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# The Fraternal

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# Among Soviet Baptists

Outside the United States and India, the Baptists of the Soviet Union represent the largest single community in the worldwide Baptist fellowship, with some 600,000 adult baptised believers and a total following of at least an estimated two million. They form the largest non-Orthodox Christian grouping in the Soviet Union and the most significant and widespread expression of Protestant Christianity in that vast country. A distinctive characteristic of the Baptists in Soviet religious life is that they are found all over the Soviet Union — throughout European Russia, in the ancient lands of Armenia and Georgia, right across the Ukraine, in the Baltic republics, in the rapidly-developing Siberian territories, in the central Asian lands such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan where most people belong to various Asiatic races, and in the Soviet Far East. "From Archangel to Tbilisi, from Moscow to Vladivostok, we have Baptist churches!", a superintendent once told me proudly. The title 'All-Union' Baptist is very apt.

It has been my privilege to have made six major journeys among Soviet Baptists over the past fourteen years, on ecumenical study visits, for Christian peace events, and on preaching missions: with reference to the latter, at the invitation of the All-Union Baptists I undertook major preaching tours in 1978 (covering Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Novgorod for preaching engagements, with also visits to Orthodox centres at Vladimir and Suzdal) and in 1982 (Moscow, Volgograd, Tashkent and Samarkand). In 1979 I visited Soviet Georgia and preached at the main Baptist church in Tbilisi; I have preached on several occasions at the central Moscow Baptist church.

In this article I am not attempting any definitive statement about Baptist life in the Soviet Union nor any all-embracing definition of Church-State relations; rather, I want to highlight some key characteristics of Baptist church life in the U.S.S.R. today, and some issues that have struck me as particularly significant. I must also state at the outset the fundamental Christian reason for my active interest in Soviet religious life generally and Baptist life specifically: it is that the Gospel of Reconciliation calls us to break down 'the middle walls of partition' in every age, and in our own time of East-West ideological-military division and the Cold War, it is vitally important to build the Christian bridges of reconciliation, peace and mutual understanding, East-West, with our contacts with the Soviet Union and its Churches having a special significance. In the context of both Anglo-Soviet religious relations and British church life, British Baptists have a unique responsibility — and a special opportunity — as the only major denomination in Britain with a sister denomination throughout the USSR. Only Baptists are in the mainstream of Christian life in both our countries. In the global context, the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) is the largest single Baptist body in the Baptist World Alliance, as neither American nor Indian Baptists form a single union. Furthermore, I believe we have much to learn from this Baptist community which has shared fully the sorrows and achievements of the Soviet peoples over the turbulent decades since 1917.

Some historical background, albeit brief, is necessary. Christianity in the Russian lands has been overwhelmingly the saga of the Orthodox Church, from the time Saint Prince Vladimir converted Kiev Rus in 986. Russian Orthodoxy was characterised on the one hand by much deep spirituality, holiness, monastic devotion and sublime artistic achievements, and on the other by a general subservience to the Czarist state, an over-spiritualised understanding of the Faith which accordingly failed to produce a 'social Gospel', and in its latter pre-1917 days, much corruption. Its close involvement with Russian feudalism meant that any modern, reforming political force was bound to clash with it and reduce its powers; as in Russia that force was revolutionary Communism with an atheistic ideology, the conflict was bound to be bitter, and to have repercussions for other religious groups. Yet Protestantism, like so many other Western movements such as the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, had come very late to Russia and was much suppressed by Orthodoxy. Baptists, who recorded the first believer's baptism on Russian soil at Tbilisi, in 1867, and grew rapidly by the missions of Johann Oncken from Germany and Lord Radstock from Britain, generally welcomed the 1917 Revolution as bringing them equality with the Orthodox and much more freedom, and spread much in the 1920s and 1930s. Stalinisation, anti-religious persecutions and the Nazi onslaught then took their toll, but the Second World War proved a turning-point for Russian Christianity, as Orthodox and Baptists alike stood firmly behind their country's resistance to Nazi invasion. I recall, on a visit to Leningrad, being taken around its famous, sombre Piskaryovskoye Cemetery, where some 600,000 soldiery and citizenry lie buried, victims of the long Nazi siege of the city. My Baptist guide told me that almost all the families in the main Leningrad Baptist church (which has over 3500 members) had lost members and relatives in the siege. He declared that through their heroic commitment to their country's cause in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45, "Baptists won the right to be heard again" in Communist Russia. I met a Baptist superintendent in northern Russia who had been released from imprisonment for his faith and went straight into the Red Army, where he won high decorations for valour. In this wartime context the Soviet State and Orthodox Church made a Concordat in 1942; in 1944 the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists was formed, bringing together different evangelical and Baptist streams into one union, which also comprises numerous Pentecostals and the Mennonites. The wartime change in Church-State relations led to the re-opening of many churches and an increasing "normalisation" of church life and opportunities for worship, which continued in the post-war years; the Khrushchev period, however, saw a re-assertion of anti-religious activity, with increased restrictions. The All-Union Baptist leadership always took the view that it should work 'within the system' as long as the Christian conscience was not compromised. Then, and subsequently, it has always taken the path of patient negotiation with the state authorities, rather than opposition; latterly, under the leadership of Rev. Alexei Bichkov as General Secretary, this policy has had considerable achievements, especially in the fields of Bible printing and imports, church building and extension programmes,

and an ever-increasing range of outside contacts, culminating in the visit of Dr. Billy Graham in 1982. Behind the scenes, the All-Union Baptists did much to help those of their brethren who left the Union in the early 1960s as 'dissident Baptists' under such leaders as Georgi Vins, in protest against the Khrushchev restrictions.

Personally, my work has always been within the All-Union Baptists, but I am aware that the distinction between the two groups is not always clear, for in some cities some Baptists worship at both kinds of churches, especially where a so-called 'Reform' Baptist church has registered with the local authorities.

My visits to the Soviet Union, particularly the preaching missions undertaken officially at the invitation of the All-Union Baptists, have usually begun and ended with visits to what is, for me the most remarkable Baptist church anywhere in the world — the central Moscow Baptist church in quiet Little Vuzovsky Street, off the busy Pokrovsky Boulevard and only a few minutes drive from Red Square. With over 5100 members and many others attending, it is certainly the biggest Baptist fellowship anywhere in the U.S.S.R. Its services — morning, afternoon and evening on Sundays, and Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings, too — draw Baptist and other evangelical Christians from all over central Moscow city. It is the 'only Baptist church in the central part of the Soviet capital (permission has now been granted for a second one, and a suitable site is being sought), though eighteen smaller churches can be found in the outer suburbs and some towns of Greater Moscow. There is a Baptist church close to Moscow's Domododova Airport; the latest to be formed is in the Saltikovka suburb. The central Moscow church is used on Saturday morning for Adventist worship.

I have shared in worship many times at Vuzovsky Street, and had the privilege of preaching to over nine hundred people there on several occasions. I never fail to be moved by the fervour and joy of the worshippers, the beauty of the choral work (the church has three choirs, like most big Baptist churches in the U.S.S.R.) and the intensity of the prayer, both led from the pulpit and freely uttered by members of the congregation. (In many services there is time for free prayer by the congregation, but charismatic expression is strongly discouraged). Many teenagers and usually some children are among the Moscow worshippers; it is quite incorrect to say the congregation is only elderly and mainly female, though many women of all ages attend the services, and make their distinctive contribution. The composition and reading of Christian poetry is a living tradition among Baptist women in Moscow, and in some other parts of the Soviet Union. The Moscow church is usually packed to capacity, with people overflowing from downstairs pews and upstairs gallery seats onto the aisles and staircases and even outside into the street. In Moscow, as elsewhere, worship is long by our standards, with three sermons, Biblical meditations, hymns and choral items, prayer sessions, and various other items including greetings from visitors. Many people take notes on the sermons, to study the relevant Bible passages further at home. Most people

at the Moscow church seem to have a Bible. Russian Baptist worship is rich, intense and warm; its feeling is never slick, but always deeply serious, arising from profound depths of personal and congregational experience. The Communion Service is the high peak of Baptist worship in the Soviet Union: twelve deacons and ministers gather around the Communion Table, for the breaking and blessing of the Bread by the senior minister. The deacons then circulate twelve platters of Bread among the congregation, and worshippers take the Bread as they receive it; the practice is repeated with the wine, with twelve chalices being circulated for the distribution of the Wine. The number twelve of each is to remind worshippers of the first twelve Apostles, to be a spiritual link with the first Communion. It is a profoundly moving service. Other important worship events, such as weddings and harvest festivals, are not too dissimilar from our own practice, though after believers' baptisms, giving bunches of flowers to the newly-baptised believers is standard Russian practice!

Suggestions for prayer and the giving of greetings are another integral part of Russian Baptist worship. I once saw people in the gallery at the Moscow church dropping pieces of paper onto those in the pews below! The papers were passed to the front, to a deacon specially assigned to the task of reading their messages of prayer and greeting, and preparing for the presiding minister an ordered list of prayer and for announcing the greetings, usually from visitors from other parts of the USSR. The function of the presiding minister is most definitely not to conduct a 'ministerial monologue' but to lead the worship in a sensitive fashion, moulding the various elements of the worship and the response of the congregation together in a coherent mode; he does not necessarily preach, though he will usually lead one or more of the prayers. The big Baptist churches in the USSR, such as at Moscow and Leningrad, have a team ministry. Rev. Vasil Logvinyenko, trained as an engineer and formerly Baptist minister at Odessa, has been senior minister at Moscow since 1980; Rev. Michael Zhidkov, who was trained at Spurgeon's College and is well-known in international Baptist circles, was senior minister at Moscow for some years before 1980.

Logvinyenko told me, during my summer 1982 visit, of developments in the Moscow church's life.

"There has been a steady growth in our membership in recent years, with more and more young people, and young couples, coming into membership. The spiritual life of our church has deepened, too: we recently started a monthly Friday morning prayer meeting, in preparation for the Sunday Communion and to pray for revival. Many people attend it. But this renewed emphasis on the prayer meeting is certainly not confined to the Moscow church; most of the churches of our Union have introduced it in recent years. On Saturdays I have special discussions with our young preachers to help them develop their skills and Bible knowledge, but done quite informally. Children can be brought to the services by their parents without any problems, but state regulations do not permit special teaching for the children on church premises — the parents have to do that at home, and that has always been a Christian tradition in Russia."

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(The Russian Orthodox say: 'The Faith is transmitted at the mother's knee', and the absence of Sunday schools makes no difference to them, but my understanding is that the Baptists would welcome a change in this regulation, to permit them to re-establish Sunday school work, which they had for some years after 1917.)

Moscow Baptist church is untypical in that it regularly receives a stream of many international Baptist and other visitors (Richard Nixon worshipped there at the height of his presidential *detente* diplomacy!) from all over the world, and is consequently very well-informed on international Baptist life. Reports on conferences of the Baptist World Alliance, European Baptist Federation, World Council of Churches, Christian Peace Conference and similar bodies are regularly given by Russian Baptist leaders and visitors alike. At Moscow and elsewhere, worship can become very emotional. Saying goodbye to the visiting preacher is always especially emotional, with the whole congregation singing *God be with you till we meet again* and waving their handkerchiefs! This practice is widespread in Soviet Baptist churches: I experienced it in Central Asia no less than in Moscow.

While to my knowledge there is no orchestra at the central Moscow Baptist church, orchestral music and accompaniment of hymns is a distinctive feature of some Russian Baptist churches. When I visited the new church on leafy Pulukina street in Volgograd last year, morning worship featured not only two choirs but also a forty-piece orchestra of violins, flutes, percussion and balalaikas, and the music was of a high quality. I also came across this on my visits to churches in the Ukraine in 1970 and 1978: girls wearing traditional embroidered peasant costumes and playing the bandura, a special kind of balalaika, make a lively contribution to Baptist worship in Kiev and other Ukrainian cities.

In sociological terms, Baptists mainly appeal to what we would term the urban working-class. (In the USSR, as so often elsewhere, Protestantism is primarily the religion of the cities.) Judging by appearances is difficult, for in the Soviet Union there are no obviously poor and no obviously rich people; in congregations I have visited, the young people are often much better-dressed than some of the older folk, and I believe this reflects not only changing tastes and rising affluence for those in their twenties and thirties, but also their rejection of some of the "puritanism" among Baptists of the older generation (among whom the wearing of ties in church is often rejected as egotistical and therefore sinful), and their access through education to a wider range of careers. I once preached at the city of Klin, near Moscow, and was accompanied by a group of young people from the central Moscow church, who were visiting the Klin congregation with a ministry of music and testimony. Over lunch I asked them their secular occupations. All but one, a young woman who worked in a nursery school, were pursuing careers in science and technology, and none felt they had experienced any job discrimination because of their Christian faith, though they readily acknowledged that "all top jobs" were reserved for Communist Party members. In Moscow, the congregation has a sprinkling of professional people including doctors (there is always one on duty during worship in case anyone is taken ill); when I visited the main Leningrad Baptist church in 1978, I learned of the recent decease of a member of the



congregation who had been a Professor of Engineering at Leningrad University and had a major responsibility in re-designing the city's water and sewerage systems. The whole faculty had come to the Baptist church for his funeral. 'Conscientious work' in one's secular calling is a strong emphasis among All-Union Baptists, who see such as the offering of work to God and the means of contributing positively to their society. Some Baptists have gained awards as Heroes of Soviet Labour; some Baptist women have won Soviet Motherhood awards; these achievements are seen as forms of 'witness' in a context of much public indifference and ideological hostility towards religion. Soviet press commentators, pondering the reasons for the steady growth of the Baptist churches, have highlighted with favourable comment the Baptists' strong personal morality, devotion to work and duty, their stand against sexual looseness and alcoholism (although some Russian Baptists practise moderation rather than total abstention from alcohol, the drinking of spirits, especially the national beverage, vodka, is strongly disapproved), and their concern and care for the lonely, elderly and those on the margins of society. The spiritual and pastoral outreach of the Baptists to those whose material needs are well met by the Soviet welfare state is undoubtedly a key factor in their contemporary experience of church growth, both in numbers and Christian maturity. Evangelism is by preaching in the churches and person-to-person contact; such methods as door-to-door visitation, evangelism or religious broadcasting are currently not permitted in the Soviet Union (a lot of Gospel broadcasts are beamed in from outside but their Christian message is often distorted by extreme fundamentalism, weird apocalyptic and anti-Communist politics); weddings, funerals and house-parties to celebrate a family moving into a new home, are also times of Christian celebration and proclamation.

The public situation in respect of religion in the U.S.S.R. is complex and full of contradictions. In schools and colleges, the young people are taught that all religions are the mythologies of the pre-scientific, pre-Communist era. They are also taught to respect the churches and Christian art of a millenium of Russian Orthodoxy, as sublime expressions of the artistic and aesthetic endeavours of the Russian people. Huge sums of public money are spent on restoring and preserving religious monuments; some Orthodox Cathedral choirs are maintained at public expense. The Baptists do not receive, and would not wish to, any such material assistance, but with the Orthodox share this atmosphere of contradiction. On the one hand, the Young Communist League will fulminate against the attractions of religion for the young; on the other, academicians will acknowledge the literary and historical value of the Bible for all educated people. Baptist ministers are dismissed as "the purveyors of dying ideas" yet find coming to them college students who say "we have been taught God does not exist, but we'd like to know from you, why you believe otherwise". "Our Government now acknowledges that our Church is not withering away, but is a living organism", Rev. Alexei Bichkov told me. Most Russian Baptists will not try to analyse the sociological factors helping the revival of religious interest in their country, and they certainly do not interpret it in any anti-Communist political way; most will simply say, "We pray constantly for revival, and God has given us revival!"

Undoubtedly a major factor in Baptist church growth is the very real commitment of church members to their fellowship, not only in terms of Sunday worship but also in terms of a profound and costly dedication of their time and talents. I had an almost amazing experience of this when I visited the main Baptist church in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan in Soviet Central Asia, last summer. This huge 1,300-member church is remarkable because its members are actually rebuilding it by their own labour (“the city authorities are providing the materials, we are providing the workers”), with work teams doing all aspects of the re-construction, under the supervision of one of their own number, a 30-year-old lady construction engineer. The church leaders proudly quote the remark of one of the Tashkent city councillors — “If you want to know about building, go and see how the Baptists do it!” — and there is certainly no trace of amateurism about the church premises, which include a spacious conference hall, a suite of study rooms and a small lending library. When I preached there, the main worship hall, designed to hold nearly a thousand people, was still bare and unfinished; the gallery was full of building equipment; but services were nevertheless being held throughout the process of re-building. Tashkent is not the only Soviet city where the Baptists are building or re-constructing their churches by their own labour; the All-Union Baptists are currently engaged on a major construction and church extension programme in many cities; fine new churches have been established at Alma Ata and other Central Asian cities; elsewhere new premises are rented or purchased. All this represents both a considerable sense of vision by the leadership of the All-Union Baptists, and a very real commitment of effort and money by the members in the churches.

Russian Baptists are willing to use their personal opportunities for church extension. In 1978 I preached at the small church in Novgorod, being privileged to be the first British Baptist to visit there. The fellowship was founded in 1967; it had grown from eighteen to ninety-five members over the first decade; the church did not have purpose-built premises, but used the extended front room of a private house, owned by a non-believer whose wife had been converted to Christ. She, aware of the need for premises, and knowing her house to be in a most convenient location, prevailed upon her husband to have the room enlarged and used solely for worship purposes! (He stood at the door, smiling benignly as we went in for the midweek service attended by sixty people, but he did not participate.)

The relationship of the All-Union Baptists to Soviet society is sometimes described by Western writers in stark terms of opposition and confrontation. My conclusion after several visits and many conversations with Baptists there, is to reject such description as misleading and much over-simplified. The sufferings of earlier decades were severe and real, but, thankfully, the context for the All-Union Baptists today is not Church-State conflict but a situation of continuous negotiation with the government Council for Religious Affairs, in which restrictions are steadily being eased and fresh possibilities are being developed. The current church building programme and increasing facilities for import and internal production of Bibles, are two significant examples. Indifference, and ‘consumer materialism’, rather



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Anyway, to get back to this 'phone call. "Any news of the Mission? We have a few column inches to fill, and I wondered if anything interesting had happened." I thought for a few moments, but nothing immediately came to mind. So I thanked the reporter — asked him to keep in touch, and rang off.

After all, he wouldn't consider it particularly important that an elderly lady in 'Rest-a-While' said "I reckon this is the nearest thing to heaven I've ever seen". — No headline there! The Editor wouldn't exactly hold the front page to tell of a very recently bereaved lady, the mother-in-law of one of our local Anglican Clergy, who has felt so loved and valued during her two-week stay with us — "I'd recommend it to anyone" — she told me.

There would be little likelihood of a dramatic increase in circulation because the paper contained the story of folk at Greenwoods or The Parsonage — folk who had been despised and humiliated and rejected by so many, that the love and strength of Jesus seemed an impossible dream ..... until the dream came true through the Mission's ministry.

"Nothing special to report" I said. And the newspaper reporter agreed with me. BUT YOU KNOW BETTER, DON'T YOU?

Keep on praying — keep on giving, and encouraging others to do the same.

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Superintendent Minister

than the challenge of philosophical atheism, are the main barriers to Baptist advance. Other obstacles have nothing to do with Communism. In Soviet Central Asia, the vast majority of religious people are Islamic, whether by tradition and family culture, or by actual religious practice as well. The vitality of Islam in regions such as Uzbekistan cannot be doubted by the perceptive visitor. Christians are doubly a minority, both in relation to ideological Marxism-Leninism and to Islamic society. Conversions to evangelical Christianity from Islam are not frequent, but are happening. A considerable revival is under way among Baptists in Soviet Central Asia: while some of the converts are among Russian immigrants from the European regions, others are from indigenous Islamic nationalities. The social pressures in Islamic society against conversion to Christian faith are as strong in the Soviet Union as anywhere else in the Islamic world. The Christian convert can readily experience a total rejection from his family circle, and the church has to be much more than a Sunday worshipping fellowship: "it has to provide a whole new family, a whole new nexus of personal relations, for the new Christian." At Tashkent, I was privileged to meet a young Kazakh girl recently converted to Christ. She had counted the cost and accepted it — and the church was being "a new family" to her.

In other ways we might find surprising, Soviet society inadvertently assists the advance of the Gospel. I recall a conversation I had before morning service with the deacons at the Volgograd church. I was asked to explain why the Church in Britain was numerically in decline, "when you have so many colleges and such fine preachers"(!) I tried to explain about the challenge of secularism in Western society. Then one of the deacons remarked: "The trouble in your country is that you have too much freedom of literature and films. In our society, such things as pornography, nihilism and violence in literature and media are not allowed, for such things are anti-human. They are also anti-Christian." He had no doubt that the suppression of evil cultural influences in this way, through the state censorship system, benefited not only society but also the Church. The Western liberal-democratic tradition to which our British Baptist forbears contributed so much, would reject this approach. However, we must recognise that our Russian Baptist brethren come from a very different historical and cultural tradition, both as Russians and as Christians. While they certainly want the freedom to produce more Christian literature, they generally endorse the secular puritanism and moralism in Soviet culture and believe the exclusion of 'anti-human' and nihilistic tendencies in the arts and media, is a very positive feature of their society. Violence, sexual promiscuity, alcoholism and other forms of anti-social behaviour are customarily portrayed in a negative light in the Soviet media, and Soviet popular entertainment is generally of the 'wholesome' kind. The whole advertising paraphernalia of Western acquisitive society is totally absent from Soviet society, of course. Russian Baptists can be very patriotic, and their approval of such social norms is very much part of that patriotism.

It is my considered view that British Baptists need to develop a relationship with our brothers and sisters of the All-Union Evangelical Christians-Baptists, on a much more regular and systematic basis, than has hitherto been the case. I have been assured more than once by their leaders

that such a relationship would be much welcomed. Dr Ernest Payne and Dr David Russell, as General Secretaries of the Baptist Union, and in various capacities within the Baptist World Alliance and the European Baptist Federation, made several visits among Soviet Baptists; other prominent British Baptists such as Sir Cyril Black and Dr Morris West have also been guests of the All-Union Baptists; British Baptists' concern for those outside the All-Union fellowship in difficulties with the authorities, is much respected; Russian Baptist ministers have trained at Spurgeon's and Bristol colleges, and some All-Union leaders have attended our assemblies; but to my knowledge our Baptist Union has never formally established a policy of regular, mutual, ongoing official contacts. It may well be that Rev. Bernard Green's visit earlier this year may lead in the long term to a fresh appraisal of the situation; I do hope so. For in our continent of Europe so divided by the man-made frontiers of the bloc and ideology, Christians have a very special responsibility to be bridge-builders and 'ministers of reconciliation', and we as Baptists, in Britain and the Soviet Union, have a particular responsibility towards healing the misunderstandings and separations between our respective societies.

**Brian G. Cooper**

*(Brian G. Cooper, MA, BLitt, is founder and director of Christian Action for East-West Reconciliation and European Representative of the London Baptist Association.)*

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# Preaching from Romans 1 - 8

Twenty five years ago the Baptist Assembly was always held in London, and it was generally accepted that it always would be. Since that time, a modest reform has enabled us to gather in provincial centres as well, but in those days habit and custom were strong enough to over-ride the text of the Constitution which required that the meetings be held alternately in London and the provinces. Whenever that text was quoted in the Council during the 50's and 60's, it was met with the strictly non-expository reply that it was not practicable.

One by-product of those yearly visits to Westminster Chapel, however, was the opportunity to check up on how far Dr. Lloyd-Jones had travelled through the epistle to the Romans since we local yokels were last in town. He was working through a continuous exposition of the letter, week by week. I forget how long it took him. I forget, actually, whether he ever reached the end of it. Between one Assembly and the next he had moved on by a chapter, or maybe two.

That study was a programme for a weekday meeting — on Fridays, I think — and not Sunday sermons. But Zwingli in 16th century Zurich initiated a similar practice for his preaching on the Lord's Day. He commenced his ministry in the Cathedral Church in 1519, announcing that he would no longer restrict himself to the biblical passages prescribed for each Sunday of the year, but instead would preach on the entire Gospel according to Matthew from cover to cover. (For good measure, he had the Greek text in front of him on the pulpit.) One young humanist called Thomas Platter was so enthused by this innovation that he declared he felt as if he were being pulled up by the hair of his head.

Twenty five years ago or thereabouts I was myself enthused by the same idea — in the Zwinglian rather than the Lloyd-Jonesian intention — and so I inflicted on a long suffering congregation a series of sermons on the Gospel according to Mark. The exercise lasted well over a year, by which time I thanked God that Mark is shorter than Matthew. I recall, for example, reaching the story of the cleansing of a leper at Harvest Festival. No one in that 20th century congregation imitated Thomas Platter. A few of them, perhaps, lost some hair before the end was reached. One or two escaped mercifully to heaven.

Still, having set one's hand to the plough.... When it was all over, I did a Zwingli in reverse. I turned to a Lectionary arranged for the Calendar, and I have stayed with it ever since. So there is no way now that I would preach from Romans 1 through to Romans 8.

But why, I ask myself, is my remit just these eight chapters? Do they sound practicable, whereas sixteen do not? To be sure, all Protestant interpreters have concentrated on chapters 1 - 8 as the meat of the epistle; and rightly so. To be sure, some Protestant interpreters have shown a relative lack of interest in chapters 9 - 16; and not so rightly so; but as the Editorial Board of the Fraternal are not among them I conclude that they desire us all to consider afresh how we preach from what Luther called "the very centre and kernel of the epistle and all Scripture".

Luther said that of 3.21-31, which, as it happens, occurs in the Lectionary for the 7th Sunday before Christmas. This date, far more often than not, is also Remembrance Day. Such a date is itself a reminder that we all follow a Calendar of some sort, and that such a Calendar is affected by secular occasions as well as Christian seasons. What is then brought to that particular occasion is the reading of these words: "For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". What may then also be brought to that occasion is a sermon rooted in that text.

To ask what such a sermon should say on such a date is to raise a bevy of questions before we put pen to paper. The first of them, inevitably, is the exegetical one. What did Paul mean? The traditional Protestant answer goes something like this: the apostle is announcing how an individual sinner can become a righteous person in God's sight. James Price, however, has argued that Paul is concerned with a more fundamental question, namely, under whose dominion is the world? Price understands Paul's answer to that question to go something like this: the whole world belongs to God, a just God and a Saviour, and in and through Jesus Christ he is exerting his power to reclaim it.

Secondly, whatever may be the results of our exegetical probing, we are bound to ask how we understand the text of the epistle in its meaning for today's world. We are bound to reflect that we ourselves are conditioned in our hearing of it by the past centuries of the Church's witness. (That is partly to admit that eisegesis is always in fashion.)

Thirdly — and this is the crux of preaching, of the preparation of the words we use in our sermons — what will the *congregation* hear in what we say? For they also are conditioned, by their birth and background, by their daily work, by their family needs, by yesterday's football results, by the newspaper they read regularly — and on Remembrance Day by their own particular memories (or the lack of them) as well as by their convictions about war and peace. Last year we were all conditioned to some degree by our differentiated attitudes to the Falklands crisis.

The tools of preaching, like the tools of Scripture itself, are words. But these are also the tools of our everyday life. The business of the world is carried on by words, and they have a dangerous ambiguity. (P.J. Leenhardt once remarked wryly about the difficulties in an ecumenical discussion, "A truth crossing Catholic lips loses its original meaning when it passes through a Protestant ear.")

We have inherited Paul's words in our native tongue as "justification by faith". This is the language of the Revised Standard Version. What Paul wrote was "ek pisteos", which N.E.B., N.I.V. and T.E.V. all translate as "through faith". The apostle was certainly not saying that faith is the instrument of our salvation, and I assume there are plenty of people like me who regularly use the R.S.V. form without ever intending to convey that he did.

B.H. Streeter had this to say about these words of Paul, the words of an educated Jew passing through the ear of a cultured Gentile like Luke: "It is highly improbable that Luke had any clear appreciation of the real

significance of this aspect of Paul's thought — at any rate it is a commonplace of theologians that no other Church writer had it before Augustine, and he only in part. This aspect of Paulinism is, of its very nature, a reaction against a religion of law centring round a sacrificial system related to a deeply ethical sense of guilt. Medieval Latin Catholicism was another such religion, and therefore Luther understood this side of Paul; but no Greek ever did, or ever could — so why should Luke? What Luke and the Gentile Christians of his time deduced from Romans was the conclusion that the Mosaic Law was abrogated by Christ; but the more heartily people welcome a conclusion, the less need they often feel for really comprehending the argument by which it is reached.”

Let us, therefore, now ask our first question again. What did Paul mean? Was not he also conditioned? The record of the Old Testament gave him his working vocabulary. God is Lord, and God is righteous, and yet the wicked prosper, the ungodly triumph and the poor are oppressed. God's righteousness still needs to be vindicated in human history.

The apostle's tools were words. With them he articulated his faith, wrote his epistles and preached his sermons. But he lived as a missionary in the context of an acute crisis. The urgent task before him was that of declaring on what terms the Gentiles might become members of the Church of God. So he expounded the Gospel, not as some hasty improvisation by God to a plan that was going wrong, but as the meaning of his purpose for creation from the beginning and therefore as the key to the life of Jew and Gentile together. But this meant for him, a devout reader of the Old Testament and a Pharisee to boot, an upheaval of mind so drastic that he was forced to use language like “the unsearchable riches of Christ” or “that he might be just and the Justifier of him that believes”.

What Paul did was to use metaphors with a corporate connotation. He invariably strained them to their limits. (Sometimes, we may think he took them beyond their limits.) He used the language of commerce and law and religion, taking it from the market-place, the court and the temple. He has often been criticised for using allegedly impersonal categories, but, as Gordon Rupp once put it, “those who complain of his figures as abstract, and as unsuited to express personal relationships, might walk through the City of London, pass the Royal Exchange, the Old Bailey and the Cathedral of St. Paul. They will find there, as in the heart of any city from the most ancient times, those same figures...and be reminded that the language of transaction, of judgement and of sacrifice sums up a good deal of the life of man in its corporate existence.”

In Pauline usage, justification is a metaphor. It is also a forensic term, and none the worse for that. The overwhelming majority of exegetes are sure that its meaning is “to declare righteous” and not “to make righteous”. It thus brings into sharpest focus the reality that Christians still fall into sin. Paul the Pharisee had no desperate problem with sin. Paul the proclaimer of the grace of God did. If Christ has already achieved the salvation of God which he bestows, then there is a massive contradiction between what Christians have by faith and what we shall have at the last day.

Now let us ask our second question again. How do we understand the meaning of justification in today's world? For one thing, the context of our



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preaching is a far cry from that of Paul's. The way in which we proclaim the Gospel, even in a place where race relations are volatile, is different from his — precisely because he won his battle for one Church of Jesus Christ within whose fellowship Jewishness or Gentileness was of no significance. For another thing, we are not the coiners of this revolutionary language. We have inherited it through the processes of history. Four and half centuries ago, justification by faith was a phrase reverberating all round Europe. Luther was a leading source of the noise. Like Paul, he was truly a child of his own time and place. Also like Paul, he recognised both the gravity of sin and the costliness of grace. But the days of Luther's idiom have gone.

What began as a watchword of the Reformation became in due course little more than a slogan. Today it is not even that. As Hans Kung has written, "It has rightly been observed that the question most disputed at the time of the Reformation now leaves people in the Protestant Churches just as cold as those in the Catholic Church." Kung himself is not pleased by the drop in temperature. On the contrary, he is convinced that the matter is as vitally important as ever. Indeed, his comment is that it may be even more important now, in a society where people are judged increasingly by what they have achieved.

That, perhaps, is a subtle hint on how we prepare a sermon from the text of Romans 1 - 8. Kung the contemporary Roman Catholic commends the insight of the Reformers. But out of the processes of the history of the last 400 years he makes two comments. One is that the Protestant emphasis on man's dependence on God alone for his salvation led, paradoxically, to the Protestant work ethic which fostered a society dominated by the idea of achievement. The other is that thinking in terms of efficiency finally becomes a serious threat to our humanity, and that our liberation from it comes from realising that what ultimately matters is not our achievement but justification by faith alone.

And so to the asking of our third question again. What will the congregation hear in our preaching? The viaduct of time which spans the distance between the writing of the letter to the Romans and our reading of it today has carried it through several changes of scenery. No longer is there, and not ever again will there be, any debate as to *whether* Gentiles may have their place in God's covenant people. Yet the epistle is no museum piece. I suspect a good sermon on Romans 3.21-31 will not once use the phrase "justification by faith", although it will doubtless refer to the ways in which we all seek to justify ourselves.

I hope it has been judged fair and proper for me to stay at length with this theme. It seemed to me more worth-while than some sort of analysis of the eight chapters. I turn now, more briefly, to three other texts. (The Lectionary is still in my hand.)

On the 8th Sunday before Christmas 7.7-12 occurs as a reading. It comforts me not a little to turn to Keith Nickle's commentary on this paragraph. "Scholars have invested considerable energy in debating whether Paul is talking about everybody or just himself, and whether he means the human condition before or after trusting God's act in Jesus Christ. My inclination is to take the least wearisome route of assuming that the section admits of all the possibilities suggested without excluding any."

6.1-11 is the Epistle for the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost. In my Baptist

freedom, I usually extend that to verse 14. The Lectionary, after all, is not a law under which we are bound. But the way it jiggles about with Romans in the course of two years, as indeed with the other biblical books, reflects its grasp of the wholeness of Scripture in the ministry of the Word and thereby its sense of what is fitting on a particular day in the year. Romans, however, is carved up in this treatment. I do not find this open to objection. Few books of the Bible can be read from beginning to end in Sunday worship. More to the point, few books lend themselves to consecutive reading from beginning to end through many Sundays. Preaching depends on Bible study, but is not itself Bible study.

Yet what is carved up in Romans is a consecutive argument. The content of 6.1-11 not only depends on 5.12-21 but is itself part of a unit which does not conclude until 8.39. The preacher, being aware of that, should hardly be drawing it to the congregation's awareness in a sermon. In one respect at least the text has by now cut away for us the thread of that battle Paul fought and won in his lifetime. By chapter 5 the distinction between Jews and Gentiles has disappeared. Now Paul writes repeatedly about "all" or "the many". Adam represents the entire human race.

In another respect, however, the text is anticipatory. Our new life with or in the risen Christ is yet to be given a conceptual development as life in the Spirit. That comes in chapter 8.

The baptismal language of Romans 6 is explicit. Christ has died for us; we have died to sin with him; this is God's gracious decision. We may well ask, as citizens in a pragmatic world, what on earth is there left for us to do? Every time this chapter is read the old Pelagian controversy, whose ashes go on smouldering in Britain, is fanned again. Two features in the chapter seem to me to stand out in bold relief. One of them is the moral commitment of baptism, the "walk in newness of life". The other is the use of the future tense: "we shall be united with him...we shall also live with him".

It is this moral commitment to live according to the future, this ethic of the eschaton, which is so unavoidable in the text and (for me, at any rate) so very hard to express in sermonic words.

The Lectionary follows a two-year cycle. So far, I have referred only to Year 1. It is in Year 2 that Romans 8 comes into its own. Festively so. Some section of it is chosen on no fewer than four Sundays. One of them, as it happens, is again the 7th Sunday before Christmas, where verses 18-25 are set (to which I add verses 26-27). Exegetically complicated and thematically pluralistic, it invites us to preach about present sufferings and future glory together, to preach about the groaning prayer of the Church and the groaning travail of all creation in the same breath. For the Spirit of God is our intercessor.

This article stops rather than ends with a jolt at 8.26. We preachers find many ways of encouraging the discipline and privilege of prayer among all God's children. We proclaim the Gospel within an Order of worship which is cemented into one total movement with prayer. There are other words in Romans (cf 12.12) and in Paul's other letters which make it clear we are in good company when we stress the importance of prayer. It is only within that setting and in that conviction that we may hear — and then preach from — these words: "we do not know how to pray as we ought".

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# Christianity and Politics

During the recent General Election our local Council of Churches and the town's U.N.A. group arranged a public meeting at which questions were put to four of the new constituency's parliamentary candidates. I telephoned the news desk of our local radio station to tell them about it.

"And what are the churches doing, getting mixed up in politics?" came the quizzical response.

I murmured something about the Kingdom of God being concerned with justice and peace, and explained that we were offering the candidates an independent forum and the opportunity of speaking to a large audience on important issues, some of which were not high on the campaign agenda. The voice at the other end of the line seemed to accept this unsatisfactory reply, and we carried on with the business in hand.

That little episode illustrates some of the questions which are raised by the conjunction of "Christianity" and "Politics". Is Christian faith at all concerned with the world of politics, and should the churches get mixed up in it? If so, how do we establish the relationship? Does the bible offer us answers to political questions, or is the task more complex? And what is the role of the churches? Are they simply independent forums, or do we have a responsibility as congregations, denominations and ecumenically to make political pronouncements?

In this article I want to indicate some directions for further exploration of these contentions and complex issues.

## Political involvement

Recent events within the Church of England have only served to reinforce the urgency with which some, both inside and outside the churches, are questioning Christian involvement in politics. The rewording of the National Anthem to avoid overtones of imperialism; the determination that the Falklands Memorial Service should be an occasion for repentance and reconciliation, rather than national rejoicing; and the report "The Church and the Bomb": all have provoked critical and hostile reaction from some quarters, as well, let it be said, as appreciative comment from others. In recent years the theology emerging from some third world countries, in particular those of Latin America, has been criticised as a politicisation of the gospel. And the World Council of Church's Programme to Combat Racism has been attacked as an improper use of church funds.(1)

In Baptist circles there are some who, despite the long tradition of social concern in the denomination, and the recent growth of interest in conservative evangelical circles, continue to see the gospel in purely individual and other-worldly terms. The fact that Dr. David Russell in his presidential address at this year's assembly felt it necessary to declare so emphatically, "If I am condemned for dabbling in politics so be it; for politics too stands in need of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ" shows that he anticipated some hostile response to his theme.(2)

A recent article by Paul Ballard in Baptist Quarterly helpfully evaluates some of the strands in the critique of Christian involvement in politics.(3) He

indicates the need not simply to respond to the various lines of argument with counterargument, but also to be sensitive to the truths that critics are pointing to.

Thus those who warn against the Christian community becoming identified with a particular ideology are highlighting the perennial danger of the church being used as a tool of the right or the left. Certainly the church cannot be absolutely separated from its cultural environment. Nor can Christians withdraw into a safe area of political neutrality; political inactivity is political acquiescence. Nevertheless there is a proper concern for a more distinctively Christian critique of society which, while drawing on all the secular resources available for assessment, does not simply endorse conclusions reached on other grounds. The Christian lives in a constant tension between his loyalty to Christ as Lord and his commitment to service in the world.

Similarly, to the assertion that Christianity is concerned with personal faith it can readily be responded that people are not simply individuals, that corporate structures create the conditions of life, and that sin is institutional as much as it is personal. But the need for real spirituality remains. "Systems are empty without people of integrity to run them."

And, though the Docetic rejection of incarnation is apparent in the claim that the absolute demand and final grace of the Gospel stand completely apart from the sordid reality of history, it is all too easy to forget that the word of God does stand over against us, and to bridge the gap with our own favourite bits of the gospel.

At this point the central theological grounding for Christian involvement in politics emerges. It is the conviction that in Jesus we see God's creative, saving involvement in the world personally expressed. Jesus, like every other person, was not an isolated individual; he belonged to a family, a community, a nation. Deliberately and self-consciously he stepped onto the public stage of his day with the message that God's rule of love and justice was on the point of being established in the world. This message, demonstrated in his actions and embodied in his own person, was not simply for individuals but for society as a whole. But it did not fit any of the contemporary party lines, and inevitably the man who demonstrated and embodied it was torn apart by the "parallelogram of forces" on which he was stretched.<sup>(4)</sup> He was publicly executed as a religio-political dissident. This man Jesus Christians believe to be Son of God. And that means that we proclaim him not simply as the Saviour of individual people but as their Saviour in all the dimensions of their lives, including the political. God is involved in the world, and in the name of Jesus he calls us to be involved.

A call to involvement on its own is, however, not enough. As Ballard points out, we need to offer a distinctively Christian contribution to political debate. How is that to be done? What are our resources? And does our faith in Christ entail specific commitments and actions?

## **Biblical answers?**

It might seem as if the way to move to a more specifically Christian presentation would be to seek in the Bible for principles which we can then

apply to our contemporary situation. This appears to be the position of Ronald Sider in his influential "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger."(5). He declares that it is possible to answer questions about God's bias toward the poor only after searching for biblical answers to five other related questions (page 53), and he speaks of "revealed principles of justice in society". Nevertheless he himself admits that the Bible does not offer the blueprint for a new economic order, and he acknowledges the large gulf between revealed principles and contemporary application (page 183f).

The structure of the book itself indicates that even this is an oversimplification of the relationship between the Bible and today's world. The first two chapters are devoted to an account of the widening gap between rich and poor in the world, an account which is not, indeed cannot be, purely descriptive. It incorporates moral judgements about the degrading effects of poverty, the use of wealth, the power of advertising, the rationalisation of affluence, which are made without any reference to biblical principles, and presuppose that the gap between rich and poor is morally indefensible.

In the final part of the book Sider slips from talk of "fundamental biblical principles" to talk of "basic theological presuppositions" as if the two were synonymous. They are so only if "biblical" means the selective use of texts and passages drawn indifferently from various parts of the bible to support a rationally developed argument. The bible as a whole is however not homogenous, systematic or always internally self-consistent. For example people can — and have — drawn from the bible very different messages about the place of war in the ordering of affairs between states. What Sider offers is theology of a particular sort interpreting, as all theology does, biblical material and themes in the context of traditional and contemporary systematised convictions about God and the world. I do not want to underestimate the challenges which Sider's book offers to our thinking and action about the poor of the world. My concern is rather to point to the need for a more self-consciously theological approach to political issues, one which is not content with a catena of biblical texts but which recognises the place of tradition and reason (to use the traditional categories) in theological argument.

## **Negative Critique**

In seeking to develop such an approach I begin by returning to the tension between our loyalty to Christ and our commitment to the world. This tension implies a critical stance towards the powers and authorities of the world. The transcendence of God and the Lordship of Jesus relativise the status of every political authority. In a sense we are travelling along the *via negativa* in the reverse direction. Instead of preserving the mystery of God by a negation of all the characteristics of the created order we are defining, de-limiting the created order, and here in particular the political order, by reference to the complete otherness of God.

Already in ancient Israel the deep and abiding suspicion of the institution of the monarchy expressed in 1 Samuel 8 rested not only on the painful experience of royal power but also on the religious ideology which

sustained it. Despite attempts to differentiate the divine sonship ascribed to Jewish kings from that of neighbouring rulers the suspicion never vanished that in having a king the people of Israel and Judah had indeed rejected the sovereignty of God.

The political consequences of allegiance to Jesus as Lord in the early church can be seen in the rejection of the authority of the Sanhedrin (compare Acts 4,18ff) and crucially in the refusal to offer homage to the Roman emperor as divine. In the Graeco-Roman world into which the church moved the tension and potential conflict between the one God and the many lords had, however, already been recognised. Stoic philosophy saw a difference between, on the one hand, the mythical theology of the theatre and the political theology of state religion, both of them together belonging to the public life of particular communities, and, on the other hand, the metaphysical theology of the philosophers which by contrast offered a universal faith capable of encompassing the whole human race. The early Christian apologists embraced this Stoic contrast in order to advance the claims of the church to be the potentially uniting factor in the Roman Empire. With the adoption of the Pax Christiana as the foundation of the crumbling Pax Romana Christianity entered a new era in which Christian theology was constantly laid open to the twin dangers of being taken over as the political theology of the Christian state and of being used to advance the claims of ecclesiastical power.

As the medieval universe of church and state broke apart under the strain of its inner ambiguities and tension Rousseau picked up the Stoic theme in his distinction between civil religion and the religion of humanity and transposed it into a new context where the churches had been the instruments of state religion. Later writers politicised Rousseau's private religion of humanity, looking forward to a universal religion which would replace the religion of monarchic national states and lay the foundation for democratic freedom. The church, which in its origin had been declared "atheist" because of its rejection of the gods of the Roman Empire, now found the *via negativa* being used critically against its own support of state religion. The critique offered by a Christian political theology has to be self-critical as much as it is critical of self-absolutising power in the rest of society.

Jürgen Moltmann has outlined such a critical theology in terms of the theology of the cross (6) Jesus, accused in the eyes of his own community, executed as a political criminal, has been exalted by God. The glory of God now shines not in the jewelled crowns of princes but in the face of the crucified Jesus. The authority of God is represented not in the mighty of this world but in the outcast Son of Man. By negating the image of power and authority the theology of the cross radicalises the second commandment forbidding graven images. Idols are things people make and subject themselves to. For Luther even good works could be a form of idolatry. There is scarcely any area of life more thoroughly permeated by idolatry than politics. It is perhaps inevitable that those who represent a community in the political arena, whether elected or not, become estranged from those they represent. Representation can become domination as those who



exercise authority in the state, or the institutions of which they are a part, become more concerned with holding on to power than serving the community. On the other hand public expectation and media presentation can invest political leaders with an aura of glory which inflates the role they play and their capacity to solve the community's problems. It was J.Q. Adam, the fourth president of the U.S.A. who declared, "Democracy has no monuments. It mints no medals. It does not bear the head of a man on its coins. Its true nature is iconoclasm." A critical theology, grounded in the iconoclasm of the cross, will be concerned continuously to challenge and control the political images which people make for themselves.

In this spirit Thomas Helwys presented his plea for religious tolerance to James I. "Our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he hath no authority as a king but in earthly causes, and if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more." Indeed Baptist origins lie in part in a critique of churches sustained by and themselves sustaining the power of the state, whether at Grebel and Manz's Zurich or in the England of Helwys and Smyth. Some Baptists, in their enthusiasm for the independence of the local church, all too easily overlook the fact that that independence was won, not from other independent churches, but from a church institutionally intertwined with the apparatus of political power.

Baptists like other Dissenters were, however, not simply a protest movement. They were motivated by a positive conception of the church as a meeting of believers who had freely covenanted together, and they saw this pattern of church life as playing a full part in the life of society. It would be all too easy for negative critique to lead to an emigration into a sectarian ghetto. But the crucified Jesus is the one whom God has raised from death. In patristic and medieval theology the *via negativa* was pursued, not for its own sake, but in order to set limits to the *via eminentiae*, preserving positive affirmation about the being and nature of God from theological idolatry. Those positive affirmations remain a necessary part of the theological task; a gospel which has only a negative message is scarcely good news. A Christian concern for politics has a similar affirmative task; our loyalty to Christ drives us back into the world.

## **Positive Affirmation**

The glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ sheds its light on the world. As we travel the *via eminentiae* in reverse we receive and share a vision of God. This vision can take a variety of forms. For Dr Russell it is clearly the kingdom of God, overcoming evil of every'king in the world, which motivates his political concern. The central image informing Sider's thought is that of the justice of God which, precisely because of its complete impartiality, discriminates in favour of those who are oppressed. Running through the whole of Moltmann's work is the theme of freedom, the history of liberation and emancipation through Christ.

The function of the vision is not to preempt or replace rational argument. Rather it motivates concern, lays hold on us, acting as a call, an invitation, a challenge to realisation, much as the divine call laid hold on the prophets of

ancient Israel. "I have a dream", declared Martin Luther King Jr., and for the sake of that dream of universal brotherhood and sisterhood he gave his life.

And the vision guides and informs our political judgment, offering a pattern, a framework within which we make decisions. We do not come to political situations cold but start with initial biases for certain values based on the vision of God's world offered us by our Christian faith. J. Philip Wogaman calls these initial biases "moral presumptions". (7) He himself delineates four positive presumptions — the goodness of the created order, the value of individual life, the unity of the human family in God and the equality of persons before God — and two negative presumptions — human finitude and sin. As he points out it is not as if any one of these could structure our decision-making but taken together they help us to engage our minds more clearly in the complex task of moral judgement where it is more often the case of choosing between grey and grey rather than between black and white. Wogaman adds a further complexity in the shape of polar presumptions like the polarity between the individual and the social nature of man, but to a certain extent these simply articulate tension already implicit in the positive and negative presumptions. He shows how these presumptions bear on political judgements. For example the goodness of the created order presumes against actual preparation for a nuclear war which would make the earth uninhabitable. The conviction that God loves individual people presumes in favour of the civil liberties upheld in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. The unity of humankind in God challenges all those barriers of race, class, creed and nationality which divide the human family, and the equality of all persons in God predisposes in favour of a fair distribution of the earth's resources. The awareness of human finitude and sinfulness puts into question any political system which assumes that some persons are infallible or morally perfect, and suggests a strong presumption in favour of the underdog.

Wogaman does not write in the explicitly visionary style of, say, Moltmann. And yet the moral presumptions for which he carefully argues are all drawn from a uniting vision, an ultimate reference, a centre of value — "the community of love and justice which Christians understand by faith to be the kingdom of God." (Page 220. Compare page 240, "God's intended community of love and justice.")

We need a vision of that kind, both to motivate political concern and to inform political judgement. Every system of thought, even the most secularised is directed by some transcending, embracing picture of the order of things. The Christian vision is inspired by the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ. In him we glimpse a new creation in which human needs are satisfied, divided groups are reconciled and people are released to celebrate the love of God. That vision finds expression in worship as we rejoice in the goodness of God's creation, receive the good news that in Christ God forgives his people and are renewed by his Spirit for service in the world. The eucharist above all, the feast of offering, thanksgiving and sharing opens up a vision of creation as God intends it to be, and challenges those who participate to seek peace and justice in the world. (8)

## Concrete Commitment

Such a vision expressed in worship and articulated in moral presumptions does not lead of itself to specific political options. It is not as if we have replaced the bible as a source of answers to political questions by an affirmative theology. The moral presumptions outlined by Wogaman do set limits to what is acceptable in Christian terms; they make it impossible, for example, for a Christian to advocate blatantly racist policies. And they do offer a set of priorities when working out the most acceptable of a range of political choices. But Wogaman himself admits that within those limits and guided by those priorities Christians will differ in the specific judgements they make.

So we are left with a church catholic, embracing a plurality of political views. Ballard puts very clearly the need for there to be dialogue and even conflict within the fellowship of faith as people of differing yet limited experience and perspectives work through the tension of standing by their own convictions while remaining open to others of different persuasion. But is diversity comprehended within wholeness an adequate response to the vision of God in Christ? Is the church, locally, nationally or ecumenically, simply an independent forum where people of differing political views can meet in the one fellowship of Christ? Or does the church and those who speak on its behalf have a responsibility to advocate particular policies?

Ballard himself admits that this is a key issue. He responds with an analysis of what constituted the authority of a church study or pronouncement in terms of the power of the body which issues it, the integrity of the persons involved, the processes of consultation and the intrinsic worth of the material produced or statement made. This sociological approach is helpful as far as it goes. But in the end I do not think it takes us beyond the recognition that authority depends on acknowledgement in the church or in any other social group. We are still no nearer establishing whether there are any grounds for making specific political pronouncements or taking particular political actions.

A way forward may be found if we reflect on what it means for the church to be the body of Christ, the concrete embodiment of God's will for the world. It was in this direction that Bonhoeffer was exploring when, in one of the earlier fragments of his projected "Ethics" he spoke of ethics as conformation to Christ, incarnate crucified and risen, and asked how Christ takes form among us, here and now. (9) He called for concrete judgements and decisions to be ventured, concrete commandments and instructions to be offered. The theme of the concrete commandment is one that runs right through Bonhoeffer's work. In 1932, in an article entitled "What is the church?" he spoke of the two political words of the church. (10) The first word, corresponding to our "negative critique", is the call to recognise the proper limits of politics and disengages the church from allegiance to parties. The second word is a concrete commandment. It is not to be confused with a political programme but may involve identifying with a particular party for its implementation. That summer, in a paper presented to a Youth Peace Conference (11) he explored more fully the way a concrete

commandment avoids the generality of, for example, the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself, which leaves the application to the individual. It is he said, not enough for the church to say there should be no war but there are necessary wars. It should be able to say of a particular war, "Engage in it" or "Do not engage in it." Before it can make such a pronouncement the church must know all the details of the situation. But there is always the risk that some relevant information or point of view has been overlooked. However, rather than retreating to general principles the church should be ready to venture, in God's name, either an intentional silence or a definite commandment, recognising that in so doing it blasphemed but trusting in the promise of divine forgiveness. At that time Bonhoeffer believed the World Alliance of Life and Work had recognised a definite commandment to establish international peace. He himself saw peace, however, not as an absolute ideal but as controlled by the values of truth and right, for the sake of which it might be necessary to engage in struggle. He was nevertheless clear that war as a means of struggle was completely forbidden by God, because modern weapons made it mutually self-destructive.

The relevance of this discussion to debates taking place fifty years later is striking. I think the points Bonhoeffer makes are still worth consideration. The theological basis for a concrete political statement is the presence of Christ in his church, a living dynamic presence which cannot be tied to a programme or ideology. The specificity of the statement derives from careful research into the facts of the situation and their varying interpretation. But though spoken in the name of Christ, it will recognise that it is not the last word and remain open to correction. While not in itself committed to a particular political party, its implementation will challenge its audience to consider the appropriateness of their party allegiance.

The theme of international peace is once again firmly on the agenda. The working party of the Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England have done all the churches a service by their thorough examination of the issue of nuclear weapons and the Christian conscience in their report "The Church and the Bomb." (12) Though the General Synod did not pass the motion presented by that working party's chairman, the Bishop of Salisbury, it did accept a weaker resolution which at least condemned the first use of nuclear weapons. At the Baptist Union Assembly no resolution was put at the end of the debate on this issue. The reason given was pragmatic; the fear of a welter of amendments. Perhaps there was also a fear of dividing the Assembly. And there is the underlying question of the authority of such a gathering. But does the Assembly not have the authority to speak, by its vote, a word in the name of Christ? Would not a resolution that made clear the moral unacceptability of the use of nuclear weapons command the assent of a huge majority, whatever people's views on deterrence and disarmament. And even if a much more specific resolution, advocating a nuclear freeze and British unilateral nuclear disarmament within NATO, were not passed at an Assembly would not the well-publicised fact that it was to be proposed specifically challenge local churches to discern for themselves the concrete commandment of God,

“for us, here and now”?

The question of concrete commitments is a difficult one. But if the living Christ does make himself known in the corporate life of the church it is a question we have to face. It may have been valuable to have engaged in offering our local community the opportunity of hearing their parliamentary candidates on the same platform. But we need, too, to speak and act in ways which will open others to the vision we have of God in Jesus Christ. Concrete commitment is the goal of political involvement.

### Footnotes:

1. See especially E. Norman, *Christianity and the World Order*, Oxford 1979.
2. D.S. Russell, *Yours is the Kingdom*, Baptist Union 1983.
3. P.H. Ballard, *How far ought the Church to be politicalised?*, The Baptist Quarterly Vol. XXX No.1 January 1983, pages 15ff.
4. Compare Hans Kung's account in *On Being a Christian*, Collins 1977, paper 175ff.
5. R.J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Hodder and Stoughton 1978.
6. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. S.C.M.  
I also draw on an earlier essay, *Theologische Kritik der Politischen Religion in Kirche im Prozess der Aufklärung*. München 1970.
7. J.P. Wogaman, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgment*, S.C.M. 1976.
8. Compare *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, W.C.C., Geneva 1982, pages 10ff.
9. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Collins 1964, pages 80ff, esp. page 88.
10. D. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*. Collins 1965, paper 156ff.
11. D. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* pages 157ff.
12. *The Church and the Bomb*, Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience. Hodder and Stoughton 1982.

## FROM YOUR COMMITTEE

The Librarian, George Neal, reports that the sale of the Fellowship's Library during the Nottingham Assembly has realised the gross total of £370.00. So far £300 has been sent to the EUROLIT fund to provide books for our colleagues in Eastern Europe. In addition several parcels of books selected from the Library by Rev. Alec Gilmore have also been dispatched to ministers in Eastern Europe.

There are, however, still considerable numbers of books with local fraternal or individual ministers. Those who have Fraternal Library books are asked either to return them to George Neal or if you wish to keep them to send a cheque for what you consider to be their value. (Remembering the cause to which any further monies received will be allocated.)

Those who were present at the Pastoral Session were enthralled by Dame Cecily Saunders' address. Members will therefore be interested to know that copies of the address are available on video cassette. Please contact Vic Sumner for further details.

The Offering at the Pastoral Session for the Benevolent Fund totalled £252, by far the highest amount ever received for this Fund. This will enable us to continue to help members and their families as needs become known to the

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This scheme, which comprises twelve self-contained flats, provides sheltered accommodation for a total of eighteen senior citizens and includes a laundry, communal lounge, a lift and a guest bedroom for the use of visitors. Llys Caeglas is alongside Greenfield Baptist Church and is built on the site of the former Sunday School building. The adjoining cottage, which now forms an integral part of the development, has been refurbished to provide accommodation for the Warden.

Completion is scheduled for early July and the Official Opening will be held on 10th September, 1983.

General Secretary,  
Baptist Men's Movement Housing Association Limited,  
Baptist Church House,  
4 Southampton Row,  
London,  
WC1B 4AB.

officers. Last year grants totalling £295 were made from the fund.

A number of copies of the 1983 Churches Purchasing Scheme Booklet are still available. These can be obtained from either David Piggott or Jim Clarke, price £1.00 including postage.