will perish. Leave the root and the life remains in it; within a generation or two all the worst evils of Romanism will reappear.' Spurgeon would have said a hearty Amen to that!

His view of Public Worship

Listen to this protest, in one of those sermons mentioned earlier, to the growing man-centredness in religious thought and life:

In our very religion God has a secondary place. We have made ourselves the centre of our religious thought. We are conscious that we ourselves are alive, but he has ceased to be the Living God ... In morals we think of our own conscience, not of God's law; of our self respect, not of God's approval; and we are distressed by self reproach, not by God's displeasure and God's anger ... A church which has lost its God, what is it worth? Where is its power? Brethren, we must try to find God again. When we have found him, and not till then, we shall know something of the agitation and fear with which the penitent of all ages have trembled in the presence of his anger, and something of the surprise and rapture with which they have listened to these words of Christ—that in his name the remission of sins is to be preached to all nations.

That is a message for today is it not? In similar vein are his remarks on worship in an address to the Autumn Assembly of the Congregational Union during his chairmanship in 1869. We are not the first generation to face pressure to change our form of worship! It was happening then too. Listen to this:

The problem to be solved by those who are interested in the aesthetics of public worship is singularly delicate. They have to consider how they can secure perfect freedom for the highest activities of our spiritual nature; but they must not attempt to stimulate and intensify these activities. Reverential awe, peaceful trust, the fervour of love, the exultation of hope, can be created only by the Holy Ghost; all that Art can do is to provide for these supernatural affections a just and adequate expression ... The true solution to this problem

will vary with the varying culture of the Church and the varying temperament of the nations; but I am Puritan enough to believe that the higher life suffers infinitely less from those forms of service in which there is no beauty, nobleness or pathos, than from those which in themselves are so rich, so stately, and so pathetic that they excite, even in the undevout, emotions which are easily mistaken for the sorrows of a supernatural penitence and the triumph of a supernatural joy.

And then with regard to prayer:

When we have abandoned as wearisome that 'long prayer' which was consecrated by the usage of two centuries, it is not certain that our shorter prayers will be offered with more faith and fervour; and in a few years our churches and congregations may become weary of them too ... We shall never be able, by any artifices of literary arrangement, or by any beauty of devotional thought, to charm the impenitent into sorrowful confession of sin, or the undevout into reverent worship.

In our public prayer we must think less than we have been accustomed to think of the taste, the criticism, the impatience of men who do not pray. In the presence of the awful perils from which we ask to be redeemed, of the infinite blessings we desire to obtain, and of the bright perfections we adore, we must not be troubled by the indifference and the weariness of those to whom these transcendent terrors and glories are all unreal. When we pray, our great design is not to move men, but to move God, and if we fail to do that we fail altogether.

To all of which we too can only say Amen. The changes desired by some of our people may be of a different kind but in essence the motivation is often the same: an attempt to create an atmosphere of joy and devotion by music and other means and to make Christian worship more acceptable to unspiritual people. Dale's response seems to me as relevant as ever.

Not that Dale was averse to all changes. Like some of us, he produced his own hymn book in order to introduce some contemporary hymns. He didn't have Graham Kendrick but he did have Thomas Hornblower Gill! He objected to some of his language and complained that his verses did not always fit the tunes very well, the accents falling on wrong words and syllables (and we know all about that!); nonetheless he commended them as being vastly superior to the miserably sentimental hymns generally being produced by others at the time. The latter he described as 'women's hymns rather than men's hymns; and they are the hymns of very weak hysterical women too!'

Incidentally as one reads Dale's closely argued, intellectually demanding sermons, including those preached to his own congregation, made up largely of ordinary Birmingham people, one realizes how far the capacity of people to

listen to sermons has fallen over the past hundred years. Our congregations must, on the whole, be better educated than his. Their ability (or willingness?) to concentrate and work hard at listening is far less. Is it all the result of the television culture or are there spiritual factors as well?

His doctrine of the Atonement

In 1929, a young preacher in South Wales was criticised by an older minister along the lines that the Cross and work of Christ appeared to have little place in his preaching. In response the young minister got hold of three books on the subject. The story goes that he immediately gave himself to the study of them and refused to leave his study for either lunch or tea. His wife became so concerned that she telephoned her brother to ask whether a doctor should be called! But when he eventually emerged he claimed to have found 'the real heart of the gospel and the key to the inner meaning of the Christian faith'. The young preacher was Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones; one of the books was RW Dale's *The Atonement*, published in 1875 and consisting of the Congregational Lecture he had given earlier that year.

First I note that there are two enormous strengths in Dale's exposition of the Atonement. Over against a growing tendency to make the Incarnation the central doctrine of the Gospel (a tendency still strong today) he insists on the centrality of the Cross. And, contrary to the moral influence theory which teaches that the significance of the Cross is merely that it changes us by demonstrating the love of God to us, Dale insisted on the objective fact of the Atonement. There is a direct relationship between the death of Christ and the remission of sins. The Cross, and it alone, makes it possible for God to forgive sinners.

Moreover he insisted that belief in the fact of the Atonement is much more important than belief in any particular theory of the Atonement. You do not need to understand how Christ's death deals with sins in order to believe savingly in the crucified Saviour. In that emphasis he was surely also right.

When he comes to his own theory of the Atonement I believe that there is some cause for unease. His position is not easy to grasp, far less to state simply. At times he seems to come very near to the position of the Reformers but without quite reaching there.

In the early days of his assistantship at Carrs Lane, part of his exposition of Romans had caused a furore in some quarters. He had rejected the orthodox view of Original Sin, in particular that Adam's sin is imputed to all his descendants. Not surprisingly therefore he also rejected the view that our sins and our guilt are imputed to Christ. This he regarded as a legal fiction. Nevertheless he still insisted that Christ suffered as a punishment for our sins.

God could not simply waive the penalties for our sins. The Eternal Law of Righteousness (a favourite phrase of Dale's) had to be upheld. Christ suffered and died to assert that suffering and being forsaken by God are the just results of sin.

The scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed critique of Dale's position. Suffice to say that, whilst it did not prevent him from preaching fervently a Gospel that was identifiably evangelical, I believe that it introduced a subtle but significant change of emphasis. There are I think grounds for saying this was the result of an attempt to accommodate, in part at least, some of the new ideas being taught by others.

His doctrine of Scripture

Higher Criticism was of course at the heart of the new theology, or the negative theology as Dr Campbell, Dale's boyhood minister at Whitefield's Tabernacle and later doughty editor of various congregational journals, called it. A great friend of Dale, Dr Henry Allon, whilst chairman of the Congregational Union in 1864, described verbal inspiration as indefensible, on the grounds that so many religious people had revolted against it. Alexander Raleigh, chairman of the Congregational Union in 1868, asserted that there were errors and mistakes in the Bible.

Dale became chairman of the Union the following year. What view did he take of Scripture?

In an address that year he asserted that the really serious controversy turned on the authority of Christ, not with the threatened demonstration of the historical untrustworthiness of a few characters here and there in the Old Testament. Twenty one years later he amplified and argued this view in a series of addresses at Carrs Lane, which were subsequently published in his book *The Living Christ and the Four Gospels*. As the title indicates, the Battle for the Bible now involved the New Testament as well.

In these addresses Dale sets out to do two things: to defend Christian faith and to defend the Bible, in particular the Gospels. He starts from the observation that, although many Christians were aware of the arguments of the Higher Critics and unable to answer them intellectually, they nevertheless continued to trust in Christ. How is this to be explained? It is, says Dale, because of their experience of the Living Christ. In turning to him they have found their sense of guilt removed, their prayers have been answered, they, having been mightily strengthened by him, are conscious of a living union with him. Whether or not the Gospels were written in the first century by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John does not make any difference to their experience of Christ. And even were they to become convinced that some of

the miracles in the Gospel did not actually happen, this would not shake their assurance that miracles had happened in their own lives.

As an example he turns to the story of Blind Bartimaeus. He supposes that he had heard of the healing of the blind man in Jerusalem and that it was this that gave him faith to appeal to Christ when he arrived in Jericho. Suppose, Dale argues, that after receiving his sight all kinds of arguments were presented to him casting doubt on the story of the blind man in Jerusalem. He might have to accept that the miracle might not have happened or that, at any rate, it could not be proved to have happened. But such doubts could not affect the reality of his own experience and therefore of his trust in Christ. Even though his faith may originally have had a flimsy basis, now it had a sure one—his own experience. So for us; we might come to faith through what the Bible tells us about Christ but, once we have come to Christ, our faith is sustained not so much by what the Bible says as by our own experience of the Living Christ. In this way Dale sought to defend the Christian faith from the onslaughts of the Higher Critics. A verbally inspired and inerrant Bible is not essential for a sure faith.

He then argues from the certainties of Christian experience back to the substantial reliability of the Bible. The Jesus we find portrayed in the Gospels is in fact exactly the Jesus we have discovered in our experience. However it is inconceivable that the Gospels present merely imaginary stories about Jesus, made up to fit with Christian experience. The parallel emphasis on His Manhood and on His Deity and the extraordinary blend of the two could and would never have been constructed this way. 'The story transcends invention; it must be true.' Or at least substantially so. We have no need to trouble ourselves about the details of authorship nor to be over troubled if doubts arise about the accuracy or authenticity of this or that incident. Those things are the province of the scholars and may safely be left to them. He goes on however to reinforce his own views of the essential reliability of the Gospels and the traditional view of their authorship by appealing to the evidence of early Christian writings.

With regard more particularly to the Old Testament Dale urged, as so many were to do subsequently, that there need be no conflict between science and the Bible. The two could be reconciled by recognising that they dealt with different areas of reality and human experience. Science is legitimately concerned with the origin of the physical organisation of man and Dale seems to have assumed that Darwin's theory of evolution was no longer open to question. But the Bible deals with man's ethical and religious life and while the findings of science would require some reinterpretation of the Bible, they did not mean its rejection.

Thus Dale sought to defend the Bible as reasonably reliable even though not infallible. The really serious and surprising thing is that Dale does not seem to have come to terms with the Bible's own testimony to itself and particularly with Christ's own attitude to and teaching about Scripture.

Of course he was right to say that a belief in the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture was not essential to saving faith; most people accept this doctrine after, not before, conversion. It was Luther who said that we believe the Scriptures for Christ's sake, not Christ for the Scriptures' sake. However, belief in verbally inspired and inerrant Scripture was far more important for the health of the church and the preservation and purity of the Gospel than Dale saw. Subsequent history has demonstrated that very clearly. Soon men would arise who would boldly assert that the Christ of experience is quite different from the Jesus of history and of the Bible. Experience has proved to be a foundation of shifting sand and the justification for all kinds of strange doctrines as well as for the denial of many true ones!

We must not be too hard on Dale. He was fighting an essentially new battle and had no BB Warfield or JI Packer and host of others to turn to. Undoubtedly he himself had a very high view of the Bible and I doubt whether, if we could have listened to him preach, we would have heard anything on most Sundays which would have alarmed us. However, he had given ground and when the door has been opened to the possibility of some errors in the Scriptures it is always harder to shut it than to open it wider. We must not ignore the warning that to shift even slightly from the orthodox doctrine of Scripture is to begin to drift perilously, especially if we are a teacher of others.

His view of the Destiny of Unbelievers

There was one doctrine in which Dale freely acknowledged that he had departed from the earlier creed of evangelicalism. At that centenary service in Bath he had listed the fourth distinctive of evangelicalism as the Eternal Suffering of all who heard the Gospel and rejected it. The accuracy of even that statement is questionable for we might ask if Whitefield, Wesley and the rest had limited the danger of everlasting hell only to those who had heard the Gospel? I think not, for a deep concern about the impending eternal misery of the heathen had been a major factor in the early nineteenth century missionary movement. However, even when expressed in this more qualified form, Dale rejected the doctrine of the eternal punishment of unbelievers. Quite early in his ministry he had adopted the view that only those who believed in Christ would live forever. For others the judgement would lead to eternal death, which he understood as annihilation. In other words he believed in what is

called Conditional Immortality. In asserting this view, he rejected not only the orthodox view but also the 'larger hope' or universalism, and idea which was gaining support in his day.

Once again we are bound to ask how important was, and is, this deviation from evangelical orthodoxy? We should note first that, whatever consequences may be charged upon this view and those who hold it in our own day, for Dale at least it did not diminish the urgency of evangelism. Listen to him again in that sermon at Bath:

Even when the question of the ultimate destiny of the impenitent remains unresolved, there is enough to fill us with a passion of zeal for the salvation of men from certain doom, whether it be temporary or final, which threatens them if they live and die without God. It is not the duration but the reality of the penalty which is vital here. Belief that there is nothing to be saved from certainly does sap the passion for salvation.

Nevertheless I think that two things need to be said. Firstly it would seem that Dale rejected the older view of eternal punishment, not because he felt compelled by the Scriptures to do so, but because he found it repugnant to his own way of thinking. He said that John Angell James' belief in that doctrine gave a wrong impression of the man: 'He believed in an appalling doctrine but had a most tender heart.' We can have some sympathy for Dale and others who have felt like that. This is not a welcome doctrine to any of us but this fact is a bad reason for rejecting it! Incidentally I think the same could be said about his rejection of the orthodox doctrine of Original Sin, that it was more because he found it unacceptable than as a result of a careful exegesis of Scripture.

Secondly, despite Dale's protests to the contrary, the doctrine of Conditional Immortality certainly does lessen the terrors of judgement and has at least the tendency to lessen the urgency of the Gospel and the passion for evangelism.

His view of the Church

We will look at this briefly but it is important to realize that his view, in so far as his view represented others at the time and later became representative of Congregationalism at large, could not fail to be a major factor in Congregationalism's decline. His view of the nature of the church and of church unity is crucial in the response made to significant and symptomatic events that took place during the 1877 Autumn meetings of the Congregational Union. An unofficial meeting was called which asserted the principle that 'religious communion is not dependent on on agreement in theological, critical or historical opinion'. The meeting was attended by some

who denied the Incarnation and Resurrection and so aroused considerable alarm.

Dale was in America at the time but, on his return, vigorously supported the committee of the Union who had responded to this extreme ecumenism by proposing that the following May Assembly should be asked to affirm a declaration of faith. However this was seen as a statement of what Congregationalists believe not what churches must believe in order to be part of the Congregational Union. Hopefully churches which departed from the Evangelical Faith of the majority would exclude themselves; but no steps were taken for their exclusion by others. The refusal to exercise any doctrinal discipline within the Union was surely a disaster.

This was Dale's own position not only in regard to communion between churches, but also with regard to membership of particular churches. He was happy with declarations of faith but rejected their use as a test for fellowship. Thus he could conceive of even a unitarian being received as a member of a Congregational Church, believing that it was possible for someone to have genuine faith in Christ whilst still having intellectual doubts about His Deity. You will see that there are two convictions present here: a refusal to add anything to bare faith in Christ as a condition of church membership but also, seemingly, a refusal to give even a minimal doctrinal content to what constitutes a credible profession of faith.

Dale's view of inter-church fellowship, typical I assume of the majority of Congregationalists of the time, led the way to the Congregational Union becoming a very mixed body. His view of the conditions for church membership, appealing as it is in many ways, surely paved the way for modernism to be accepted in the pulpit and to take root in the pews.

Some conclusions for today

1. The story of the second half of the 19th Century reminds us of the terrible possibility of churches and fellowships of churches moving rapidly away from Biblical Christianity. Complacency about doctrinal orthodoxy is never in order.
2. The story of RW Dale warns us that deviations that may appear small and relatively unimportant can, in the slightly longer term, have most serious consequences. This is especially so when they are embraced and taught by good and godly men. The errors of good men can be more harmful than all errors of bad men. This is not a call to heresy hunting; it is a call to vigilance over our own minds and hearts and to clear thinking.
3. Let us note the danger of exalting experience over Scripture and making experience the foundation of faith and fellowship. This is not a call for

dead orthodoxy but, unlike the Bible which never fails us, experience is not infallible.

4. Dale's theology warns us against the dangers of attempting a synthesis between modern thought and Biblical truth. Dale's friend, Dr AM Fairbairn, who was first Principal of Mansfield College and is regarded by Tudur Jones as the founder of liberal evangelicalism, described Dale's intellect as not so much critical as synthetic. He says that Dale 'incorporated the fundamental idea or governing thought of the new liberal theology without surrendering the old evangelical doctrines'. I suspect that in so doing he made it easier for others to go on to surrender them. This is not a call to be backwoodsmen and antiquarians but a call to hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints.
5. Finally, on a positive note, let me fasten on something that Dale emphasised, again in that centenary address at Bath. He said that the old evangelicalism had not only a characteristic creed but a characteristic ethos. He noted that, in his view, some deficiencies in the outlook of that old evangelicalism had been made good in his generation. Amongst these was a greater concern for the truth for its own sake rather than simply as an instrument of salvation.

However he also feared losses:

I do not ask whether the element of fear has a great place in our teaching but whether it has a great place in our hearts—whether we ourselves are afraid, whether the Christian people who have been trained by us are afraid of what will come to men who do not believe in Christ; whether we, whether our people, are filled with agonising earnestness for their salvation.

Again he said, taking up what he felt were the gains of the nineteenth century:

Do we, and our people, as the result of the passion for truth, know the real meaning of the Bible better than our fathers knew it a hundred years ago: Do we brood over the revelations of God contained in the Old and New Testaments as our fathers brooded over them?

He also believed that there was a greater emphasis on moral teaching but asked:

Are we producing a more vigorous and more mature—a less compromising and less self-indulgent type of moral character than that which was created when moral teaching was too much neglected? We have gone into the world in a sense in which Evangelicalism thought it sinful and dangerous to go into the world. But are we mastering the world by the power of God and making it what God meant it to be, or is the world mastering us?

Even if we think that on some points we are more Biblical and orthodox than

Dale was, these questions are as relevant to us as to those to whom he first posed them a hundred years ago. To be truly evangelical means having the right ethos as well as the right creed, a zeal for evangelism, a love for the Bible, a desire for holiness and a thirst for God and for his glory.

May God help us not only to guard our minds but our hearts as well!

