EDITORIAL

WHITHER EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN SCOTLAND?

Life out of death is a law of institutional as well as spiritual life. This autumn has witnessed the demise after more than a century of Glasgow Bible College, known for most of that era as BTI, the Bible Training Institute. Its merger with Northumbria Bible College of Berwick-upon-Tweed (earlier named Lebanon Missionary Bible College) has given birth to International Christian College (housed in temporary premises in Glasgow). As we welcome this visionary new foundation, which is committed to melding the strengths of both parent colleges – Northumbria's community-based devotion to cross-cultural vision, informing and integrating the whole curriculum, and Glasgow's metropolitan provision of training for diverse career tracks of Christian service – we should not fail to mark the disappearance from the Scottish scene of BTI/GBC. It proved one of Dwight L. Moody's most enduring legacies to Scotland, and its contributions to evangelical Christianity well beyond Scotland have been distinguished. *Deo gratias.*

A health-check on evangelical theology in Scotland might register the ambitious new ICC as well as the lusty youngster in Elgin, the Highland Theological Institute, in addition to the established colleges serving the Scottish Baptists and the Free Church of Scotland. Additional institutional resources are found in Rutherford House in Edinburgh. Nor should the orthodox-evangelical-biblical segment of the Divinity Faculties' teaching spectrum be forgotten. The health-checker might conclude that at least in institutional terms the patient is vigorously active. This judgement might be reinforced by reviewing publishing outlets, societies and fellowships for theological conference and even the solid expository fare of many a Scottish pulpit.

Yet the overall verdict on the vitality of evangelical theology would surely not be unreservedly favourable. We devote greater energies to historical theology than to contemporary constructive theology (as a comparison of the number of volumes in the two Rutherford Studies series makes plain). A tradition that will rightly be eternally grateful to the Reformation – for there it was reborn – is bound to find endless inspiration in that and successor generations. Yet just as the Reformers drew creatively on the early church Fathers, and even the medievals, so we dare not be rooted so fast in Reformation divinity that we lack the agility to address present-day realities. Where does one look, for example, for theological orientation on those vast and increasing reaches of contemporary human experience taken up with leisure, entertainment, sport, holidays? Will we work in heaven? The word 'retirement' meant something rather different not so long ago (so that when I started teaching in New College I was assigned not an office but a 'retiring room').

'Active retirement' was almost an oxymoron. It would at least give the lie to those tired jibes about kill-joy Calvinism if one of the sons or daughters of John Knox were to write a masterly theology of leisure.

Or to look in another, not wholly unrelated direction, what theologically are we to make of the progressive displacement of the verbal by the visual in human communication, or at least of the textual and literary by the electronic? When it was that Christians first started taking their own Bibles to worship services I do not know, but it has been possible for less than a quarter of the church's history. It cannot be long – if it has not happened already – before worshippers turn on their hand-held mini-computers to find Jeremiah 31 instead of opening the leaves of a paper Bible. The former, I trust, will no less be Scripture for not being in printed form.

Readers will immediately think of other pressing areas of contemporary life that clamour for the attention of biblically-tutored wisdom. Some of the most demanding bear not so much on how we spend our time or communicate with each other but on our very humanity. *Created, not made* is the telling title of a book by Oliver O'Donovan. What degree and kinds of 'making' (re-making, unmaking) are compatible with the recognition that we are indeed created beings, not human artefacts?

My concern is not to list but to illustrate the contemporary challenges before an evangelical theological community that is perhaps as instinctively conservative as any in the world. It is a concern not that we should draw any less copiously on our rich traditions of Reformed and Scottish divinity, but that we do so with the most self-conscious and deliberate of intentions to address the life of Christian people at the turn of the millennia. When explicating Scripture we do not seek to become men and women of the first century, or of earlier still. No more can our theology be a replication of sixteenth– or seventeenth-century formulations. There are likely to be pressing issues of the first order clamouring for our attention on which our hallowed forefathers can afford little or no help. Indeed, to limit ourselves to their horizons may well disable us at the outset from constructive theologizing on some of the demands of our day.

This sharply contemporary imperative should inform not only our treatment of specific issues but also the whole cast of our theological work. Millennial theology in Scotland, and most insistently evangel-ical (gospel-led) theology, has to function in a missionary-cum-apologetic mode. That is, it has to serve the fulfilling of the Great Commission as truly as, and perhaps not much less directly than, pioneer outreach to 'unevangelized fields'. Scripture yields more than hints about the heavy responsibility of those who once heard or knew and turned away, but equally of those who should have spoken and kept silent. Will evangelical

theologians in Scotland be catalysts in precipitating that *metanoia*, that decisive turn-around in the orientation of heart and mind, in pastors, deacons, elders and other leaders which will convert the church to mission? If we need a missiology for Scotland – and no less for Britain and Europe and the West at large – we are certain not to find it in our own native resources. We will need to sit at the feet of those whose spurs have been won at the frontline of cross-cultural mission. It is no accident that the late Lesslie Newbigin was the most significant theological interpreter of the Western church's missionary task in the last generation.

Mention of Newbigin recalls the apologetic dimension of the contemporary challenge to theology. Teachers and preachers of Scripture need all the help they can get to do so with a sharp sensitivity to the peculiar prejudices, delusions, obsessions, misconceptions, ignorances abroad in our culture. It is inevitably a confusing situation, for all manner of half-remembered Sunday school stories, half-digested media distortions and sensationalized half-truths combine with varying measures of nostalgia, guilt and sentimentality to make our contemporaries far more complicated than unevangelized heathen. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, yet not without promise even when suppressed (*cf.* Rom. 1:18). In this context a great deal more evangelism will have to be pre-evangelism. Now will it be pastorally inexpedient, for this is the world of subtly insidious corruptions to which Christian people are all the time exposed.

Not least powerful will be the apologetic of life, and especially the life of the Christian congregation. I conclude this editorial by returning to theology's role in the forming of the missionary church – a church which is more often over against its human environment rather than a reflection of it. 'A church of the people' is an ambiguous phrase. In a favourable sense, it identifies a church that adds no *skandalon* to that of the gospel itself by its unnecessarily alien cultural forms or styles – of language, speech, music, social level, aesthetic tastes, even moral sensibilities. Re-reading the gospels with these criteria in mind may give us fresh experience of the power of God's Word. We may not be called to embrace the leper or share a meal with a prostitute, but how successfully do we make the brother or sister struggling with homosexuality one of us? Or in quite a different direction, does our church teaching display the homely touch of Jesus the story-teller, rather than the heavy didacticism of the lecture-room?

Missiologists like Lamin Sanneh use the image of translation to characterize the transposition of the Christian faith from one cultural matrix into another. In our patch in late second-millennium Britain, we have to grapple with the tricky task of translation not so much from the ancient Near East as from the yesteryear of our own tradition. Its very proximity and familiarity may mask the need for translation altogether.

But if the saints can cope with the AV/KJV, teenagers cannot – *and should not be faced with negotiating this skandalon*! And this is just the tiniest example. If Gentiles did not have to become, in effect, Jews in order to become Christians (the Galatian controversy), then no socio-cultural conversion should be expected of those who would in Scotland in 1998 trust in Christ for life and death.

Along these and other lines Scottish evangelical theology, especially in the national Church, will be called to give discerning attention to what I like to call 'the science of the congregation'. It must complement, and perhaps correct, our manifold theologies of ministry. It is a moot point which should come first. For my part, too much ecclesiology labours under the inhibiting weight of the legacies of Christendom, establishment and parish. But more urgently, ours must be a practical or applied theology of the congregation, recognizing its high calling to be a living embodiment of the gospel.

If these reflections need any excuse, this is my last opportunity to exercise the editorial BiC. From the first issue of 1999 the Revd Dr Kenneth E. Roxburgh, Principal of the Scottish Baptist College in Glasgow and formerly minister in the now not-so-new town of Livingston, takes over as editor. His Edinburgh doctoral thesis on Thomas Gillespie and the Origins of the Relief Church is being prepared for publication by Peter Lang. I wish him very well in this chair.