EDITORIAL: HOW DO CHURCHES GROW? BELIEVING AND BELONGING

An academic theologian in Britain who is interested in how churches grow is as rare as (to adapt his own image) a pelican in Princes Street or Park Lane. One who believes that churches actually can grow is an even rarer bird, a species one might have thought extinct rather than merely endangered. Hence a warm editorial welcome to *A Vision for Growth. Why Your Church Doesn't Have to be a Pelican in the Wilderness* (SPCK, London, 1994; 117pp., £6.99; ISBN 0 281 04759 6), by Robin Gill who is the Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern Theology at the University of Kent.

For me the most suggestive material is found in chapter 2 on 'Believing and Belonging':

> In matters of faith, belonging is primary. Intellectuals are apt to forget this. We are so concerned with thought that we frequently convince ourselves that *belief* is primary. People believe and then they belong, so it is assumed ... in that order. In contrast, I am convinced that the order is mostly the other way around – we belong and *then* we believe.

The conviction, or assumption, shared by many Evangelicals (I am here particularizing more specifically than Gill) is that once people are brought to faith through conversion, then they will become active church members. Or they should.... The challenge presented in the follow-up to a Billy Graham-type mission (so-and-so professed faith, and now he or she must be integrated into a church) has taught us that it does not always work so neatly. Sometimes it does; people come to faith and then start attending worship and learn to belong.

But Robin Gill cites impressive survey evidence that puts belonging before believing for most people. Interviews with lapsed Methodists rarely threw up loss of faith as the reason for their disappearance from the pews. Christian belief appears to have persisted longer than churchgoing. Today we are witnessing a collapse in belonging leading to, not caused by, a decline in belief. When newly active Christians have been questioned about what brought them to commitment, they rarely mention a transition from unfaith to faith. They speak rather about returning to the fold they knew as children, or some personal or familial link, or some special experience, like marriage, or bereavement, or a house-move, that brought

them into touch with a congregation. Very often the crystallization of a new faith awareness takes some time.

> The typical pattern instead seems to be this. Changing from unbelief to belief is usually a slow process.... There may have to be years of belonging before belief feels fully comfortable. Conversely, people who *stop* belonging may retain core Christian beliefs for many years.... Disbelief does not appear usually to be the main reason for ceasing to go to church.

This perspective fills Gill with foreboding:

> If belonging is the first stage in the Christian life, then belonging is fast disappearing in Britain today. The area that is disappearing at the most alarming rate is that of child belonging.

He does not underestimate the difficulty of kindling belief among those who have had no experience of church or Sunday school..., who have had no prior belonging at all.

The terms of this analysis will not come naturally to many Evangelicals, for whom explicit profession of faith is the starting point rather than the goal of the journey. Yet they carry an inescapable challenge, partly because evangelical congregations seem no less vulnerable to decline than others (as the results of the 1994 church census will bear out), and partly because of the social and cultural gulf opening up between the churched and the never-churched among us.

The challenge addresses especially the shape and quality of the local congregation's life. Is it open and accommodating to those seeking to belong *simpliciter*, without or before faith? Does it extend bridges enabling the fearful and the uncomfortable and the self-consciously lost (socially or culturally, not spiritually!) to creep in – and once in, not to be smothered by overwhelming assumptions, demands or expectations? It was said of the Servant of the Lord that 'a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench' (Is.42:3). What ethos should characterize the community of the Servant, as it seeks to nourish believing in the wasteland?

Community: on what terms?

Re-creating community is the concern of two Edinburgh Church of Scotland ministers, Bill Clinkenbeard and Ian Gilmour, in *Full on the Eye. Perspectives on the World, the*

Church, and the Faith (Bavelaw Press, Edinburgh, 1994; 105pp., £4.95; ISBN 0 9517168 1 6). Their perspectives on contemporary Scotland are sharply drawn, nor do they pull any punches on the church – which seems to be the Church of Scotland. 'Hey Dad, We Shrank the Church' is a wonderful title for a retrospect from 2050. 'It is possible... to project a society largely devoid of the historic church.'

Our joint-authors' prescription is a key focus on community, expressed in a church on the corner-shop model rather than the supermarket. The Christian community gathered to hear and speak the Word of God, celebrate the sacraments and enjoy fellowship – how traditional it all sounds! But there is a good dose of radicalism here too. The authors' concern is only to *open* a discussion. That it might be a genuine dialogue with the likes of your Editor could depend on their readiness to abandon hoary libels about fundamentalists and literalism. They want greater emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus, 'however it is interpreted'. But you are not allowed this 'howeverness' if you appeal, as they do, to the faith of the early church. It only happens now if it happened then, like the cross.

Must baptism decrease?

In May 1995, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was recommended by one of its committees to approve the admission, subject to certain provisos, of unbaptized children to the Lord's table. Readers unaware of this tawdry proposal, which was brought to the Assembly bereft of any shred of theological clothing to cover its indecency, may need to prick themselves to be sure they are not hallucinating. The Scottish Kirk once had an honoured name in the world for theological virility. And even after doctrinal discipline vanished with the coming of age of liberty of opinion even on matters indubitably entering into the substance of the faith, baptism remained inviolate. Just you dare to do anything to allow anyone else to claim that you are repeating it! But now it seems you do not even need it once!

For if unbaptized children, it was argued, why not unbaptized adults? And what of the Church's noble profession of being part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church? Could anything be more blatant a breach of catholic and apostolic order than to admit the unbaptized to

communion? It seems that such a perspective had never crossed the proposers' horizon. The suggestion was another salvo – more a damp squib in the event – in a continuing campaign to promote the place of the Lord's supper in the normal life of the church. A good thing, you might think, and you would be right. But you can have too much of a good thing (like the doxologies added indiscriminately to every psalm in the third edition of the *Church Hymnary*, as Alec Cheyne once quipped). If the price of the increase of one dominical sacrament is the decrease of the other, then one is certainly having too much of a good thing.

More generally, the proposal reflects a stubborn tendency to minimize baptism. In a way, making infant baptism the theological norm (as well as the norm in practice) could be said to have invited this fate, but now is not the occasion to pursue such alluring hares. Certainly as the church in the West heads into a new era of primary mission, baptism, and more particularly conversion-baptism (which might be said to be a third option, alongside baptism of infants and of believers), must come into its own. As Karl Barth saw, infant baptism belongs to Christendom: it came into its own well after Constantine, and it is already fading fast as Christendom disintegrates. Yet infant baptism is baptism, and the difference between baptized and unbaptized children in the same Sunday school is no mere logistical or pastoral untidiness.

The most surprising defender of the proposal on the floor of the General Assembly was Professor James Torrance. Robin Gill's book reminded me of a common theologoumenon of his – that we do not believe in order to belong, but we believe because we already belong. This dictum moves in a different orbit from Gill's pastoral sociology, and we must not confuse the two. I suspect that it is a half-truth masquerading as a whole truth, but that is for another day. But if a believing response to belonging takes sacramental form, then that must first be baptism. To reverse the sequence of baptism and supper is theologically inept and ecclesially frivolous.