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Editorial

Alan Sillitoe's short story, 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner' is, by common consent, one of the most impressive to emerge from the 'angry young men' period of the English novel. It describes a Borstal Boy, Smith, who is entered for the 'Borstal Blue Ribbon Prize Cup for Long Distance Country Running (All England)'. He is a gifted runner. The governor has high hopes that he will win, enhancing the reputation of his institution. Furthermore, Smith knows that he can do it. The day dawns. In his ears echo the shouts of encouragement of staff and fellow-inmates. He easily leads the field. The result is a foregone conclusion. But no! Smith deliberately collapses. Though quite capable, it was never his intention to win. What looks like a defiant anti-social gesture is, in fact, part of a struggle to be appreciated as a human being, irrespective of achievement. What others expect of you may well not correspond to what you have to be to live an authentic existence.

This represents the continuing crisis of Christianity. How should we then live? For our existence is lived between the Scylla and Charybdis of conformity and rebellion. Each has its attractions. Each can be accepted uncritically as the normative Christian life. Our own Baptist roots, at least those in continental soil, were deep in rebellion (Thomas Müntzer and Münster). At other times we have reflected society's outlook and values far too perfectly. It is a question, not of balance or compromise, but of *authenticity*: at such a time as this and under these conditions, what does it mean to be true to Christ? Bonhoeffer's question (in the light of the German Church's capitulation to Hitler and Aryanism) has haunted your editor for years: 'Are we still serviceable'?

Among those who rang bells and awoke the dead is the prophet of Basle, Karl Barth (1886-1968). His theological seriousness has found an echo in Peter Shepherd who asks searching questions about the nature and value of work and its relation to human dignity and self-worth.

The next two articles are to some extent complementary. Both concern the Church Meeting. Fred Bacon's spirited rationale for congregational government would, in former days, have been stating the obvious. But 'charismatic renewal' has sent us all back to the first principles of Baptist polity. On the other hand, Michael Jobling provides some timely evidence that the Church Meeting is alive and well, even flourishing, in 'renewal churches'.

Perhaps to be British and a Christian makes it doubly hard to grieve and not be ashamed of oneself. Many valuable social and psychological insights have, in recent years, illuminated the bereavement condition. Geoffrey Walters seeks to provide us with a strong theological undergirding as we minister to those suffering loss.

Theology, Karl Barth and Work

The theologian Karl Barth wrote early in his career as a theologian that he had got over the childish ailment of being ashamed of theology (1). It seems to me that as we face today's complex social and economic problems there is a danger that we shall forget — or perhaps be ashamed of — the place of theology in looking for answers.

The Primacy of Theology

It is not surprising that the task of theology is unpopular today. We are awash with words — words blasted at us through advertising, newspapers and broadcasting. In Church circles we have talks, conferences, correspondence, magazines and paperbacks galore. One net effect of this is to devalue words altogether. Too many words means too little thought given to their meaning.

Another reason for the neglect of theology is that we live in an age devoted to the Image. Presidents and Prime Ministers are elected and products sold by means of their image — the pictures and feelings they are associated with — rather than their real meaning and value. Christian leaders and events often gain their appeal in the same way. This is not a healthy environment for theology to flourish.

A third reason for lack of interest in Evangelical circles may be the perception that the theology corner is occupied and controlled by Liberals and any movement in that direction involves the risk of compromising Biblical truth. A fourth may be that we are all so concerned with results — achieved as rapidly as possible — that the time consuming and apparently unproductive task of theological thought is squeezed out.

Whatever the reasons may be, it seems that the task of Biblical theology is often neglected by we ministers, who are uniquely able to pursue it. This is unfortunate because it inevitably leads to a shaky foundation for our attempts to respond to the challenges the world is throwing at us these days. It is not enough simply to appeal to the simple statements of the Bible over these issues, because the Bible does not address many of them directly — we do not find reference to participating in a modern democratic society; nor to the many dilemmas of modern medical practice; nor to issues of mass unemployment; nor to nuclear weapons etc etc.. And the great theologians of the past did not wrestle with them either. These are contemporary problems and contemporary theological thinking — interpreting Biblical principles for today — is needed if Christian answers are to be found.

If we do not take the task seriously, and instead cobble together impromptu and superficial responses to what is going on, we will inevitably end up slavishly following the world's agenda, debating issues within the framework of secular thinking and using Biblical texts as ammunition, if and when appropriate. Theology will be relegated to the position of a preamble or an afterthought instead of occupying the central place it warrants. There is a sense, of course, in which the world always sets the agenda — our theology must be undertaken within the context of the world in which we are living. But the content and heart of our theology must be rooted first and foremost in the Biblical revelation.

Analogy and Christocentricity

To return to Barth, there are two themes which he highlights which are helpful for us in pursuing this theological task. One is the principle of analogy. He believed that there should always be a correspondence or analogy between Divine action and human action. A particular concern of his was to understand the role of the State and its relationship with the Church. The State is, he wrote, 'an allegory, a correspondence and an analogue' to the Kingdom of God (2). In speaking of human work, he believes it to correspond to the Providential Rule of God, its function being to reflect or mirror God's work — to demonstrate a correspondence and likeness to God's work (3). This theme can be seen in the stories of Man's creation in Genesis 1 and 2, where the Divine image in Man is closely linked to his task of dominion over nature.

A second theme is that of Christocentricity. All of human work and action finds its meaning and purpose only in Christ. Christ is the Lord and centre not only of the Church and explicitly Christian activity, but of the whole of life. Thus any human endeavour gains dignity and purpose only insofar as it serves the cause of Christ — even if only indirectly or unknowingly.

It is not possible here to investigate these themes or assess them. Taking them at face value, they commend themselves as useful tools in seeking to be at the same time genuinely theological and relevant to the contemporary scene.

Work and its Meaning

One crucial area of concern today is the meaning of human work. How might we approach this issue by means of these tools? It is necessary to be aware of the nature of the contemporary crisis of work for a start — to recognise some of the factors that have played a part in the last ten to twenty years in changing the work scene in a more radical way than anything since the Industrial Revolution. This provides the context or setting for any theological thinking we might pursue.

The factors contributing to the contemporary crisis of work are varied and still a matter of debate. Writers such as Alvin Toffler, James Robertson and Andre Gorz describe them in a fairly radical way which is not accepted by more conventional economists (4). Writers such as Charles Handy, David Bleakley and Roger Clarke identify similar kinds of factors from an explicitly Christian perspective (5). These include the revolutionary impact of automation in most spheres of work — which means that new investment often results not in more but fewer jobs; the challenge of the newly industrialised nations; the increasing number of women entering the job market on an equal footing with men; the world-wide ecological threat resulting from modern work practices.

The practical social consequences of these changes are widespread and serious. The most obvious is the onset of mass unemployment. This in turn is being dealt with on the socio-economic level by means of various devices, most of which are ad hoc and regarded as temporary, and do not seriously take account of the basic underlying changes we are living through. The under-twenties are being taken out of the job-market by means of Training Schemes of various descriptions; the proportion of employees who are part-time or temporary staff and who therefore lack the security of a 'proper' job is growing; various attempts are made to decrease the unemployment figures without changing the underlying reality; early retirement is increasingly the norm. These responses to the present work crisis are, if you like, at one end of the scale. At the other end is the continuing, and growing, affluence of the South-East of England. Just how much of this is due to the frantic money-spinning of the City and defence-orientated high-tech industries, I wonder?

These changes are fundamental. They raise the whole question of what it means for an individual to participate in, and contribute to, and share in the wealth of, his or her society. Work has for many generations been the key to this — the means of 'earning a living'. The changes we are living through in the field of work are changes which strike at the root of our whole concept of humanity and society. We cannot afford to allow questions such as these to remain unaddressed by our theology.

My concern is that on the basis of at least a partial grasp of these issues we take our theological task seriously. We certainly need from time to time articles such as Paul Allen's essay in the October 1987 issue of *Fraternal* (6) to help us, and we need to think through our theology in the light of them — or at least if we do not feel able to, to encourage those who can.

Theological Exploration

Let me give a few examples of possible ways forward with regard to thinking theologically about the issue of work. One of the features of the Divine work of creation and redemption is that it is consciously and explicitly directed towards a specific goal. At the end of each day in the work of creation the Creator reflects upon what he has done and judges it according to its achievement — 'and behold, it was very good'. The Divine activity was affirmed and took its value and meaning from what it accomplished. In a similar way the work of Christ in redemption was completed and given its meaning and value only when his sacrifice on the cross had been accomplished. 'It is finished' was a cry which implies the final achievement of the task which Christ has been given by the Father. In a wider sense, the whole work of God revealed in Scripture is looking forward to its completion, its final goal, its ultimate destination in Christ.

If there should be a correspondence or analogy between the Divine work and human work, then this orientation towards the goal or product of work should be reflected in human work also. The value and meaning of the activity of work is found in the goal towards which it is directed and which ultimately it achieves. We must reject the notion that simply to be kept occupied — to exert physical and mental effort on some activity — is in itself good work. There may be benefits of being busy, but we should not identify busy activity with work, for the two are very different.

Superficially, there is a similarity between this goal-orientated view of work (we could call it the 'teleological dimension of work') and contemporary calls for increased productivity. However, the modern drive for productivity is usually a question of encouraging the production of goods and services which are marketable rather than having any inherent value and benefit. The market is a rough and ready measure of the value of the product of work, but has serious flaws. Much work which is rewarded very highly by the market (e.g. financial speculation) has dubious real benefit and much work of great benefit (e.g. parenthood; voluntary work) is not rewarded at all by the market.

A second dimension of Divine work is that it takes the form of service. The work of creation was undertaken for the sake of Man — it was given to humanity to enjoy and to care for, and the climax of the work of creation was the Divine blessing upon Adam and Eve. Ultimately we could say that the purpose of creation was the Covenant relationship between God and Man, and for the sake of that relationship God gave of Himself to Man. The social, or self-giving, dimension of the Divine work is even more fundamental to understanding its meaning than its teleological dimension. This dimension is seen more clearly still in the work of Christ, who gave Himself for Man, and who described Himself as a servant.

Human work, too, if it is to correspond in any way to God's work, and if it is to gain its meaning from being centred on Christ, is to take the form of service. It will involve an aspect of self-giving for the sake of another. In today's individualistic and money centred society, it is easy to lose altogether this sense of the service of work. We are urged to become independent of others rather than to recognise our mutual dependence. Relationships with others — whether they be relationships between consumers, between those who work together, or between consumers and producers — are generally purely functional and formal where they exist at all in the field of work. We need to promote the notion of mutual dependence and the importance of the concept of service in work.

This may sound idealistic and unworkable, and it will be so unless we identify particular ways in which it can be done. Alan Storkey suggests that the way forward is to alter the way institutions (e.g. financial institutions; companies; professions and Unions; political institutions etc) operate in the economic market place of today by means of legislation (7). He says that a wider and more urgent recognition of Christian values, expressing itself through pressure for institutional reform, is the way forward. There are other dimensions of work which we could identify from the Divine model of working, of course. Responses from Christians will vary widely. But let us not underestimate either the significance of the changes we are living through, nor the importance of our theology in responding to the contemporary crisis of work.

I will finish as I began, with a thought provoking quotation from Karl Barth: 'Politics is the most manly of occupations next to theology' (8).

Peter Shepherd

Notes:

1. Quoted by Helmut Gollwitzer in *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* ET T & T Clarke, 1961, p9, from Barth's essay, *Not und Verheissung der christlichen Verkündigung* (1922).
2. *The Christian Community and the Civil Community in Against the Stream*, SCM, 1954 (p32).
3. *Church Dogmatics*, III:3 (T & T Clarke) pp46-51.
4. In, for example, *Paths to Paradise* (Andre Gorz, Pluto Press, 1985); *The Third Wave* (Alvin Toffler, Pan, 1981); *Future Work* (James Robertson, Gower, 1985).
5. See Charles Handy, *The Future of Work*, Blackwells, 1984; David Bleakley, *Beyond Work – Free to Be*, SCM, 1985; Roger Clarke, *Work in Crisis*, St Andrews Press, 1982.
6. Paul Allen, *Contemporary Economics: Some Ethical Reflections*, in *Fraternal*, Vol. 220 (p19).
7. Alan Storkey, *Transforming Economics*, SPCK, 1986.
8. Quoted in Helmut Gollwitzer (op cit) p10.

Can We Really Justify Congregational Church Government?

Some of us who were brought up in traditional Baptist churches and who entered the ministry more than, say, twenty years ago took almost for granted that congregational church government was superior to other forms.

If we did question it we had, for instance, Wheeler Robinson's *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, Henry Cook's *What Baptists Stand For*, and, later, Morris West's *Baptist Principles* to quieten our doubts, though in those the legitimacy (and not superiority?) of congregational church government was assumed more than argued for.

If we ministers tended to accept it without serious questioning so, even more, did most Baptist church members. Consequently the Church Members Meeting (the inclusion of 'Members' seems to be necessary these days) was counted as central in the church's decision-making process — even though only about a third of the membership attended!

But times have changed. There has been a move in some Baptist churches towards giving the final decision-making authority to the main church leadership body — usually called 'elders' ! or, in some cases, even to an outside individual or group.

Then there has been an increasing number of people joining our churches from other denominations, or none, with little or no knowledge of Baptist principles and, sometimes, sadly, are poorly instructed in them before and after joining. They more readily question even the legitimacy, let alone the superiority, of our form of government, and we have to give them an answer.

All this has set me (and others) thinking again about and studying more assiduously the question of how well we *can* justify the importance we give to congregational church government, with the necessary implication that the Church Members' Meeting should have the final authority in governing the church. And not only to answer it to my own satisfaction but, also, in sufficiently comprehensible terms for the average lay Christian.

After studying it with as open a mind as possible and writing down my findings at some length, it so happened that Philip Withers invited me to lead a Conference of ministers and deacons and their spouses of the Wokingham District of Baptist Churches. He wanted me to take the subject *Making the Most of the Church Meeting*, basing it on the booklet of that title.

I was grateful for this as it prompted me to prepare in a more concise form the examination I had made of the practice of congregational church government so as to present it as an introductory talk to the Conference. Afterwards I was encouraged to share it more widely. Hence its appearance here.

Its title was:

WHO SHOULD RUN MY CHURCH?

In other words, who should govern it? The brief answer is, GOD, of course! But God doesn't do it by himself. He employs people. Which people? We can identify

Four Possible Types of Government (or combination thereof)



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1. External 2. Monarchic 3. Oligarchic 4. Democratic

We ask two questions about each —

- a) Where do we find them today?
- v) Where do we see them in the New Testament?

1. EXTERNAL GOVERNMENT

That is, government, in varying degrees, by a person or people from *outside* the local church (eg. Bishop or Council, or both).

a) **Where today?** Some examples:

Roman Catholic (Bishop), Salvation Army (General), some House Churches (Apostles), Anglican (Bishop and General Synod), and then, (by Councils), Church of Scotland, Methodist, URC, Society of Friends, most Baptist churches in the USSR, and in parts of our Baptist mission field.

b) **Where in the NT?** Some possible examples:

The Jerusalem church had at least strong influence on other churches (Acts 15:1-33). Did it have *control* over them? In some areas, probably, in so far as they were prepared to accept it.

Did Paul have control? If he did, it was surely as a member of and from *within* 'his' churches — those which he founded — and not from *without* see 2.b) below.

2. MONARCHIC GOVERNMENT

That is, by an *individual* within the church.

a) **Where today?** Some examples:

(To some degree) Anglican incumbent, RC priest, S. Army Corps Officer, House Church leading elder.

b) **Where in the NT?** Some possible examples:

James in Jerusalem had considerable influence (Acts 12:17; 15:13,19; Gal. 2:9). But was it *control*? This seems doubtful from the evidence we have.

Paul came at least extremely near personal control in 'his' churches (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Thess. 3:4,6,10,12,14), though it was restrained (2 Cor. 1:24).

Timothy (Ephesus), and Titus (Crete) came near to it (Epistles of Timothy and Titus).

The one definite example of monarchic control is with Diotrephes (what a disaster!) (3 John 9-11).

3. OLIGARCHIC GOVERNMENT

That is, by a *small group* within the church — self-appointing and accountable to each other only.

a) Where today? Some examples:

Open Brethren (elders), some House Churches (elders), a few Baptist (elders), and also with some external control, in the Church of Scotland (Kirk Session), and probably most Baptist churches in the USSR (Presidium).

b) Where in the NT? Some possible examples:

In a number of churches strong leadership from elders (also called bishops) plus, sometimes, deacons to assist (the deacons of our Baptist churches today are nearer in role to the NT elders than NT deacons — we would do better to call ours 'elders'). But there is no clear evidence of true oligarchies in NT churches, except quite possibly in Rome (Hebrews 13:17).

(In each of the foregoing examples of church government found today the members of the church/congregation may in practice be consulted or even asked to make decisions, but the final authority will still (in certain areas at least), remain with the external, monarchic or oligarchic body.)

4. DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT

That is, by the *church members* acting together in Church Members' Meeting.

'Democratic' is often misunderstood and misrepresented; we therefore need to recognise that 'democratic church government' means that:

- * Churches which practise it are not, strictly speaking, *democracies*. They still remain *theocracies*, that is, ruled by GOD. But they do use democratic procedures.
- * Members are not only *consulted*; they also have the *vote*.
- * Members not only have the *vote*; they also have opportunities for *discussion*.
- * Some decisions may be *delegated to others*, but the most crucial ones must be *retained to themselves* by the church members (eg. admission or removal of church members, appointment of deacons).
- * Decisions need not necessarily be *unanimous*, but *always by suitable majorities*
- * Leaders are not denied their proper authority and respect, yet their authority is limited, and they are selected democratically, and are accountable to the Church Members' Meeting.
- * Churches though *autonomous*, are not necessarily *independent* of other churches.
- * Where churches are *interdependent* with other churches (eg. through their regional and national denominational bodies) they will still democratically appoint their representatives to the inter-church councils.

a) Where today? Some examples:

Those that practise full democratic participation, i.e. congregational church government: Baptist, Congregational, Assemblies of God.

Those that are under some external control but nevertheless elect their representatives to the external denominational councils and, therefore, are democratic: Methodist, Society of Friends, URC.

(It is interesting and significant that other main-line churches are moving towards democratic practices, though not yet in theory).

b) Where in the NT? Some examples:

Christ's teaching on disciplining (Matt. 18:15-20). Not only Baptists take this as an example; the Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, says in interpreting this passage: "It is the whole Church, the whole community which bears the authority to forgive sins ... the whole community of the disciples is addressed here." *The Church* p. 332.

In the Jerusalem church: Election of the 'Seven' (Acts 6:1-6)
The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:22, 25, 28)

WHO THEN SHOULD RUN MY CHURCH?

It will be seen from the above that there is no single model of church government in the New Testament.

B.H. Streeter in his oft-quoted, *The Primitive Church*, page 261, goes so far as to say: "In the Primitive Church there was no single system of Church Order laid down by the Apostles. During the first hundred years of Christianity, The Church was an organism alive and growing — changing its organisation to meet changing needs. Clearly in Asia, Syria, and Rome during that century the system of government varied from church to church, and in the same church at different times." James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, says much the same thing, though he does not provide a neat quotable quote. In other words, no Christian community can legitimately claim to have structured their church on *the one* New Testament model. Those who do have simply selected one or two Scriptures and ignored the rest.

Mark you, I believe we can say that the system of using democratic procedures appears to be more common than other systems in the New Testament; and I believe we can also say that the advantages of democratic church government outweigh those of other systems. This, however, is too slender a foundation on which to justify the *supremacy* of democratic church government. We have to look for underlying PRINCIPLES on which to base our practice. When we do that we find, I believe, that the one outstanding principle which should dictate our practice is this:

Every individual has the basic responsibility and competence to control, under the guidance of God, the direction of his own life. He thus should be given the opportunity by others to do so. In other words, he has the right to act according to individual conscience and this must not be given to, or taken away by, any other person or persons.

This principle is deduced from three fundamental Christian truths:

a) EACH INDIVIDUAL IS ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD ALONE FOR HIS ACTIONS

Everyone is created by God for the glory and service of God and the service of man and is accountable to God for how he fulfils this purpose (1 Cor. 10:31; Mark 12:29-31; James 4:7a; Rom. 14:12). Each person, therefore has the responsibility and right to live his life as he believes God would have him.

b) NO PERSON HAS THE RIGHT TO ULTIMATE AUTHORITY OVER ANY OTHER

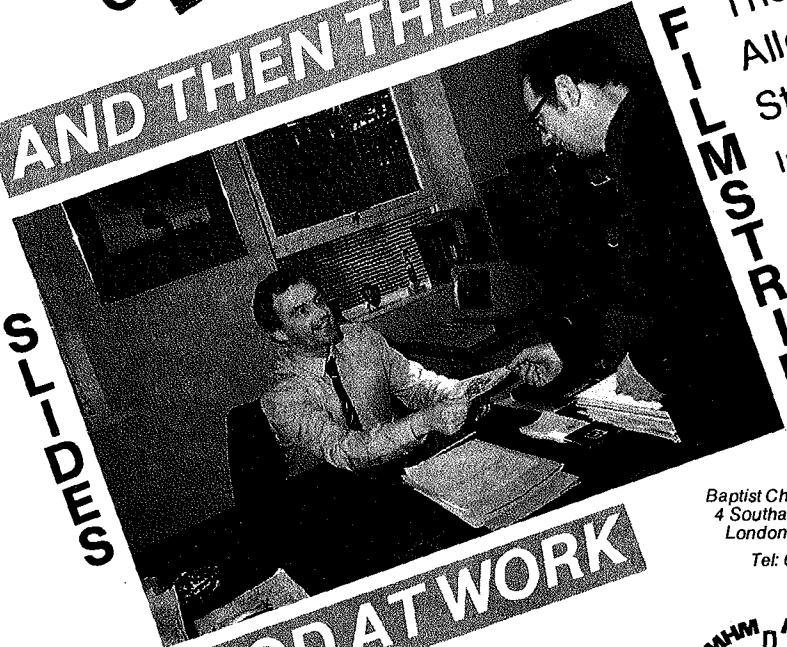
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Each individual is loved infinitely by God. This is evident from the fact that Christ died for us all, and we are all sought for by the Holy Spirit that we might have fellowship with God (John 3:16,17; 1 Tim. 2:4-6; 2 Pet. 3:9; John 16:7-11; John 14:23). Therefore everyone is of infinite value and should be treated as such by himself and by others. This means that no one may use him as a means to an end nor demand his total submission; nor may he surrender his will to any but God even though he does and should treat with respect the opinions of his fellows and accept their directions at times so long as they are within the limits of his conscience.

c) EVERYONE CAN HAVE DIRECT AND EFFICACIOUS ACCESS TO GOD

All believers have equal access to God (the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers – 1 Pet. 2:5;9; Rev. 1:5,6; Phil. 2:12-13). Therefore they can receive the direct guidance and enabling of the Holy Spirit to decide and live as God would have them. Though they will value the wisdom and help of others they will give priority to what they believe is of divine origin.

Now, how does this relate to the individual Christian's participation in the government of his church? We see how it relates in the —

THREE COROLLARIES of the principle which these truths signify:

- i) The ideal is that each church member should be given the opportunity to be directly involved in the decision-making process of his church. This is because it is in and through his church that much of the believer's Christian life and service are nurtured and expressed, and, as we have seen, he must take ultimate responsibility for this before God. Congregational church government is the system which provides this opportunity to the maximum degree.
In practice, of course, decisions made by the church will not always be in line with his views, but he will usually be able to defer to and abide by the consensus of his fellow-members as being in line with God's will. If he thinks, however, that they are acting fundamentally contrary to God's will he will feel obliged to part company with them.
- ii) The Church Members' Meeting will then be the centre of human authority in the church, i.e. the body of people with whom rests the final responsibility for what happens in and through the church.
- iii) a) Each church which practises congregational church government should retain and strengthen it.
b) Those churches which do not should move towards it as expeditiously as is practicable.

I have expressed b) thus because it may not be judicious in every church to try to introduce congregational church government immediately. In early missionary work, among people used to a hierarchal tribal structure where the chief's word was law, democratic procedures were so foreign to new converts that a paternalistic/monarchic approach was necessary to begin with; also some external control has been found wise among even our Baptist overseas mission churches and, no doubt, it would be unwise to

eliminate it in the foreseeable future. In the USSR because of difficult relationships with the state it would, no doubt, be impracticable for those Baptist churches within the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists to attempt to move as yet to complete congregational church government.

No doubt the variations in church order which we find in the New Testament churches are there because the situation and its needs varied from church to church and from time to time, and had to be met in a variety of ways.

But the fact remains that, if the principle enunciated above is of decisive importance, congregational church government is the ideal towards which all churches should move.

Fred Bacon

Renewal and the Church Meeting (a survey)

A fairly persistent myth in Baptist circles links charismatic renewal with government by elders and the abandonment of the Church Meeting. During 1987, as a very minor part of a sabbatical project, I surveyed a small group of Baptist Churches involved in charismatic renewal to find what difference renewal had made to their Church Meetings. The results indicate that there are churches involved in charismatic renewal where, far from being abandoned, the Church Meeting is in fact experiencing a new lease of life.

Thirty churches were contacted, the sole common feature being that all of them were known to be involved in charismatic renewal to a greater or lesser degree. Twenty nine questionnaires were returned, filled in by Church Secretaries, Administrators or in some cases, Ministers. The churches varied in size from 49 to 600, and were fairly evenly dotted about England, with the exception that none were in East Anglia or the North East of England. The following is a summary of the information gathered:

Size of the Churches

The following table shows the size of the churches questioned:

Size of Church	Number of Churches
600 +	2
500 - 600	1
400 - 500	1
300 - 400	6
200 - 300	5
100 - 200	8
0 - 100	5

QUESTION: Do you have a Church Meeting?

All twenty nine churches have a functioning Church Meeting, and only one indicated any doubt about the necessity to have one. One church, West Bridgford, in Nottingham, has a federal structure, where the church is divided

into different congregations which meet separately on a Sunday morning and have separate oversight from members of a pastoral team. Here individual congregations have their own congregational meeting as well as the united Church Meeting.

QUESTION: How often do your Church Meetings take place?

There was considerable variation in the frequency of Church Meetings, as this table shows:

Frequency of Church Meeting	Number of Churches
Quarterly	10
5 per year	1
Alternate months/6 - 7 per year	7
8 - 10 per year	5
Monthly	5

QUESTION: How many members attend, on average?

By correlating answers to this question with the membership size of the churches it was possible to deduce an estimated percentage of the members in each church who attend Church Meetings. One smaller church in Birmingham claimed a 70% turn out, way ahead of the field. Others fell into the following categories:

%age attendance at Church Meeting	Number of Churches
20% - 29%	4
30% - 39%	12
40% - 50%	11

There seemed to be some correlation between size of membership and percentage turnout, but the sample was too small to get this clear. The best percentage attendance figures seemed to be in those churches with a membership between 100 and 150, and those with a membership between 350 and 550. On the other hand, percentage attendance seemed lower on average when the membership is under 50, between 150 and 350, and over 550.

QUESTION: Are the gifts of the Holy Spirit (particularly word of wisdom, word of knowledge and prophecy) manifested in Church Meetings?

Categories of Answer	Number of Churches
Yes, regularly	7
Occasionally	6
Rarely	5
No, but decisions in Church Meetings may be influenced by use of spiritual gifts in prayer meetings or worship services	2
Not at all	8

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To the Readers of the Fraternal.

Dear Friends,

It has been our practice for many years where a Church's insurances are of sufficient size, to offer to appoint the responsible official, usually the Church Treasurer, as an agent of the Company. This has resulted in commission being allowed on the Church insurance premium, and more often than not the Church has benefitted from this commission.

A number of our agents appointed in this way have introduced to us the personal insurance of members — principally house building and contents insurance. Many members welcome the opportunity to place this business with the denominational insurer and it is an important source of growth for the Company.

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Over the coming months we shall be writing to all our agents on his subject.

Yours sincerely,

M.E. Purver

QUESTION: Does discussion of church business ever officially take place outside of Church Meetings (e.g. in Housegroups) ?

Twelve of the twenty nine churches were pursuing a policy of deliberately discussing church business in housegroups as well as in Church Meetings. Decisions are taken in the Church Meeting but the housegroup structure, common in charismatic churches, provides a vehicle for a widespread debate on important issues by the whole membership without the pressure to make a decision. With an effective report-back system, it can enable the Pastor or elders to get a clearer picture of what the whole church is feeling.

QUESTION: Can you think of any other ways in which Renewal has changed your Church Meetings?

QUESTION: Do you have any other comments to add?

A wide range of answers were given to these questions, which can be classified as follows:

Answers Indicating:	Number of Churches where Answers of Each Kind were given
A greater place given to worship	12
A better, more friendly/loving atmosphere	11
More emphasis on/time given to prayer	10
Greater trust placed in leaders and officers, less suspicion	7
Change from majority decisions to either consensus or unanimity as a basis for decision making	5
Less important items dealt with outside Church Meeting, leaving time for discussing major issues	5
Meeting chaired by someone other than the Minister	2
Less argument	1
Greater sensitivity to the Holy Spirit	1
Decisions made more quickly	1
Shift towards government by elders, Church Meeting being for communication rather than decision	1
The Church giving more money away to causes outside	1
No changes mentioned	2

In addition to these changes, one church has introduced a standard agenda with four headings which provide a balance of the various elements of worship and prayer, fellowship concerns, reports, and forward planning. Another church had combined their prayer meeting and Church Meeting in such a way that the main emphasis was on prayer, business decisions being taken as necessary only after being thoroughly prayed over.

Michael Jobling

The Theology of Bereavement

There is no shortage of literature on bereavement. Most of it comes from medical, psychological or sociological sources or, where it is Christian literature, insights from these fields are often 'pasted' onto traditional thought and practice. No one doubts the value of these insights, but could it be that Christian theology has its own areas of enquiry and a contribution to make in its own right to the study of bereavement? This article aims to raise some theological issues which relate to the subject. But first one or two preliminary observations.

1. The theology of bereavement is not the theology of death. We all know from pastoral practice that to answer questions about death itself or even about the afterlife does not resolve the problems of the bereaved. These problems are not so much about death as about life — or rather about survival in the context of an immense sense of loss.
2. The Bible takes bereavement seriously and, while it may not be a major Biblical theme, a study of the experience of bereavements of, say, Abraham, Jacob, David, Job, Jesus and the early Christians reveals a wide range of emotional and psychological states all dealt with realistically, credibly and sensitively. What we do not find is any attempt to 'anaesthetise' human experience with spiritual truth.
3. Contemporary trends in popular Christian thinking require us to take the theological aspects of bereavement seriously. In particular renewed interest in healing and the triumphalistic excesses that this has unfortunately generated have important implications for the Christian bereaved.

But what are the theological issues which bereavement raises? Here, I think, are some of them:-

(a) **“And after this ...”?** (Hebrews 9:27)

“Where is he now?” demands the bereaved. It is a natural question. C.M. Parkes argues that an important phase of bereavement can be explained in terms of ‘searching’ and describes this by analogy to the behaviour of the greylag goose searching for its mate! If ‘finding’, in a literal sense, is an impossibility perhaps there may be some mitigation of pain in knowing *where* he is and being able to picture him there.

But is it possible to answer such a question theologically? To be “absent from the body”, explains Paul, is to be “present with the Lord”. He was thinking though of his own impending death, not comforting a bereaved person. If “the body”, through which the whole personhood of the deceased

was, in life, expressed, lies lifeless before you or is known to be in a coffin in the ground, or reduced to a pile of ashes, how can the question 'where?' be answered?

Christians of different periods and different traditions have attempted to answer the question in a number of ways:-

- (i) His disembodied soul or spirit is enjoying blissful communion with God and on the day of resurrection will be reunited with a glorified body.
- (ii) Upon death he will have assumed in heaven a 'spiritual body' like that of Christ with no material continuity with the 'flesh and blood' left on earth.
- (iii) His soul is in a state analagous to sleep and will 'awake' on the day that the body is resurrected.
- (iv) Because death takes the person out of the space-time continuum, as Ray Anderson argues "the removal of a sense of time means for those who are awakened that the long night of death is reduced to a mathematical point and they are thus summoned out of completed life". The question 'where in the meantime?' thus becomes an irrelevancy.

Probably all of these speculations can claim the warrant of some Biblical texts while others could be quoted against them. A weakness shared by all of them is that they provide little basis for visualisation of the type that might be stimulated by an answer such as : "He's away on a business trip to London". Nevertheless some bereaved people at some point may need to think through the issue. At the risk of subjectivity it might be said that (iv) is more satisfying to the intellect but (i) or (ii) to the imagination! Faith has to be satisfied with the less specific but nevertheless glorious answer: "with Christ".

That the whole area can create intense anxiety even to an intelligent Christian grieving for his Christian partner can be seen in the jottings of C.S. Lewis: "They tell me H. is happy now, they tell me she is at peace. What makes them so sure of this?" Theological assurance is not identical with emotional or mental security.

(b) **"Though he slay me ..."** (Job 13:15)

Bereavement is only one aspect of the sufferings of Job. Nevertheless, the problem grappled with in this book often becomes acutely relevant to the bereaved. Stated theologically the problem is: 'how can the reality of human suffering be reconciled with Biblical teaching about the will, righteousness and love of God?' In the heart of the bereaved — particularly the Christian bereaved — the question is often reduced to "how could He let *this* happen?" Clearly this is not the place for a detailed treatment of theodicy and there are plenty of books on the subject. It is important nevertheless to see how this problem touches bereavement.

The bereaved person may encounter the problem in two major areas:-

- (i) His own suffering in bereavement: "Why should I have to feel like this?"
- (ii) The suffering of the deceased before death or the untimeliness of his death.

The first is easier to handle and is probably best dealt with by 'de-theologising'. The pain of the question can often be eased by an understanding of the natural and normal process of bereavement —

something to be expected, some of the details of which are predictable. It can thus be seen as consistent with love. A world without bereavement would (given the fact of death) be a world without real human love.

The second area is much more problematic even (perhaps especially) for the committed Christian. Thus it was for C.S. Lewis: "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him". The concept of God which he fears and yet dallies with for a while is that of the "Cosmic Sadist". Interestingly the search for a 'purpose' to suffering only changes the concept to the proposition: 'God always vivisects!' and fails to ease the anxiety.

Sometimes religious questions of this kind are an expression of the phenomenon of grief and therefore passed through as a 'phase'. Sometimes, however, the experience of bereavement results in painful theological adjustment. The wife of a Pentecostal pastor whose 20 year old son was killed in a motor accident underwent an agonising transformation of her view of the will of God and the nature of prayer: "I had always asked God to keep my children safe!" Such an adjustment, however horrendous the experience, might be seen as an element of spiritual growth. It is evident too, however, that negative adjustments could just as easily result.

Parkes points out that anger is a frequent concomitant of grief and that the three most common objects of anger are the deceased, the medical professions, and God. Many Christians, however, will not allow themselves to be angry at God and suppressed feelings result in depression. Such a phenomenon is not uncommon and illustrates how relevant theological considerations can be to psychological developments.

(c) "If only I ..." (2 Samuel 18:33)

Guilt is, as Parkes also says, an experience of many bereaved people. Christian belief can bring to the problem of guilt both some complicating factors and some helpful resources. From pastoral experience three major sources of guilt can be discerned:-

- (i) Guilt surrounding the death itself. Bereaved people often feel themselves in some way responsible for the death of their loved ones. Or they may feel guilty about a real or supposed failure to adequately care or show love during the final illness.
- (ii) Guilt about non-grief or supposed insufficient grief. For some people the death of a close individual can, at least partially, be a liberation particularly after a long illness or an unsatisfactory relationship. It can sometimes be accompanied by negative feelings towards the deceased. Guilt is induced by the 'inappropriateness' of these feelings which can paradoxically co-exist with and complicate genuine grief.
- (iii) Guilt about grief. This is probably a uniquely Christian phenomenon! One lady, early in her bereavement, would often apologise for her grieving. She argued that if she really believed she would not feel like this or have to bother the minister! Such thoughts can result in doubts about the genuineness of one's faith and accusations of selfishness.

Good Christian theology takes guilt seriously but does not wallow in it! The New Testament gives many assurances of forgiveness upon confession. Good pastoral practice can in whatever tradition of churchmanship, ease along the process of identification, confession, forgiveness and a sense of 'absolution'. However, the direct application of forgiveness needs to be

handled with extreme caution. To 'forgive' an imagined sin can often serve to reinforce self-blame. Forgiveness is only appropriate when a real wrong has been committed, and, as we have seen, much of the guilt felt by bereaved people is unrealistically based. Indeed, it may sometimes be more appropriate to invoke the approval of God for a person's behaviour. In any case good theology should lead towards not away from reality. C.S. Lewis argues himself out of a sense of guilt about 'feeling better' too soon: "I am sure H. wouldn't approve of it (i.e. the guilt). She'd tell me not to be a fool. So, I'm pretty certain, would God".

(d) **"My God, my God"** (Matt. 27:46)

We have already made much reference to C.S. Lewis' extremely helpful diary of the process of his own grief. Particularly moving is his description of the experience of the 'absence' of God at a moment of real pain: "But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become". At a later stage of bereavement he explains the phenomenon to himself thus: "I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it ... After all you must have a capacity to receive or even omnipotence can't give".

These thoughts raise the issue of the subjectivity of our experience of God. Lewis is quite right to stress our capacity to receive. We can only feel anything within the scope of our 'feelings' — and that includes all religious/spiritual experiences. This is not to deny that such a capacity can be increased by spiritual exercise — but merely to affirm that it is finite, it has a limit. All of this points to an aspect of some forms of contemporary Christianity which is I believe a cause of profound disquiet. I refer to the priority of experience in some Christian teaching. If our knowledge of God rests primarily on our feelings, if he demonstrates his love and faithfulness to us by what he makes us feel, if excitement and emotional stimulation are the keys to spirituality, then at any time of crisis (including bereavement) faith is going to be radically undermined and, to say the least, an important resource lost.

A theology which can be of support to the bereaved — indeed which can survive bereavement — must stress the objective aspects of faith — that the reality of God is not dependent on our experience of him, that his loving character does not shift with our psycho/emotional changes. It may be futile to insist to some bereaved people that God is a "present help in trouble" when they are conscious only of his absence, but as they emerge from grief they need a theological framework which will enable them to see that God did not abandon them nor has he been proved non-existent by the evidence of their emotions.

(e) **"Therefore comfort one another ..."** (Thess. 4:15)

Paul expects the Christian family at Thessalonica to be a mutual support group. One is tempted to ask the question, "Is it?" or perhaps, "How often is it?". Ecclesiology thus also touches on the experience of bereavement. How much help the church is to a bereaved person will depend on the kind of

church it is. And that is a theological question as well as one of personality.

Here is a 'Checklist' of questions which might help a church to assess its helpfulness to its own members or to others at such a time.

- (i) Is your church a genuine community? — Do its members reflect the Biblical ideal of "one body" or are relationships superficial?
- (ii) Does your church have walls? Is it turned in upon its own needs or is it open to the needs of non-members also?
- (iii) Are there those in the church available and willing to listen? — or does a superficial 'business' preclude that?
- (iv) Is the preaching and teaching of the church earthed in reality? — or does it deal mainly in doctrinal abstractions? — or perhaps pressurise adherents towards normative experiences?
- (v) Are its members encouraged to be sensitive to the needs of others? Would a sufferer be likely to encounter the extremes of disinterest or inquisitiveness?

For many bereaved people the point of contact with 'the church' will be the clergyman who takes the funeral. Parkes concludes sadly that, "Clergy, like everyone else, are often embarrassed and ineffectual when face-to-face with those who have been or are about to be bereaved. Yet" he concludes, speaking of the widows in a particular survey, "I had the impression that a visit from the right clergyman at the right time would have been valued by all of them". Perhaps ministers need to re-assess the value of such contacts in the context of the total ministry of their churches rather than seeing them as 'extra chores'. How many churches for example have a 'follow-up' service for bereaved people contacted by their minister at the time of the funeral?

But how well-equipped are most Christians to help the bereaved? The temptation for some would be to provide pat 'spiritual' answers which are of no help at all and many bereaved people have doubt suffered from inept attempts to 'minister'. C.S. Lewis gives us this significant warning: "Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand".

(f) **"We had hoped that ..."** (Luke 24:20)

Cleopas and his companion clearly had their hopes dashed by the crucifixion. Their grief at the loss of Jesus was complicated by the expectations they had entertained before he died. At that point those expectations had looked like faith. They now had turned out to be a denial of reality — a reality to which Jesus himself pointed time and again in his teaching.

It has never been uncommon for those who love the dying to deny that they are going to die and to suffer more in grief because their expectations were crushed and because they had forbidden themselves the opportunity to prepare for loss. In a sense this tendency has been increased by the progress of modern medicine which appears to hold out such hope. The hopes of the past become a torture in the present.

The issue here, however, is a much more specifically theological one, thrust into prominence by certain contemporary trends in Christian thinking. These trends, which combine a number of different elements, can best be summed up under the term 'triumphalism'. A 'triumphalistic' attitude

stresses those parts of Scripture which speak of the victories of the Christian life and underplays those which speak of self-denial and sacrifice. The ideal, if not normative, Christian life would be relatively trouble free, with holiness, health, good fortune, and sometimes even material prosperity, the birth-right of Christians as 'children of the King' to be claimed by faith. Negative experiences are often attributed to direct demonic activities and are to be dealt with by exorcism. There is much emphasis on supernatural intervention and particularly miracles of healing. The key to all of this is usually the degree of faith of those involved.

What is in view is not a tight 'school of thought' which holds all these views with equal extremity but a much more pervasive influence which can be found in milder forms almost everywhere. The impact of this on bereavement should be obvious. Death, instead of being primarily the doorway to a glorious eternity, has become, in terms of this life, a spiritual failure. Victory would have been a healing or (as in the case of a few isolated attempts) a raising of the dead! The bereaved person who had held such expectations, perhaps based on supposed 'words from the Lord' through other well-meaning people may suffer in a number of ways:-

- (i) He is robbed of the opportunity of 'anticipatory' grief, to come to terms with the inevitable loss before it happened and thus be better prepared for bereavement.
- (ii) His faith itself may come into question or be undermined. God has failed to live up to His 'word'.
- (iii) Guilt may be multiplied. "If I had believed more she might not have died!"
- (iv) To make sense of what has happened he may have to resort to theological absurdities which will create insecurities for the future. Perhaps God changed his mind or healed her by taking her away!

Ray Anderson, who, interestingly, teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary where John Wimber until recently held his 'Signs and Wonders' course, pleads on behalf of the dying for an adequate theology of healing which takes prayer for healing seriously but looks on the miracles which may occur as "a sacrament of the resurrection itself" and not "a truth which condemns others who are not healed". A theology of realism must be defended also for the sake of the bereaved, for they too can feel condemned by the burden of responsibility that may have been placed upon their faith for the survival of their loved ones.

Geoffrey Walters

This article is an abbreviated excerpt of a probationary essay which has since become the basis of a post-graduate research project. Geoff would be grateful to receive any views or suggestions on the subject from readers of the *Fraternal*.

R.S. Anderson *Theology, Death and Dying* (Basil Blackwell 1986)

C.S. Lewis *A Grief Observed* (Faber & Faber 1961)

C.M. Parkes *Bereaved* (Penguin 1975)

BOOK REVIEWS

Who's This Sitting In My Pew?

by Faith Bowers (Triangle, 1988, 128pp, £2.25)

The title, reminiscent of the three bears' comments on discovering Goldilocks in their territory, asks us to consider whether or not we are treating the mentally handicapped in our churches in precisely the same way. We have a fair proportion of these people, looking to us for an acceptance which they may not find in society as a whole. Moreover, their numbers will increase as official policy is to place them back in society wherever possible.

We are challenged to accept them as they are, with Christian friendship, and to help them realise their true potential which may be considerably more than we imagine — by action and expression rather than with platitudes, and we shall find every effort appreciated.

The book is most helpful in suggesting different ways of approach to children and adults, and the reader's interest is maintained by lively, often humorous anecdotes, from the author's rich experience.

Certain situations need particularly careful handling, for example baptism, communion, marriage, and bereavement; a description of how various churches have dealt with these matters is most helpful.

The book closes on a positive note, showing how the mentally handicapped can help the church. From the examples given, it is clear that many churches are thinking through the issues very deeply. How many of us, for instance would have thought of enlisting their help in baking bread for communion services? In this and other ways they can be involved in church life in a way they will enjoy.

In our sophisticated world, we often forget our Saviour's injunction to become like little children; the mentally handicapped are in themselves a lesson to us in their trusting approach to Him. The book will prove a constant source of help and encouragement to all involved in working with them.

Peter Lewis

A Noble Task

by Neil Summerton (Paternoster, 1987, 188pp, £4.95)

This excellent book is accurately sub-titled, 'Eldership and Ministry in the Local Church'. Its value to those of us in the Baptist constituency lies, in part, in the fact that Summerton is a member of the Christian Brethren ... 'though I was originally an Anglican, am effectively a Strict Baptist when at our house in Suffolk, and some of my best friends are Mennonites, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Pentecostals!'

His approach is strongly exegetical, although he also has the rare ability of looking critically at aspects of the subject which until recently were left unquestioned in Brethren circles. Thus, for example, he sees a definite place for full-time salaried workers.

Also in his favour is a good writing style which makes this book a pleasure to read. To give a flavour of this style I have quoted Summerton freely in this review.

Summerton's approach is thoughtful and logical, being divided into two major areas of study. The first part covers the nuts and bolts of Eldership — 'The calling to eldership', 'The office and tasks of an elder', 'The dynamics of collective leadership', and 'Education for eldership'.

If you are already convinced of the rightness of eldership in the Baptist context — as I am(!) — you will find much in these chapters to sustain your position. But there is much to challenge also. His chapter on 'The effectiveness of the eldership group' should be compulsory reading for all elderships. There he argues that the necessary group dynamic qualities to be nurtured include 'self-knowledge and estimation', 'sympathetic understanding and appreciation of colleagues', 'an objective assessment and recognition of the gifts and optimum roles of each member of the group', and a determination 'actively to build trust between each other in the fulfilling of their individual roles'.

The second section works out the themes of 'Full-time congregational ministry'. I wonder how many of us think as radically as he does at this point. Rather than having a fixed view of what type of full-time worker a church might need, he lists a range of possibilities. The possibilities are largely functional and not institutional. They include teaching, pastoring, strategic thinking and leadership, administration and co-ordination, evangelism, 'preaching evangelists', youth pastor or leader, community care-social worker, and musical director-worship leader.

This is a book which could do much to help our church structures and leadership patterns. Last year my own church moved over to an eldership supported by an administration team. The first thing one of our new elders did was to give us all a copy of this book. We are only now beginning to realise how precious and yet how demanding a role eldership really is.

Michael Goodman

God's Answer for Pressure

by Eric Haydn (Bridge Publishing, 1987, 208pp, £2.95)

Spiritual Power & Church Growth

*C. Peter Wagner, foreword by John Wimber,
(Hodder & Stoughton, 1987 168pp £1.95)*

Both these books are products of the authors' earlier writings. In 1956 Eric Hayden, a Baptist Minister, completed a Master's degree at Durham with a thesis on the Pauline concept of baptism with special reference to Paul's doctrine of Christ-mysticism. Now he has produced thirty one devotional studies on the theme of 'In Christ'. Much is being written about stress these days, particularly stress in the ministry, and the author's conviction is that learning to live 'In Christ' will enable us to cope with the pressures of life. This is no 'Ivory Tower' philosophy but a conviction reached after many years experience in the ministry and a personal acquaintance with the pressures of life in his own family circle. Each Scripture reference is followed by a short comment with lively illustrations and ends with an appropriate prayer. The book could well be used over a month as a substitute for Bible Reading notes.

Peter Wagner is Professor of Church Growth of Fuller Theological seminary. His book is a revision of an earlier title *Look out! The Pentecostals are coming*, published in 1973, in which he describes the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal churches in Latin America. He gives two reasons for the revision. Firstly, in 1982, John Wimber 'gave me a personal introduction to the realm of the supernatural,,, now ministering in the power of the Spirit is characteristic of my regular Christian

lifestyle'. Secondly the material in the book needed updating to keep up with the rapid growth of the Pentecostal churches.

At the beginning of the book he asks the question 'What are the secrets of the explosive, sustained growth of the pentecostal churches in Latin America?'. The rest of the book is an attempt to answer that question. The secrets turn out to be — allowing the Holy Spirit free rein in the believer's life; taking the gospel to the people; effective incorporation of the new convert into the life of the church; church planting; evangelism concentrated on the working class; a strong lay ministry; pastoral leaders trained in the school of life; lively worship and divine healing. The book ends with another question which is really a challenge to the reader: 'Is the Spirit of God saying something to us non-Pentecostals as we take an objective look at our Pentecostal brothers and sisters in Latin America?' This book will be welcomed by followers of John Wimber, but it should not be ignored by others, for it has some important things to say.

Jack Ramsbottom

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