

## EDITORIAL

The challenge of Paul to Timothy to 'do the work of an evangelist' (2 Tim. 4:5) can hardly be more relevant to those engaged in the ministry of the church. A plethora of statistical reports, historical surveys, sociological analysis and books on church growth remind us that if the church is to be faithful to its calling, it must share in the mission of God to a lost and lonely world. We live in a society which is anything but Christian. Steve Bruce reminds us that 'Britain was once religious, it is now secular'<sup>1</sup> with only '14 percent of Scots' attending church.<sup>2</sup> If the recent analysis of church growth in Conservative Evangelical churches in America is similar to that of Scotland, then even growing churches are gaining their numbers through 'switching saints' rather than converts.<sup>3</sup> As we draw near to the year 2000, facing the challenge of secularisation and postmodernity, we need to relate the gospel, church and world in creative ways and engage in a missionary encounter with our contemporary culture.

This is the challenge which faces not only the leaders of denominations in Scotland today but also those of us who are directly involved in the theological formation of future leaders within our evangelical constituency. Andrew Kirk reminds us that 'theology by its nature is missionary... for it has as its object the study of the ways of a God who is by nature

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Bruce, 'The Truth about Religion in Britain' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1995 34.4, p. 428.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Bruce, 'Religion in Britain at the Close of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1996, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup> Robin D. Perrin, Paul Kennedy and Donald E. Miller, 'Examining the Sources of Conservative Church Growth: Where are the New Evangelical Movements Getting their Numbers?' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1997, 36.1, pp. 71-80. Calum Brown from University of Strathclyde has recently made the comment that 'Only one denomination which has experienced membership decline in Scotland has sustained a late-twentieth-century reversal – the Baptist Church. Baptist membership declined from the 1930s until 1976, and then started a modest but steady growth in the last quarter of the century.' However, he goes on to comment that the growth may be due to the fact that the 'Baptists have been recruiting amongst disaffected members of the Church of Scotland.' See Calum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh, 1997), p. 159.

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missionary and a foundational text written by and for missionaries'.<sup>4</sup> If our study of theology is genuine it will lead us 'to participate in mission... to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is the fountain of sending love'.<sup>5</sup>

Although the issue of 'relevance' can be over-emphasised, the question of how we relate a curriculum of theological reflection to the issues of our contemporary culture is one which cannot be avoided. Indeed the strict disciplinary boundaries which continue to dominate theological education make it all too possible to become engrossed in the theological enterprise for its own sake rather than for the sake of the *missio Dei*. Throughout our theological studies we need to make connections with the needs of the church and the lostness of the world.

I am not arguing for a programme of spiritual formation which is untheological. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We need to equip women and men for the future leadership of the church who will be enabled to follow Paul into the 'market place' of our own communities and 'try to convince' our contemporaries by 'speaking out boldly, and arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God' so that the unreached peoples of Scotland 'hear the word of the Lord' in a way that makes sense.

For example, as Evangelicals we are convinced that the cross reveals God's act of reconciling the world to himself in Christ. Yet as you trace the historical development of the doctrine of the atonement down through the centuries you discover that at different times, in different contexts and within different cultures, the doctrine of the cross has been understood in different ways. The message of the cross has been contextualised, made relevant to the different perceived needs of human beings at specific times in history.

Although the biblical message is that 'all have sinned' and that 'Christ died for our sins' the way in which different words are used for sin makes us realise that the awareness of the basic human predicament will change from age to age and so will the particular emphasis we make in our presentation of the message of the cross. This does not mean reducing the message of Christianity so that it becomes palatable to human taste. Rather, we should allow Christ crucified to be seen as the reality which men and women need to know within their hearts because contact points

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<sup>4</sup> J. Andrew Kirk, *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1997), pp. 48, 50.

<sup>5</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, 1991), p. 390.

have been made, bridges have been built between the message of the first century and the lives of people in the twenty-first century.

For instance many people have a sense of alienation or estrangement, of being divided from other people and thus in need of reconciliation. Then there are others who feel a sense of failing to find fulfilment and purpose in life – falling short ‘of the glory of God’. Furthermore, sin indicates that failure in personal relationships with God and other people and the world is, in Emil Brunner’s memorable phrase ‘a theatre of revolt’. To each of these situations, a different facet of the gospel message of the cross will be expressed. Thus there are various images of the work of atonement which will illustrate the divine act of redemption.

Perhaps the most common understanding of the cross in the New Testament period was that of sacrifice in which the blood of Christ was seen as an agent of cleansing and so images of washing and fresh clothing abound. Still in our own culture the idea of moral defilement prevails and so we speak of a ‘dirty trick’, ‘foul language’ and ‘a clean driving licence’. We may have a shower to make us feel clean again, not only after a difficult and tiring day but also when we feel that we have been spiritually and morally affected by the world.

The metaphors of atonement which the church has used from one age to the next are not mutually exclusive and to choose only one and reject the others is to rob oneself of the richness of the New Testament proclamation of the cross. Each metaphor has a distinctive and vital contribution to make to our understanding and proclamation of the gospel, helping us to make sense of its meaning and message and enabling us to preach Christ crucified within our communities.

In our modern setting any preacher must know the situation of his congregation and the relevance of the gospel to that situation if he is to bring out the full richness and relevance of the Christian proclamation for them. The complexity and diversity of the human situation is matched by a corresponding richness of our understanding of salvation – with the fundamental insight being retained that salvation is primarily about being restored to fellowship with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Lausanne Covenant challenges churches to be ‘deeply rooted in Christ and closely related to their culture’. It is a principle which we readily accept when we send missionaries to work in foreign cultures. They learn the language and customs of the people to whom they will minister and yet it is a concept which we rarely take on board within our contemporary context. Yet if the church is to communicate the good news

of Jesus to our secular society we must express it in ways which are meaningful. This will involve ministers in a pattern of initial and continuing education in the concepts and context of our world, engaging in a critical analysis of the times in which we live so that we understand the way people think, the perplexing issues they are grappling with and thus apply the good news of God's love to the lives they are living. In this way the church will be able to engage in 'the prophetic and missionary calling which is the fundamental task of the followers of Christ'.<sup>6</sup>

Scripture is a rich resource of material which is as relevant in the twentieth century as it was in the first. As preachers we need to work hard, not only in our understanding of how the text of Scripture was interpreted in ancient Israel and the Christian communities of Asia Minor but how it is to be applied to the contemporary situation of Aberdeen, Alloa and Abbeyhill and make our application of Scripture explicit. Haddon Robinson makes this point well when he says that 'early in the sermon, the listeners should realise that the pastor is talking about them – application starts in the introduction not in the conclusion'.<sup>7</sup> Preaching which is biblical will be authentic but only relevant preaching can be classified as being biblical.

Our own postmodern culture is crying out for a compelling presentation of the gospel of Christ which makes connections with people in their daily living, offering a message of hope in the midst of despair. As preachers, let us hear and heed the words of Paul to Timothy to 'do our best to present ourselves to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth'.

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<sup>6</sup> David W. Smith, *Transforming the World: The Social Impact of British Evangelicalism* (Carlisle, 1998), p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Expository Preaching* (Leicester, 1980), p.164.