

# WHAT KIND OF THEOLOGY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

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Although delivered almost on the eve of the twenty-first century, this lecture is inevitably a somewhat risky undertaking. Such is the helter-skelter pace of change in Britain at the turn of the millennia that only the early years of the next century can be in view. Furthermore, diagnosis is more the order of the day than prescription. So there will be more about shape than content, more the theological task than theological exposition – a programmatic exercise.

## 1. A Missionary Theology

What is called for is a theology for a church in an explicitly missionary mode, as it faces a situation in Scotland that calls inescapably for missiological categories of discussion. Since relatively little attention has been paid to missiology for Western culture – the late Lesslie Newbigin being a distinguished exception – we shall increasingly depend on missiological wisdom garnered in cross-cultural mission overseas.

The recognition that Scotland is missionary territory, in some sense analogous to that now somewhat old-fashioned usage, ‘the mission field’, is not inescapable. Even if it is accepted in principle, thinking through its implications and working it out in practice will not be painless. For it is of course not the whole story. Scotland still has a national church – the Church of Scotland. Emblems of the church’s prominence stand on many a street corner in our cities and towns. There is still no lack of evidence in public and local life of the interweaving of Christianity into the warp and woof of Scottish society. As a Catholic writer recently commented on Britain generally,

Christianity is part of the cultural fabric of this country. Like it or dislike it, believe it, disbelieve it or remain agnostic, we cannot ignore the scale by which Catholic Christianity has shaped our country. Much of our public debate has been and continues to be shaped by ideas and arguments that inevitably relate to the Christian tradition, while much of our personal discussion and questioning, to say nothing of our

participation in the arts, takes place in a cultural context shaped now as in the past in implicit or explicit dialogue with Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

One difference between now and the past is that this 'dialogue with Christianity' takes place in increasing ignorance of, and with massive lack of living contact with, the Christian church. A leading Scottish religious historian is preparing a major work entitled 'The Death of Christian Britain'. An opinion poll revealed about half of the younger interviewees ignorant of the link between Jesus and Christmas. The 1998 statistics for the Edinburgh Presbytery of the Church of Scotland reveal a membership less than 47,000 against over 112,000 in 1968, admissions 1184 against 5912, and baptisms 832 against 3323. In 1998 eighty-nine congregations welcomed between them only 332 new members by profession of faith. These figures cover enormous local variation. One congregation in a housing scheme had only one male member under the age of forty.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that galloping deChristianization is the order of the day. The Scottish people need to rediscover Christianity, to be re-evangelized, which prescribes a missionary task made all the more taxing by Scotland's historical experience of the church over a millennium and a half. The dialogue, implicit or explicit, may assume, or at least ineluctably reflect, that Scotland has in a true sense for long been a Christian country, but it is now for the most part dialogue with a government and a culture which accord Christianity no privileged status or recognition.

Herein lies huge potential for disagreement, confusion and inactivity. No part of Britain is virgin mission territory, like much of Afghanistan or even areas of India. Any number of factors could be cited in defence of the maintenance of traditional patterns of Christian ministry, in the pastoral mould, to a population still in some degree pervasively Christian. If the membership of the Kirk is down to some 600,000, as large a number again, and probably more, were infant-baptized in the Church of Scotland. Such figures provide a platform for campaigning groups, whether churches or Christian bodies like the Evangelical Alliance, to seek to make the public face of a nominally Christian society more authentically Christian.

But the assumptions undergirding this strategy look increasingly unsafe. Residual folk-Christianity is not nothing, but it looms larger as an

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<sup>1</sup> Father Brendan Callaghan, quoted (p. 4) in 'The Media and Religion', a lecture delivered in November 1996 as Gresham Professor by Madeleine Bunting, religious affairs editor of *The Guardian*.

obstacle than a stepping-stone. For most of Scotland the pressing need is for a missionary strategy, and so I identify a missionary theology as the first desideratum. Such a theology believes in the Great Commission and the Great Pentecostal Empowering as fundamentally constitutive of the church's vocation. It is still the God-given, and God-resourced, responsibility of all Christians to communicate the Christian gospel to all. The presence in Scotland of small communities of adherents of other major religions is irrelevant to the validity of our missionary calling.

This insistence not only distinguishes Evangelicals from broad-church folk who are at best uncertain about an abiding commitment to converting mission, but also sets us apart from much traditional ecclesiology of Protestant and Reformed provenance, which had little or no explicit place for mission. Lesslie Newbigin's writings made much of the gulf that has traditionally yawned between ecclesiology and mission, typified in his ecumenical experience in the separate existence until 1961 of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council. Their merger in that year can hardly be credited with reshaping the WCC in a missionary image.

A missionary theology for the twenty-first century will be a theology focused on and critically fashioned by the gospel character of Christian faith, a theology organised around the good-news centre. This I contrast with a theology determined systematically, or confessionally. Most Reformation confessions originated in the need to set out the distinctives of one understanding of Christian doctrine over against one or more others. The Westminster Confession is largely devoted to resolving differences between divergent Christian interests in pursuit of national uniformity in religion. Systematic theology is often designed to show the inner coherence and rationality of Christian beliefs, perhaps in relation to a controlling centre or an organizing principle (*e.g.* covenant) or to a dominant philosophy or ideology, or in terms of certain criteria (*e.g.* the traditional Anglican threesome of Scripture, tradition and reason).

A gospel-shaped theology will spell out core Christian convictions in such a way as to give the fullest expression to the message the church is entrusted with for the unbelieving or wrongly-believing masses. The contrast is not to be overdrawn but may in part be illustrated by the difference between the Scots Confession of 1560 and the Westminster Confession of 1647 marked by none other than Edward Irving in 1831.

The Scottish Confession was the banner of the church, in all her wrestlings and conflicts, the Westminster Confession but as the camp-colours which she hath used during her days of peace; the one for

battle, the other for fair appearance and good order.... [The former] is written in a most honest straight-forward manly style, without compliment or flattery, without affectation of logical precision, or learned accuracy, as if it came fresh from the heart of laborious workmen, all the day long busy with the preaching of the truth, and sitting down at night to embody the heads of what they continually taught. There is a freshness of life about it.<sup>2</sup>

Irving has accurately captured the urgent haste with which the Scots Confession was compiled, contrasted with the months and years over which the Westminster Assembly of Divines honed every word of their documents. It could be claimed that a developed, rounded orthodoxy is a function of a settled church, not necessarily a formally established one, but not of a church engaged in primary mission.

It is not the character of missionary theology merely to repeat the ABC of the gospel but to show how all revolves around and issues from and returns to the kerygma of Christ – the proclaimed message about Christ. The eternal purposes of God, the economy, the dispensations, the covenants, the decrees, the testaments, revelation general and special – all must serve first and foremost to set forth the gospel, good news for human beings about Jesus Christ. So Evangelicalism is to be defined by its allegiance to the evangel. ‘Evangelical’ seems to me increasingly an appropriate designation for nascent Protestantism, when in the early years of the Reformation rediscovered Scripture meant rediscovered grace and faith and Christ – the great gospel centralities.

A missionary theology has a different set of priorities, partly because it assumes nothing in the recipients. It will therefore be a theology sensitive to the social and cultural world – but not assuming anything in that culture as part of the gospel. The noble Christian past of Scotland is not part of the gospel. A missionary theology does not visualize its task as a return to a lost golden age, whether the heady days of the early Reformation, the heroism of the Covenanters, years of revival, the courageous clarity of the Disruption, the powerful impact of the first Billy Graham campaign (1955). A missionary theology cannot bank on revitalising a forgotten Christian heritage. One of the seductions of a national church that loses its missionary vision is to become a branch of the heritage industry.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Irving, *The Confessions of Faith and the Books of Discipline of the Church of Scotland...* (London, 1831), pp. xciii-xciv.

Apart from anything else, what the Christian past delivers to the present may be a problematic legacy, not a fruitful platform or point of contact. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that too much in earlier Scottish Presbyterianism (for such has been most Protestantism for most of the time) has bequeathed an almost instinctive association in contemporary minds between Christianity and duty, morality, obligation, oppressive legalism, disapprobation, censorship, kill-joy repressiveness, *etc.* A large dose of caricature may be mixed in, but the message is clear: we today and tomorrow have to work mighty hard to let the gospel attractiveness of Christianity be heard and seen again in Scotland. This will not be a sentimental softness, a kind of church-hosted love-in, but grace above law, joy above solemnity, gratitude before demand, freedom rather than prohibition, forgiveness purging guilt.

## **2. An Apologetic Theology**

Until recently, apologetics was a named professorial responsibility in the Free Church of Scotland College, but ceased to be so decades ago in the University Divinity faculties. The next century will be marked by so much misrepresentation, hostility and perhaps discrimination-cum-persecution of Christianity that theological teaching will have to be pervasively apologetic in tone and ethos.

Apologetics covers various tasks. As early as the second century it was essential to correct perverted notions of Christian faith and practice. Hence it is in the writings of apologists that we find invaluable accounts, in straightforward explanatory terms, of what Christians believed and what they did when they met together. The increasing need for this corrective presentation ties in with a missionary priority – basic teaching in the face of overwhelming ignorance. Here lies the extraordinarily wide appeal of the Alpha course, but other approaches may serve not less well, such as groups for enquirers and catechisms for adults.

This point is also relevant to the vogue for Christian deviations that only too easily get fastened on mainstream Christians. How embarrassing it was recently for the England football manager's Glen Hoddle's strange notions about reincarnation and the like to be placarded as the beliefs of 'born-again' Christians. (I wonder how many pulpits seized those weeks of publicity as an opportunity to present corrective apologetic teaching.) There is, alas, no shortage of nuttery among the born-again, not least of the charismatic tendency.

Another important role of apologetics is to strengthen the faithful, arming them to give a reason for their Christian confidence. Most

apologetic writings are read not by hostile opponents and sceptical outsiders but by insecure insiders – believers made to waver or totter, neither sure themselves nor capable of standing up to criticism or exposure of alleged Christian folly.

We may not meet many persons outspokenly hostile to the Christian faith, but we live in a world in which the media are unremittingly unfriendly to traditional, orthodox Christianity. I am much indebted to a revealing lecture on ‘The Media and Religion’ by Madeleine Bunting, the religious affairs editor of *The Guardian*. Getting things right here is critical, for we are increasingly a media-made people – and media-made often insensibly, unknowingly. If ministers doubt that this is true of church members (I certainly do not), then it is unquestionably true of those we seek to reach. Bunting writes as a Catholic, with particular reference to the media’s battering of her church by exposures of episcopal and priestly immorality.

What I think is unarguable...is that there is an inherent bias in the media in Britain against religious institutions and religious expression. Most believers I’ve spoken to – of whatever faith – find the mainstream news media unrelentingly hostile. They are frustrated by the predominant tone of contempt and ridicule. Sometimes they are angry, more often, they are resigned.<sup>3</sup>

For this lamentable state of affairs, Bunting lists five causes:

- the loss of deference – a cultural phenomenon which affects all institutions and professions which claim authority – monarchy, political process, police, teachers, doctors
- an inevitable conflict between the values of the news media and religious faith which is being exacerbated by tabloidisation of broadsheets
- the ingrained hostility of a secular media elite
- a fundamental clash between religion and the nature of modern media
- a clash between religious faith and the illusions of the consumer culture which modern media is designed to promote<sup>4</sup>

When she unpacks the third of these, she paints a picture which portrays the intellectual climate in which the Christian mission today has to be conducted.

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<sup>3</sup> Bunting, ‘The Media and Religion’, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bunting, p. 2.

There is a bias in the media against understanding, even trying to understand, or allowing the possibility of the legitimacy of religious belief or spirituality. The media is dominated by a secularised elite whose scorn, contempt, derision of belief is an unquestioned orthodoxy. Faith is presented as essentially absurd. I think the media which serves up this message firmly believe it's what their readers and listeners/viewers want to hear. It is part of a post-Darwinian consensus that the truths of Christianity are utterly implausible, that the Bible is a collection of tribal myths and the proposition that it is the revelation of divine truth is ludicrous. The development of cultural relativism, as anthropologists and comparative religion have opened up the enormous sophistication of other belief systems, makes of Christianity's exclusive claims on truth an appalling imperialistic arrogance. Religion is like a dinosaur, is a widespread perception, the decline in belief in this is evidence that in time it will wither away altogether. Belief has been discredited and along with it, the whole idea that human beings might have a spiritual capacity, that it might be possible to know something called God, is belittled. At the risk of slightly exaggerating the point, I quote from George Orwell's original *1984* which contained an appendix called 'The Principles of Newspeak' in which he said that Newspeak was 'not only to provide a medium of expression for the world view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsox (English socialism) but to make all other modes of thought impossible'. The secular media virtually achieves this.<sup>5</sup>

To fill out the picture, we will also note the seven points of contrast between the value of the media and religious faith listed by a notable American Catholic theologian, Avery Dulles, whom Bunting quotes.

1. The Church's message is a mystery of faith. The press is investigative and iconoclastic, it revels in exposing what is pretentious, false and scandalous...
2. The message of the Church is eternal, seeks to maintain continuity, cherishes stability and shuns innovation; the press lives off novelty, thrives on the ephemeral, it accents what is new and different...
3. The church tries to promote unity, the press specialises in disagreement conflict. A story needs a struggle between contending parties and the press gives the impression that the church is divided into warring factions.

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<sup>5</sup> Bunting, p. 7.

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4. The main work of the church is spiritual, which gets overlooked by the press who concentrate on more tangible phenomena...
5. The press...imports democratic criteria into its assessment of any organisation. It has great difficulty in appreciating a hierarchical structure. The press have a built-in bias against the authoritative teaching of popes and bishops. The disobedient priest and dissident theologian are lionised as champions of freedom.
6. The teaching of the Church on matters of belief and moral practice is complex and subtle. The media are hungry for stories that are short, simple and striking. They slur over nuances and subtlety.
7. The Church believes in the truth of revelation. Media reports facts in such a way as accessible even to unbelievers...<sup>6</sup>

This searching analysis demonstrates incontrovertibly why theology taught and preached at the turn of the millennia must have a corrective, rehabilitative, damage-limiting function. This is how the issue is put by George Hunsberger, an American missiologist, in a tribute to Newbiggin:

In an atmosphere where it is no longer true that all good people are supposed to believe (that is, they ought to, and it may be presumed that deep down they already do), preaching can bolster little of what is socially expected. Instead it invites, welcomes and enables people to believe things that are at odds with the going versions of reality. It participates in the inner dialogue between the gospel and the assumptions of one's own culture and cultivates a community for whom conversion is the habitual approach.<sup>7</sup>

Bunting's brief lecture is most helpfully suggestive about the issues on which this kind of apologetic theological work must bite. They will be obvious to most of us who have kept our antennae receptive.

Anthropology, the understanding of human being, is an obvious case in point. What would we identify as the two or three controlling assumptions of the media about the nature of humanity? One would surely be the sexual nature of men and women. Intrinsic to fulfilled human existence is a fulfilled sex life, which warrants a fair measure of sexual freedom, as a basic human right. Where in our church theology does such

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<sup>6</sup> Bunting, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> George R. Hunsberger, 'Renewing Faith during the Postmodern Transition', in *The Bible in TransMission*, special issue (1998), pp. 10-13, at p. 11.



an assumption receive biblically wise correction? Perhaps the task is too seldom undertaken precisely because it is not a simple one. It is made trickier by the church's reputation for being obsessed with sexual morality, which in Scotland is certainly not undeserved. Christians address the distorted anthropological assumptions of the day with this damaging history dogging their efforts. As if the challenge were not taxing enough because of the tension between given fundamentals of biblical teaching, between the one-flesh complementarity of male and female by creation and the vocation to singleness or celibacy, which the example of Jesus places beyond exegetical uncertainty.

But if 'continuing conversion' is the objective, the task cannot be shirked. The designated teachers of God's truth among God's people, who exercise in my view a dispersed function as the church's magisterium, must grapple with these controlling axioms of our culture. Our remit is not satisfied by simply expounding Scripture and leaving the faithful to make the connexions between 'the two horizons'. Applied theology of a low-level apologetic kind is a high priority.

Bunting's lecture contains some pertinent reflections on hypocrisy: 'in our late 20th century lexicon there are few sins worse than hypocrisy'.<sup>8</sup> It is of course one of the vices targeted by Jesus in some of his opponents (at least according to the traditional translation of the Greek), so that a biblical occasion for considering this particular issue is available. Jesus found it highly reprehensible, so that it is an uncomfortable charge when levelled against his followers.

It hinges on the interesting fact that, when outsiders assess Christians, they generally do so by reference to goodness. They are presumably aware that Christians are religious (essentially, they go to church), but they evaluate us in moral terms. Most Christians would not identify the heart of being a Christian as a matter of morality, but then holiness or godliness or faith in Christ are more elusive categories for most non-Christians to apply. Nevertheless, this preoccupation with behaviour and with whether it matches profession may reflect a failure of Christian communication – so that others instinctively think of Christianity as decency or kindness rather than knowing God in Jesus – or may point to the dominant image of humanitarian goodness which the broad church projects.

Hypocrisy has been an easy charge to advance when a church nails its colours to a particular mast, such as priestly celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church. But lapses from sexual propriety are in general a soft

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<sup>8</sup> Bunting, p. 3.

target, because churches are commonly assumed to teach a strict line in sexual mores. One false response to widespread inability or refusal to observe inherited standards is to relax them. Richard Holloway, the Episcopalian bishop of Edinburgh, is the most notorious contemporary British exponent of this tactic, but I judge that it has served as an influential sub-text in much of recent official church reflexion on sexual ethics.

Allegations of hypocrisy would surely be less viable if Christians were known more widely as forgiven sinners living by grace in gratitude and penitence. Luther's wonderful insight that every one of us is throughout life *simul justus, simul peccator, simul penitens* – at one and the same time always justified, always sinful, always penitent – reminds us of emphases in our biblical-theological repertoire particularly appropriate for carping critics. How much better if we projected a clearer image of what constitutes our identity as Christians! We claim not to be better people but to be forgiven, and for that eternally humble and grateful.

There is, however, another dimension to this preoccupation with hypocrisy as a popularly recognized sin of Christians, and this is the dimension of the churches' past. As Bunting puts it, 'Media coverage of religious affairs in this country is, at a profound level, a dialogue of the secular/vestigially Christian present with its Christian past.'<sup>9</sup> Our Christian past in Britain has been one of power and privilege. In an age when, despite continuation of the national Church's formal status, all authority-bearing institutions are suffering from 'loss of deference', Christians are paying for our privileged and tainted past. This needs to be heavily underlined. Understanding this is very important for a realistic appreciation of the position of mainstream Christianity in Britain today. The Christian past may be for us a reservoir of inspiration, challenge and gratitude but the mere fact that the Christian church has for so long ruled the roost makes us fair game to exposure, ribald caricature and blasphemous parody in a manner that cannot apply to newer religions among us, like Hinduism and Islam. 'Calvinism' is a highly-favoured object of attack, because of its alleged long-term repressive, sex-obsessed, philistine, censorious hold over Scottish life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bunting, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> For some salutary correctives, see the essays by R. D. Kernohan and Donald Macleod in Kernohan, ed., *The Realm of Reform. Presbyterianism and Calvinism in a Changing Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999).

On a broader front, patriarchalism damns us in many feminist eyes, and in some makes our faith irredeemable. Then come the Crusades, persecution of homosexuals, longlasting toleration of slavery and so on – a fearful litany indeed. Truly the sins of the forefathers are being visited on us their children.<sup>11</sup> Liberated post-Christendom secularism will no longer listen to a magisterial church with a record like this. *The Scotsman's* editorial the day after the House of Commons voted to lower the age of consent for homosexuality to sixteen scornfully dismissed the considered position of most Scottish churchpeople. Opponents of the change motivated by 'bigotry, ignorance or religious belief' insisted on 'an impossibly narrow definition of what is normal'.

Strip away the cant and the prejudice, put aside the religious inhibitions to which few these days subscribe, and we are left with a question of civil and human rights...

Salacious moralising these days begins and ends with the juvenile elements of the tabloid world and a minority afflicted by an imperfect understanding of Christ's love.<sup>12</sup>

When Cardinal Thomas Winning, leader of Scotland's Catholic community, clarified the lowly position of the use of contraception on the scale of sins, the same paper gave space to a withering attack on such 'A Cardinal irrelevance':

Cardinal Winning and his opponents...can go on playing their boys' game of liberalism, conservatism, subtle shifts in the tone of the voice of authority, for as long as the Church survives. But out here, increasingly, women will not be listening. Now, we are slowly learning to shape our own definitions of freedom and fulfilment. And they lie nowhere along that old, narrow continuum between male prohibition and male permissiveness; but on another path entirely, where men and women walk as equals, and where, almost by definition, old all-male hierarchies like the one Cardinal Winning represents will find it impossible to follow.<sup>13</sup>

Loss of deference with a vengeance. Whether or not these particular issues are ones on which one would choose to go into battle, it is a powerful formative factor in the context in which the church has to forge

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bunting, pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> *The Scotsman*, January 26, 1999, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Joyce McMillan, *The Scotsman*, April 16, 1999, p. 23.

an apologetic theology. As Newbigin expressed it, we are called to 'Christian witness in a culture that has rejected Christendom'.<sup>14</sup>

The past sometimes requires apology in the commoner sense of the word. An Italian author has produced a book translated under the title *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: the Mea Culpa of John Paul II*. It assembles documents in which pope John Paul II has on no fewer than 94 occasions acknowledged the failings of the Catholic Church – on racism, anti-Semitism, crusades, war, treatment of women, persecution of Galileo, and so on. Not all Catholic thinkers have been happy, since as a divine entity the church cannot sin, according to Roman Catholic dogma. Nevertheless, as Richard John Neuhaus sums up, 'John Paul II is convinced that, if Christians are to walk upright in the next millennium, they must cross the threshold of the year 2000 on their knees.'<sup>15</sup> Others may reckon that the pope has not yet gone far enough, but it seems that his *mea culpa* has more in store.

Our God is one who forgives and forgets. Christian triumphalism is not in order as we celebrate the new millennium. Nor is there much mileage in attempting to deny responsibility for the abuses and outrages of earlier Christian ages – although we could be ready to cite some of the pluses.<sup>16</sup> It is almost as if the church is having to earn the right to be heard all over again, just like the first servants of the gospel in a pioneer missionary setting.

### 3. A Congregational Theology

The new century will need a strong ecclesiology of the local church as not only carrier but also embodiment of the gospel. A recent book-title spoke of the church as *The Public Face of the Gospel* (by J. L. Houlden, 1997),

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Wilbert R. Shenk, 'Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to the Theology of Mission', in *The Bible in TransMission*, special issue (1998), pp. 3-6 at p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Luigi Accattoli, *When A Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa of John Paul II* (New York, Alba House, 1998), noted by Richard John Neuhaus in *First Things* 87 (Nov. 1998), pp. 74-5. See Avery Dulles, 'Should the Church Repent?', *First Things* 88 (Dec. 1998), pp. 36-41.

<sup>16</sup> See the review in *First Things* 87 (Nov. 1998), pp. 42-50 of Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York, Doubleday, 1998).

which is not a characteristic evangelical affirmation. We have tended to stress faith in Christ, not the church, even faith in Christ despite the church.

One of Lesslie Newbigin's much-quoted emphases depicts the congregation as 'a hermeneutic of the gospel', 'an interpretive lens through which onlookers gain a view of the gospel in the living colours of common life'. For Newbigin this perspective answers an identity crisis which afflicts so many churches in a secular culture, unlike an earlier day in which they 'served the chaplaincy needs of a Christianised civic order'. If the question is asked 'Why the church?', Newbigin would answer: 'The authority to witness is its authority to exist: the only adequate witness is one that iterates what is visibly and truly embodied in a community of people embraced by the message.'<sup>17</sup>

Kevin Vanhoozer picks up Newbigin's tag in his solid study *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* If Jesus Christ is the pre-eminent interpreter of God's self-communication, the unique and definitive embodiment of God's self-communicative act or 'Word', then the church, Christ's body, is a secondary and derivative embodiment.

The way we live is also our 'interpretation' of the texts we read. Just as a musician interprets a text by performing, so the church is a communal performance of the Scriptures. The church – the sum total of those who bear the name of Christ – bears the responsibility of bearing, of doing, indeed of *being* the Word of God. Intended meaning must be continually extended – embodied in the words, deeds, and lives of its readers.

He develops a play on the double meaning of 'martyr', as witness whose 'martyrdom' attests the meaning he or she embodies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hunsberger, 'Renewing Faith', *The Bible in TransMission*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester, 1998), pp. 440-41. Cf. the pertinent comment by George Hunsberger: 'People today are not looking for a better argument that God exists and that the gospel is true. Rather, they are looking for a demonstration that life can be lived this way. Can you show me what this would look like in living colour? Is it possible to live this way in today's kind of world? Is it imaginable that I could put all my eggs in this basket and survive? Who is doing that and how? Show me. In other words,

The church in view in this paper is unambiguously the church local, partly because I believe that in the twenty-first century the national dimension of church will be less and less significant, especially in sustaining the gospel. It will have a lower profile and, at least in the mixed mainstream denominations, be increasingly confused and confusing as it seeks to accommodate pluralism. The sharply decreasing enthusiasm for church union schemes reflects a growing coolness towards national church bodies.

For the credibility – and audibility and visibility – of the gospel the local church will be the key. We probably need to think harder in the evangelical community in Scotland about the implications of this. We have majored on the ministry of the ordained, especially as expositors of the word. Are congregations simply extensions of, helpers of, the ministry of the ordained? When wise voices have been raised on the need to move on from the ministry of the word to get the shape of the congregation right, they have not always been welcome.

I want to focus here on the openness of the church, its open-textured character that allows entry at different points, without conditions. Newbigin's Indian testimony illustrates what I mean:

[F]or my first twelve years as a Bishop I was normally conducting worship in the open street – all the services of the Church without exception. My picture of the Church formed in those years is deeply etched in my mind, the picture of a group of people sitting on the ground and a larger crowd of Hindus and Muslims and others standing around listening, watching, discussing; and, thank God, when one came back a few months later some of those would be in the group in the front. So you get the sense of the Church not as something drawn out of the world into a building, but the Church sent out into the world.<sup>19</sup>

The big question is this: if the congregation in some sense is the gospel, because it must embody it, what will this entail for the ordering of its life and work? Most churches are so utterly non-transparent, which has

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the church's mission includes playing out in public view a community that lives by the patterns of the alternative regime called the reign of God.'; 'Features of the Missional Church: Some Directions and Pathways', *The Gospel and Our Culture* 25 (summer 1999), pp. 3-6, at p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Newbigin, 'On Being the Church for the World', in Giles Ecclestone, ed., *The Parish Church? Explorations in the Relationship of the Church and the World* (London & Oxford, 1988), pp. 25-42, at p. 32.

much to do with another legacy of the past – unsuitable, badly sited buildings.

Facing us here are searching questions about the congregation's cultural setting and sensitivity. I was struck recently by some comments by Crawford Mackenzie from the Mains of Fintry Urban Ministry Trust project in Dundee:

[I]n many ways it is easier for us to send missionaries to the other side of the world than to be missionaries where we are and get to the folk on our doorstep. Like the Pharisee and the Levite we are blind to the man who lives on the other side of the road and he won't hear because we have never spoken his language. Our dominant culture like an obese elephant crushes his way out of existence and we are oblivious to it.

I was hearing about a group who were being trained in radio programming – they were about to set up a new Christian Broadcasting Station. The leader of the seminar started with an icebreaker 'Tell us, what stations do you listen to?' 'Oh we don't listen to the radio', was the unbelievable reply. What about the papers? 'Oh we don't read these papers.' This group didn't know what people listen to or what they read but they wanted to preach! Before we can preach we have to learn the language. Before we can be missionaries we have to transpose the Gospel....

They say that revival often follows a recent translation of the Bible into a new tongue.... Maybe revival will follow the physical translation of the living and lived Gospel in the life of the Church into a culture that people understand in a way that has never happened before.

It is easy to assume that, because we speak the same language (approximately!), we do not face a problem of 'translation'. Implicit here are both the literal meaning of the word and its extended missiological use to denote the whole task of cross-cultural transplantation and indigenization of the gospel.<sup>20</sup>

Crawford Mackenzie wrote of the special challenge of the UPA – the 'urban priority area' of multiple deprivation. Yet every congregation in a secularizing media-made society confronts a task of the cultural translation of the gospel. The gospel itself may not be variable, but the terms in which it is communicated, the resonances it assumes, the cultural forms in which it is embodied, the style, the vocabulary, the music – all these and

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY, 1989).

much more are adaptable. I judge that we would benefit from a sharper perception of the difference between the givenness of the faith and the infinitely variable ways in which it may be expressed.

Most of us have an uncomfortable sense of extraordinarily rapid change in our social and cultural environment. Perhaps we exaggerate, by a subtle version of self-importance. But we feel ourselves to be caught up in the midst of a decade or two of a tumultuous avalanche of change. Behaviours, lifestyles, artistic creations, media representations, patterns of human relationships – all manifest an almost revolutionary propensity for change. By contrast, much evangelical congregational life in Scotland has remained constant not just for decades but for generations.

A stronger theology of the congregation should help us to discriminate between the non-negotiable and scope for freedom to change, if only because of the extraordinary difference between the contexts in which congregations are set, socially, economically, educationally and so on. The same meeting of the Superintendence Committee of Edinburgh Presbytery had before it reports on two parish churches in the city. In the five years under review, one had baptized 178 babies, the other five; one had admitted 97 new members on profession of faith (the key statistic for the future), the other nine; one received in 1998 total givings of £172,000, the other £6000. I make no suggestion here that one has been more faithful, even more successful, than the other – but simply emphasize that, in respect of the ministry of the gospel, they are as different as chalk from cheese. Only a congregational approach – a vigorous theology of the congregation and its mission – will avail. Indeed, in some localities it is almost a pre-congregational mission that is needed. Some parish churches serve communities that embrace stark internal contrasts.

I recently examined a doctoral thesis on mission strategy in the Free Church of Scotland after Thomas Chalmers' adventurous example in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In some areas, one issue was how to provide for those who stayed away from church because they did not possess Sunday-best clothes. The solution was to hold special services for them alone, with bouncers at the door to exclude the well-dressed. Is respectability still a deterrent for some?

Madeline Bunting draws out one particular feature of the ethos and mentality that the media are shaping.

[T]he media increasingly focuses on people as a way of covering stories. For example, in politics a difference over policy is translated into a battle between two politicians. It is people, not issues or an institution which grab the reader's attention. What motivates that



person? What kind of person are they, what is their family background – our media shows a deep and increasingly invasive curiosity about the person. The media likes nothing better than a news story which essentially has the plot of a soap opera. That's why the monarchy over the last five years has been such a huge story; man is unfaithful to wife with old flame; woman is unfaithful to husband and is betrayed by lover...this is *Brookside* but with the added thrill of being real-life.... This presents a particular dilemma for the Christian churches which believe their message and purpose overarches the fallibility and dwarfs the significance of the individual personality.<sup>21</sup>

Traditional Evangelicalism has been strong in abstract thought-forms – doctrine, theology, creed, principles. How does it communicate the gospel to people with little or no capacity for theory? With the tabloidization of the quality papers, this incapacity is increasingly true of a growing number of people. Britain is experiencing a shift towards a more populist cultural level (with government encouragement, it often seems), which poses an immense challenge to our bookish evangelical tradition.

A number of factors combine to create a fear that congregations, particularly of a gathered kind, may develop into ghettos, as a way of coping with an increasingly uncomfortable moral environment. The monastic option may have been banished by the sixteenth-century Reformers, but it continues to exercise a subtle fascination for embattled Christians. Within the walls, we have no linguistic problems, we sing to the same hymn-sheet (note the metaphor!), we can handle a thousand-page book, listen to a half-hour address, we are at home, having turned aside, come apart, from the world. Needless to say, such a tendency magnifies the gulf between church and non-church, aggravates the difficulty of outreach, intensifies the sense of alienation on the part of the unchurched.

The haven-church stands, I suppose, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the missionary congregation. Lesslie Newbigin always emphasized 'the church's essential missionary identity'. At the same time, he was unhappy with an ecclesiology that could accommodate denominations.

[T]he denomination is the visible form that the Church takes in a society which has accepted the secularization of public life and the privatization of religion, so that the variety of denominations corresponds, if you like, to the variety of brands available on the shelves of the supermarket. Everyone is free to take his choice.

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<sup>21</sup> Bunting, p. 6.

The denomination, either singly or together, cannot be the bearer of the challenge of the Gospel to our society, because it is itself the outward and visible form of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of that society. And, therefore, if we are to recover the sense that the local church is the Holy Catholic Church for that bit of the world in which God has set it (and that is the parish principle) then we have to challenge this whole acceptance of the denominational principle as being the normal form in which Church life is expressed. I find this both a necessary and a frightening thought!<sup>22</sup>

Newbigin's concern can be developed in different directions. From one point of view, he is affirming the principle of localism – the calling of the local church to be the church catholic with a parish, i.e. area, function expressive of the claim of the Lordship of Christ over the whole of a community's life. It is an emphasis worth pondering. The broader evangelical constituency in Britain has in recent years witnessed a spate of new-church formation and an epidemic of switching between congregations or denominations. Consumerism reigns, and mission to the congregation's neighbourhood suffers. Such trends expose the weakness of evangelical ecclesiology for generations. I advocate for the next century a congregational theology.

#### **4. A Modest Theology**

Reference has already been made to Cardinal Winning's recent clarification that use of artificial contraception was for Catholics a far less serious sin than adultery, rape and the like. Similar media interest attended his statement that abortion, although a grave failing, was nevertheless open to forgiveness. On both occasions, a somewhat chastened Catholicism publicly clarified the relation of two commonly berated positions in its moral teaching to first-order, or higher-order, issues of Christian faith. Contraception is 'very, very small' compared with the great demands of 'justice and truth and love and peace'. Abortion, although truly reprehensible, is not beyond the reach of pardon.

I would generalize from these incidents, to propose that a certain modesty or humility is appropriate not only (if I may say so) to a Roman Catholic Church battered by sensationalized exposés but to other mainstream churches with a patchy past and an unimpressive present. My argument links up also with the earlier emphasis on the basic missionary task now facing the church in Scotland. For it is a mark of a missionary

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<sup>22</sup> Newbigin, 'On Being the Church for the World', pp. 41-2.

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mode of churchly presence that some issues which rightly engage extended and intense concern in the heyday of Christendom loom much lower on the scale of priorities. Most Evangelicals would view abortion as a weighty matter. (The Christians of the very first missionary movement from Jerusalem into the Graeco-Roman world uncompromisingly condemned abortion.) But contraception ranks much lower – and other issues, such as Sunday observance, likewise.

In part, this differentiation between priorities is a matter of economy of effort. When energies are needed to transpose the church and the theology into a missionary key, secondary objectives have to be left aside. In part, it may arise from a recognition that protesting or campaigning, as a minority, on concerns of personal or public behaviour that affect the majority, is not a promising strategy in respect of winning an opening for the gospel. In such a context, law does not pave the way for grace. In part, it reflects the acknowledgement that, although Christianity remains the national religion, the actual strength of the Kirk on the ground makes trading on that special status inappropriate. A church that patently is making such a poor fist of its most fundamental task – making others disciples of Jesus Christ – has little right to be holding forth on the ordering of public policy and social life.

Intrinsic to the consumerist mind-set which now looms large in our attitude is testing claims made for products, whether comparatively, in *Which?*, or singly. So a church whose advertising promises a miracle a week (according to recent reports) exposes itself to scrutiny and challenge. What will Jesus Christ assuredly deliver? Will he deliver health, wealth and prosperity, as one false gospel holds out? If not, perhaps happiness? 'I am H-A-P-P-Y.' 'Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin'? We must beware of overselling the gospel, or to put it another way, we must be crystal-clear what it is that the gospel promises.

Ecumenical documents have an infuriating habit of using indicatives when other moods of verbs would be more appropriate. 'Bishops are guardians of apostolic faith and unity' is easily falsified; 'bishops are called to be, ought to be guardians...' at least merits consideration. When applied to the sacraments, indicatives often give the impression that they are effective *ex opere operato*. My interest in baptism hinges partly on the fact that, perhaps uniquely, theological statements about it are open to empirical verification. If baptism is incorporation into Christ in his body the church (a common enough affirmation), there has to be an outcome that is visible, identifiable in some way – unless the church is wholly

invisible. If baptism is initiation, which includes the element of beginning, there ought to be evidence of continuation.

Making theological claims conditional, or suspending them on disproof, is scarcely a feasible alternative. The situation of the church in most of the West, post-Christendom and afflicted with sharp decline and grave internal pluralism, counsels a measured judiciousness, a caution in our confidence – in fact, the very opposite of triumphalism. By our fruits we shall be known, so Jesus taught. It is a radical test, which others who do not know Jesus or his teaching, are sure to apply. Hollow facades will be stripped away, sham exposed, cover-ups exposed.

It is one of the oddities of living in this post-Christendom world that many of the unchurched know something of the reality that we should be displaying. Bunting puts her finger on it with uncanny precision:

There is a powerful voice in secular society which has exacting standards of how the churches should be matching up to the Gospel and the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>23</sup>

This voice is not infallible. Popular pressure which purports to know God's will better than the teachers of Scripture must not be allowed to stampede us into compliance, which is a basic instinct of broad-church liberalism. But it is uncomfortably true that opinion-leaders outside the church have sometimes led the church into a deeper understanding of its own Scriptures.

As we move into the twenty-first century, Christian theology must be careful to avoid maximalist hype. This should not entail any dilution of our true convictions. It requires us to know the times – mindful of the church's not-always-glorious past which lives on to dog our steps, determined to make our way in the disturbing present, preparing for an uncertain future.

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<sup>23</sup> Bunting, p. 9.