

THE STORY AND THE MYTH

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The Story is the story of the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as told in the four Gospels. The Myth is the illusion that in the nineteenth century the churches in Britain were full. Both story and myth lie at the heart of the crisis confronting our churches. For throughout the twentieth century the churches have subverted the story and believed the myth. Through this perverse pattern of behaviour they have contributed significantly to their own decline.

This is the thesis which emerges from juxtaposing two recent books: *Telling the Story* (1996) by Andrew Walker of King's College, London, and *The Myth of the Empty Church* (1993) by Robin Gill of the University of Kent.¹ Both books are immensely stimulating and have a great deal to say to all sections of the church.

Gill's Thesis

Gill's basic thesis is four-fold. First, on the basis of close analysis of church-going statistics he demonstrates conclusively that Victorian churches overall were never regularly full. In fact in many communities throughout Britain there were more church seats than inhabitants!

Second, he challenges the widely accepted view that people have stopped going to church 'largely as a result of secularisation'. While not discounting that the process of secularisation has had a negative impact, Gill maintains that churches have declined primarily for social reasons rooted in extraordinary over-building by the Victorians. This meant that many churches were from their inception relatively empty and, therefore, uninviting. 'Empty churches foster decline', says Gill. They send negative signals to the community about the church and Christianity.

Third, Gill believes that there is nothing inevitable about continuing church decline. He argues that religion can survive, even thrive, in a secularised society. As evidence, he quotes the resurgence of fundamentalism – Christian and non-Christian – and the strength of many churches in the USA.²

Fourth, Gill argues that social reasons are as important in the growth as in the decline of the church. He believes many people come

¹ Walker, *Telling the Story. Gospel, Mission and Culture* (London, 1996); Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church* (London, 1993).

² Gill examined church growth theory in his earlier work *Beyond Decline: A Challenge to the Churches* (London, 1988).

to church out of a desire to belong, and that often this desire precedes the desire to believe. John Finney's research on why people come to faith tends to confirm this, as does also the fact that many flourishing churches in America have an extensive supportive social infrastructure in the form of schools, counselling services and interest groups.³

Walker's Analysis

The strength of Walker's book is his penetrating analysis of how the Christian Story has come to be replaced in both church and culture, and his conviction that today we have a *kairos* opportunity to reinstate the Story.

According to Walker, the Story has lost ground for three main reasons. First, the church, bowing to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, allowed the forces of critical rationality to unravel the story by replacing the obligation to proclaim it with the right to discover historical information about Jesus of Nazareth. This created a 'hermeneutical oppression whereby the story – now fragmented and disconnected – has had to await authentication from the critics in order to be told' (p. 57).

Second, secularisation produced alternative metanarratives to which people turned to help them interpret life. Perhaps the most prominent, at least until recently, is the scientific world view – sometimes called 'scientism'. Scientism, Walker argues, is much more than the acceptance of the efficacy of science. 'In its weak form, it claims that science is superior to all other methodologies and philosophies; in its stronger form it claims exclusive rights to understanding reality' (p 57). Scientism owes its popularity not to large numbers of people becoming scientifically informed, but to the wonder induced by machines, medicine and engineering. 'Mastery over nature induces awe and trust. Labour-saving devices, transport inventions and technological innovations of all kinds lead to thanksgiving, not intellectual curiosity' (p 57).

The third factor in the subversion of the Story is consumerism. With the American dream – which Walker identifies as another competing metanarrative – as its rationale, and the spread of television in the 1950s and 1960s as its launch-pad, consumerism ruthlessly and successfully built on the self-expression fad which came into its own in the 1960s after decades of Enlightenment teaching on individualism in popular education at all levels. Consumerism appealed to the 'felt needs' of the new electronically created mass market – which Walker

³ This part of Gill's thesis is developed more fully in his later and much smaller book *A Vision for Growth. Why Your Church Doesn't Have to be a Pelican in the Wilderness* (London, 1994).

perceptively suggests are more often 'implanted wants', unknown before the advertisers got to work on us! The focus moved from what a product is itself to what it can do for its purchasers.

The impact of consumerism on the Story is not simply that it contradicts the Story by preaching self-indulgence over against the self-denial demanded by Jesus of his followers. It also corrupts the Story because consumerism has been allowed to invade the church. Here, claims Walker, the blame lies, not with liberals, but with Evangelicals. Following James Davison Hunter, Walker alleges that 'Modern evangelicals have unwittingly adapted to the privatized, individualist and subjectivist strains of structural pluralism and recast Christianity not as an inculturated grand narrative for the modern world, nor even as a domesticated sitcom for the local churches, but as therapy for the lost and sick, the unhappy and the repressed' (pp. 119f). He goes on to observe that the grand narrative has been interiorised to the point of disappearance, theology transformed into therapy, the language of Scripture into psychological discourse, stories into prescriptions, the concept of redemption into wish-fulfillment for self-satisfaction.

The strength of Walker's book is that it is more than analytical. It points to opportunities to recover the Story as well as probing the reasons why it has been lost. He argues strongly that the current recovery in the West of the art of storytelling is presenting the churches with a *kairos* moment to communicate the Story successfully to a generation which until now has dismissed it on the grounds that it is unfashionable rather than untenable. If the church can exploit the present popularity of story telling we may discover that people are surprisingly open to hearing the biblical message despite having closed their minds to it in other forms.

Both books are quite independent of each other: *The Myth* adopts a sociological framework and makes relatively few explicit theological value judgments on the current state of the British church. *Telling the Story* concerns itself with the church, but with its spiritual state rather than its statistical strength or weakness. And yet they are clearly related because Gill describes the context in which the Story is to be recovered and retold. And Walker underlines the vital role the Story must play in the life of the church if it is to recover its inner strength and attract new worshippers.

However, before we tease out the implicit links between the two books and the lessons they hold for the British church at the end of the twentieth century, it will be instructive to examine Gill's thesis in greater detail.

Debunking the Myth

Gill's mission is to debunk the consensus among sociologists of religion and social historians which explains the decline in church attendance in the context of an overall process of secularisation. Gill condenses this 'myth' into ten propositions which he claims do not bear up in the face of hard facts. The propositions and Gill's responses can be summarised as follows:

- **Myth:** Before the First World War a majority of churches in Britain were full.

Fact: By 1901, despite some middle-class pockets of high rates of church going, a considerable excess of church seating existed over the rural population, and urban churches were only one third full.

- **Myth:** The Victorians built extra churches to meet the demands of rapidly expanding urban and rural populations.

Fact: In the second half of the nineteenth century a vigorous church building and restoration plan was carried out in rural areas despite a rapidly declining population. And in the major urban areas the English Free Churches built so vigorously that their chapels were more empty in the 1880s than they were in 1851.

- **Myth:** Competitive church building between denominations raised the general level of churchgoing throughout the nineteenth century.

Fact: This was true only for the first part of the century. From mid-century on competitive church building increased the number of empty churches in both rural and urban areas, despite a rise in the overall attendance of the Free Churches.

- **Myth:** Urban church building never quite kept pace with late nineteenth century urban population growth resulting in significant sections of the urban working classes being excluded from church.

Fact: There was always more than adequate church accommodation across the denominations for the urban working classes, but neither the Anglicans nor the Free Churches were able to fill it.

- **Myth.** Churchgoing started to decline generally in proportion to the population only after the First World War.

Fact: Attendance in the Church of England had been declining since 1851 and in the Free Churches since the 1880s.

- **Myth:** Disillusionment resulting from the War was a significant factor in causing this decline, especially among urban working-class men.

Fact: The study *The Army and Religion* (1919) suggests that, if anything, the First World War fostered among fighting soldiers vestigial beliefs in God, prayer and the afterlife. Some confirmation of this may be found in the slight increase in

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suburban churchgoing during the decade following the Second World War. Also relevant is the mass-observation study (1947) in a London semi-suburban community which discovered that, while the Second World War had reinforced the trend away from religion among those with no previous pronounced belief, only a very small number – between 1 and 4 per cent – felt they had *lost* their faith.

- **Myth:** Secularisation – the product of nineteenth century developments in science and rational thought which spread in the twentieth century through better education – has proved to be the most abiding factor in church decline.

Fact: Opinion polls suggest that the decline in conventional Christian belief followed, rather than preceded, the decline in churchgoing. Furthermore, the suburban middle classes, who were the earliest to be affected by secularisation, were the last to be affected by churchgoing decline.

- **Myth:** Urbanisation – involving the breakdown of rural communities upon which churches thrive – has also contributed significantly to church decline.

Fact: Some urban areas in the eighteenth century recorded significantly higher churchgoing rates than those in the surrounding countryside. And areas of middle class urban churchgoing persisted with very high levels well into the twentieth century.

- **Myth:** Twentieth century leisure activities – cars, radios, televisions, etc. – have also contributed to church decline.

Fact: The urban churchgoing decline in Britain pre-dates the technological developments of the twentieth century. And in the United States churchgoing has remained relatively strong in the face of such activities.

- **Myth:** An accumulated result of these various external factors is that British churches (with the significant exception of competitive evangelical churches) have recently become secularised and increasingly empty.

Fact: It is the Roman Catholics, not the Evangelicals, who have consistently maintained full churches. One reason for this is that Catholics have never provided seating for more than 50% of their average attendance.

Causal Factors in Church Decline

From his examination and evaluation of churchgoing statistics in a variety of parishes in England and Wales, with a few passing glances at Scotland, Gill identifies five 'causal factors in church decline'. These are:

1. **Church closure.** Communion roll statistics of individual attendances reveal the impact of church closing. 'Characteristically, membership and attendance diminish rapidly as closure nears; only half of the remaining members actually transfer to a neighbouring church after closure; and these transferred members are significantly less regular in their attendance at the new church than they were at their old one' (p. 39).
2. **Church debt.** Churches were frequently closed because of congregational debt. 'Individuals who may well have been debt-free in their private lives were caught up in the growing debts of their own chapels. It is not difficult to understand from this their reluctance to join a neighbouring chapel once their own had closed' (p. 40).
3. **Multiple charges.** Gill quotes Leslie Francis' research (1989) to show that ministers with three or more churches become significantly less effective and their congregations reduce accordingly.
4. **Conspicuous churchgoing.** Small, and increasingly elderly, congregations in large, empty church buildings are off-putting to marginal and would-be churchgoers who normally prefer to attend church without feeling too conspicuous.
5. **Disillusionment.** Gill quotes Jeffrey Cox's study of the churches in Lambeth from 1870 to 1930: 'The empty church is the single most important piece of evidence brought forth by people who argue that religion has become unimportant' (p. 41).

In view of his earlier pastoral and teaching ministry north of the border, it is surprising that Gill pays so little attention in *The Myth* to Scotland. But this by no means renders the book irrelevant to Scottish churches, for the pattern of decline in England and Wales is reflected in Scotland from the end of the Second World War onwards, and probably from much earlier. The proportion of the adult churchgoing population in Scotland fell from 28% in 1959 to 17% in 1984 and then to 14% in 1994.⁴ In addition, one suspects that Gill's five causal factors operate just as strongly in Scotland as in England. Nevertheless, the book's usefulness would have been considerably increased by the inclusion of at least one in-depth case study from a Scottish parish.

⁴ Peter Brierley and Fergus Macdonald, *Prospects for Scotland 2000. Trends and Tables from the 1994 Scottish Church Census* (Eltham and Edinburgh, 1995).

Towards a Better Future

In his last chapter, entitled 'The Future of the Churches', Gill identifies eighteen broad proposals – borrowing to some extent from Leslie Paul's *The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy* (1964) – on which the church might build a new strategy. These are:

1. Subsidise mission, not maintenance.
2. Use subsidies as seed corn to promote mission.
3. Carefully monitor growth and decline area by area.
4. Deploy the most talented clergy in areas of mission.
5. Discourage duplication across denominations.
6. Make deaneries (or their equivalents) the primary management units of the church.
7. Introduce regular, caring appraisal of all clergy.
8. Give all stipendiary extra-parochial clergy charge of a small parish.
9. Use the non-stipendiary ministry more effectively.
10. Make rural deaneries (or equivalents) budget holders.
11. Recognise that single-staffed, multiple charges lead to disaster.
12. Limit rural subsidies to innovative experiments.
13. Make urban deaneries (or equivalents) wedge-shaped to incorporate a balanced mixture of urban priority areas and suburban parishes.
14. Make urban deaneries (or equivalents) budget-holders.
15. Make carefully planned mission a priority in urban areas.
16. Give the diocese (or equivalent central body) a crucial role in planning and feedback.
17. Carefully monitor all urban subsidy.
18. Encourage deaneries and local groups to assess area needs for provision and use of church buildings.

I must confess that I found this last chapter a bit of an anticlimax. The eighteen proposals seem to be statements of the obvious rather than pointers to a new future. The chapter contrasts markedly with the earlier analytical case studies which I found quite fascinating. However, on reflection, this is probably too harsh a judgement. The writer deliberately limited his study to the *physical* factors of church growth and decline, and, therefore, consciously chose to look for ways forward which are more mundane than spiritual. And there is some merit in restating the obvious when you are able to support it by a mass of evidence, if only because churches so often refuse to heed the obvious! In addition, Gill is to be respected for being rightly wary of 'building too many arguments upon short-term trends' (p. 210).

On the other hand, Gill's proposals undoubtedly suffer from being stated in isolation from both the sweeping changes taking place in late twentieth century British society and the crisis of identity occurring in

many local churches. Will Storrar has recently argued that the Church of Scotland is declining not so much because of internal failures, but much more because modernity is declining.⁵ I strongly suspect that this thesis is almost certainly also true for all other British denominations. Storrar argues convincingly that the Kirk has been built over the years, by Moderates and Evangelicals alike, into an essentially modern institution characterised by central planning, topdown organisation, uniform methods, expectation of lifetime commitments and formal membership, all of which in today's *post-modern* world are making the Kirk increasingly unworkable. I suspect Storrar would regard most of Gill's proposals as almost classic evidence of his charge that the church is 'largely wedded to modern methods to address post-modern problems'.⁶

But the crisis of the British churches is deeper than their losing touch with their context. They have also lost their identity. I have argued in *Prospects for Scotland 2000* that we urgently need a new paradigm of the church, for most churches tend to think of themselves in terms of business models rather than biblical models. Finance has replaced faith as their operational principle and the idea of each local church being primarily Christ's church, part of the people of God and a servant community, is scarcely reflected in decision-taking processes. In this sense modernity has affected the church profoundly.

Will Storrar also stresses the need for a new sense of church identity. 'The Church is more than a social institution caught up in the sweep of historical change. It is also the Body of Christ called to faithfulness and continuing reformation within the loving purposes of God for the world. The Kirk has been too preoccupied with the fruitless search for modern methods to reverse institutional decline and insufficiently committed to theological reflection on the nature and mission of the church in a post-modern world.'

It is precisely at this point that Walker's book is relevant, because the church's identity is forged as it hears (and practises) the Story and rejoices in it, and also because storytelling is providing the church with a new frontier to speak to an age which is turned off by institutions. If they can rediscover both the Story and storytelling there

⁵ 'The Decline of the Kirk' in *University of Aberdeen Divinity Alumni Association News*, No. 18, Autumn, 1997.

⁶ In passing, it may be worth noting that Gill's work is a good example of the impossibility of value-free analysis. He studiously avoids making theological judgements on the data under review, presumably in an attempt to be objective, but his proposals are in fact based on the philosophical values of modernity.

is a strong possibility that the churches will find both inner renewal and external relevance.

Four Questions for Evangelicals

Traditionally Evangelicals have been characterised as having a very high commitment to both believing the Story and telling it to others. Andrew Walker, who belongs to the Orthodox tradition, questions whether this is true. I believe we ought to listen seriously to what Walker is saying because, if he is right, the evangelical revival of recent years could, like Soviet Communism, collapse overnight. More importantly, a vital *kairos* to renew the churches and reverse their decline will be lost.

I suggest that we can best respond to Andrew Walker's challenge by asking and answering four key questions concerning our contemporary evangelical evangelism and spirituality.

1. Are Evangelicals telling the Story?

Walker emphasises that the gospel is both the Story and its telling. Given his Orthodox churchmanship, he understandably lays great stress on 'dramaturgy', but he also recognises the vital importance of both preaching and witnessing. One of the key challenges of Walker's book is whether we truly tell the Story by communicating biblical ideas and concepts. The ideas rise out of the Story and are part of the Story, but they are not the core of the Story. There is a danger that we dehydrate the gospel from being a living story about real people and real events into a theological prescription ('Four Things God wants you to know', etc.) which impacts our audience at purely an intellectual level and fails to engage them experientially with the Story of what God has done! Doctrinal preaching is vitally important, but it will be arid if it is not exegeted from the text of the Story.

2. Are Evangelicals corrupting the Story?

Walker contends that too often evangelicals corrupt (you could say 'modernise') the gospel by reducing evangelism to a matter of technique. He quotes Charles Finney's infamous remark: 'A revival is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is purely philosophical results of the right use of constituted means as much as any other effect produced by the application of means' (p.72). Coming nearer to today, Walker expresses concern that courses on evangelism sometimes so concentrate on 'the demographics and psychometrics of Church Growth methodologies, that they have little to say about the content of the gospel – the Story – to be proclaimed' (p. 53). I think the problem here is that perhaps too often we allow the tail to wag the dog! The gospel should influence our choice of methods and the way

we use them rather than the methods change the shape of the gospel to fit them. While we must use 'all means', we ought to do so in ways which are worthy of the gospel and do not distort it. Paul's observations in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians on his use of public speaking (or preaching) are instructive. He used public speaking (the principal medium of communication in his day), but he studiously avoided employing it in the manipulative ways of the Sophists.⁷

3. Are Evangelicals miniaturising the Story?

Another implication of Walker's thesis is that too often Evangelicals shrink down the grand narrative of the Christian Story to a fraction of its true stature. This, he suggests, happens in two ways:

First, by using music in worship to decorate the Word rather than to reinforce it (p. 37). If church music is allowed to take on a life of its own it will lead the Word rather than follow it and fashion will take over from meaning. As a result the Story is belittled.

Second, by reducing the gospel to a remedy for felt needs. It becomes a therapy which facilitates self-fulfillment, rather than Good News which puts us right with God and our neighbour and calls us to take up our cross and follow Christ. A by-product of the gospel is presented as its end-product.

While gospel shrinking may be a besetting sin of Evangelicals (and others), we must be careful lest, in seeking to correct it, we lose vital points of contact with unbelievers. Christian music must resonate with the contemporary culture as well as reinforce the Word. For example, one of the great challenges facing us today is to find an appropriate musical idiom which will best help to communicate the variegated spirituality expressed in the poetry of the Psalms, which resonates so much with the mood of many post-moderns. And we dare not ignore genuine felt needs. Identifying them enables us to relate the Story to where people are. The danger is that we stop at the initial point of contact, rather than helping people to see that their felt needs are symptoms of a greater need – the need of redemption.

4. Are Evangelicals indwelling the Story?

Walker makes the perceptive observation that since the eighteenth century Protestant religious experience has tended to be enthusiastic rather than mystical (p.63). This observation is, I think, true. What it identifies is probably a result of the influence of the scientific rationality which was the hallmark of modernity. But today in a post-modern world, enthusiasm is not enough. Post-modern people have set

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 2:1-5.

out on a quest for spiritual reality which is taking them into oriental mysticism, New Age therapy and neo-pagan ritual. Why are these spiritual refugees from modernity by-passing the churches? The answer, I fear, is that the churches they know and the Christians they meet have more rationality than spirituality. As a result, unlike Paul's 'outsider' visiting the church in Corinth, searching post-moderns are unable to say to us: 'God is really among you' (1Cor. 14: 25).

So, in the post-modern world enthusiastic worship and seeker-friendly services will be seen as superficial, unless they help people to indwell the story and become holy. Unless our congregations become holy communities they will be neither living the story nor attracting people to it. It is only as we live the story, on Mondays as well as on Sundays, that our congregations will become, in Lesslie Newbigin's phrase, 'the hermeneutic of the gospel' and catch the attention of the growing number of modern pilgrims in search of spirituality.

Conclusion

Gill's books describe the churches' plight: they are disillusioned, aged and dwindling. Walker outlines the wider context and highlights the remedy: Storytelling with a capital 'S'. But can telling and indwelling the Story in its fullness turn churches and nations around?

There are two answers to this question, one from Scripture, the other from history. The testimony of Scripture is that the Story as it is told is the power of God. And the witness of history is that it is precisely when a society has lost its way that mass movements into the Christian faith are most possible.