

The Church—Today and Tomorrow

by ALAN FLAVELLE

What is the way forward for the church in our land? Is it to be evolution or revolution? William Temple, one of the most perceptive of Anglicans, pointed out that "the supreme wonder of the Christian Church is that always, in moments when it has seemed most dead, out of its own body there has sprung up new life, so that in age after age it has renewed itself". Howard Snyder, on the other hand, claimed that "for a radical gospel (the biblical kind) we need a radical church (the biblical kind). For the ever-new wine we must constantly have new wineskins. In short, we need a cataclysm".

We must bear in mind what the church essentially is. Hans Kung, the progressive Roman Catholic scholar, says: "[the church] is the community of the new people of God called out and called together". The emphasis here is salutary: people, the people of God, the people of God in community. As John Havlik says: "the church (in Scripture) is never a place, but always a people; never a fold, but always a flock; never a sacred building, but always a believing community". In other words, the church is to be seen, in Peter's phrase, as "God's own people".

However there is another side to the church, the institutional side. Any group of people, meeting together regularly, doing things together, inevitably becomes an institution. Whenever we give form or order to an activity, it becomes institutional. When our way of doing things becomes ineffective or unproductive, the institution that we have created no longer fulfils the purpose for which we created it. What we need then is institutional renewal. Where this is not possible, old structures or patterns of behaviour have to be discarded and new ones developed. What we must see to in church life is that the institutional element remains functional; that is, it must work.

Before we proceed too far in attempting to analyse or to criticise the institution we must look first of all at *THE SPIRIT THAT WE SHOW WITHIN TODAY'S CHURCH*.

Certain things are obvious. There is *defective commitment*. Paul exemplifies the spirit of total commitment when he says: "for me to live is Christ" . . . "we make it our aim to please him" . . . "one thing I do . . . I press on". It seems to me that the commitment that most people in our congregations make to Christ and the Church is but one commitment among many—on a par with what they make to, say, the Rotary Club or the Women's Institute, the Masonic Lodge or the Evening Class. They do not seem to see that the commitment for which Jesus Christ calls is of a totally different order. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania once told John Stott that when he meets someone who claims to be a committed Christian, he immediately

asks the question: "committed to what?" Relatively few of us are prepared for a specific commitment to one responsibility, especially if it threatens to disturb our comfortable way of life. Sir John Lawrence, a leading Anglican, puts it like this: "What does the average church member want? He wants a building that looks like a church . . . services of the kind he's been used to . . . ministers who dress in the way he approves of . . . and to be left alone!"

There is *limited expectation*. By and large, when we plan our programmes or outline our objectives, we look for the achievable—nothing more. We never put ourselves out on a limb (like Elijah on Carmel or Peter with the lame man) where we count on God alone. I have been greatly encouraged by what has been happening in the congregation of College Hill Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati. There has been a genuine work of spiritual renewal which has affected many people. Jerry Kirk, the pastor, traces this back to a moment when one of his members asked him: "what would you be attempting for God in College Hill if you had no thought of failure?" He saw in a flash that he had not been looking for things which only God could do. Part of our trouble in the church is that we have cut God down to our own size, imposing upon Him our own limitations. We do not "expect great things from God"; nor do we "attempt great things for God".

There is *superficial fellowship*. The New Testament always sees the life of the Christian as life in community. All-too-often we imagine that we can 'go it alone', ignoring the fact that we are "members one of another". How easily we hide ourselves from one another, striking a pose, building a façade; we are not willing to be open and honest with one another. Anything approaching true fellowship makes us feel threatened. In evangelical churches in particular we think it necessary to project a success image; we give the impression that we have everything neatly worked out—with no unanswered questions, no nagging doubts, no unmastered sins. And the sham of it all stinks! So often needy people are kept at a distance because we seem so self-assured, almost inhuman in our self-sufficiency. We need to tear off our masks, to let ourselves be seen as we really are—poor sinners living only by the grace of God.

There is *counterfeit religion*. A question asked by one of my younger friends struck home: "why are there so many phonies around the churches?" Why indeed? For so many of us, religion becomes a substitute for God, and where this happens the whole thing is a sham. How naturally we act a part or live a lie, showing that there is a Pharisee in the heart of every man. John Poulton says that "what communicates today is personal authenticity in a world self-consciously drilled to reject anything that is in the least bit phoney". Many people cry out for the real thing, yet this is often conspicuous only by its absence in our churches. Here is a question which posits something theologically unthinkable, but which also presents a challenge: "If God could die, and died tomorrow, how long would it be before the people in your church found out?" Part of the trouble in Ireland

arises from an inadequate experience of conversion. Many people, I am convinced, go through what is a purely cultural conversion, in which they exchange what I may call a 'worldly' pattern of self-centredness—centred in the pub or the dance-hall or the cinema—for a religious pattern of self-centredness—centred in the prayer-meeting or the Bible-study group. The heart remains unchanged. Genuine Christian experience only comes when we are radically altered, with life centred in, and controlled by, Jesus Christ.

What is missing among us is the breath of reality—the total commitment, the expectant spirit, the warm, open one-anotherness, the heart-religion, that carry the ring of truth. This I suggest, is not unconnected with what we must look at next: *THE STRUCTURES THAT WE USE WITHIN TODAY'S CHURCH*. Dr. J. Packer, speaking to the Council of the Evangelical Alliance, said: "One of the biggest hindrances to effective evangelism is that local churches, for the most part, are bound hand-and-foot by traditional, inward-looking structures. The problem is that these structures are virtuous—God has honoured them in the past—but because they are virtuous very few see clearly that they have become demonic—in the sense that the old enemy uses them to make it impossible for church people . . . to engage in creative evangelistic activity".

In part the problem is due to the unbiblical models of the church with which we work. Four of these have a decisive effect on our thinking: firstly, we see the church as a lecture hall, where believers go to hear a message expounded; secondly, we see the church as a theatre, where the faithful gather to see a performance presented by professionals; thirdly, we see the church as a corporation, efficient and programme-oriented, with a full-time staff to carry out the wishes of the people; finally we see the church as a social club, existing primarily for the enjoyment of its members, where they have certain needs met, in the same way as certain other needs are met by other organisations to which they belong.

Working with such models gives rise to a number of grave weaknesses in church-life. First, there is the *one-man ministry*, which makes the tacit claim that in the person of one full-time, well-trained 'minister' reside all the gifts needed to enable the people of God in the congregation to function as a community of faith. In most cases, if you take the minister away, the church ceases to operate—that is, unless a substitute can be found who is cut in the same omni-competent mould! According to Ephesians 4, the members are not in the church to enable the minister to fulfil his ministry, but he is there to equip them to fulfil their ministry. He trains or coaches them, but they do the vital work. This is not to play-down the role of the teacher-pastor; it is simply to set him free to do the work for which he is called. Incidentally, I feel that one of the reasons why so few of our ministers develop their own particular gifts to the full is that the system within which they work makes it impossible. It forces them to be "jack of all trades and master of none". Here is a test for a minister to face: do you train your gifted people so effectively that, even in your prolonged absence, the church can function at full throttle?

Then we have *the spectator-membership*, comprising people who, or the most part, are uninformed and uninvolved. Once a church member gets the idea that he 'goes to church' to listen, to watch, to pay his way, to enjoy himself—and nothing more—he will never see himself as a member of the crew or a worker on the team. At best he will be a spectator or passenger; at worst, a critic and a parasite. He will never learn by participation; he will never feel responsible; he will never get beyond the baby-stage where he is content to be spoon-fed. Such a person does not recognise that Christ gives gifts to every Christian, that all the gifts must be used together, and that a congregation only reaches maximum efficiency when all the gifts are in operation. Where gifts are not being used, where members are not playing their part, the whole life of the church is being deprived. I recently heard a minister say that 98% of his members never meet for prayer, never come to a Bible study, never engage in any kind of service. I felt it necessary to ask: is this in fact the church of Jesus Christ?

Think also of the *man-centred* worship, which brings no sense that God is in the midst. How seldom our people see that we worship God simply because He is God. We worship Him not because we are needy, but because He is worthy. How easily we forget that in every act of worship God is the audience. It is not that the 'up-fronters'—minister, organist, choir—can offer something to the 'back-seaters'—people in the pews; but that 'up-fronters' and 'back-seaters' together offer something to God. He is the one to whom the worship must be acceptable. Response to a service then should not so much be 'I enjoyed that' or 'that singing was great', but rather the inarticulate and ineffable sense that He was there and that He has been honoured by what we have done. One significant thing that has come home to me recently: older people like a form of service which is predictable—and feel threatened and uneasy when it is altered, while younger people like it to be varied and flexible—otherwise they feel bored. I sometimes think of it like this: because my wife is a living person, I have no reason to think that she would want me to tell her in exactly the same way several times a week that I love her. Why then should we imagine that God wants us to tell Him the same thing in the same way twice every week, fifty-two Sundays in the year? Surely since God is infinitely great, the ways in which we extol Him as the Greatest are (almost) infinitely variable. On the other hand, there is no virtue in 'change for the sake of change'. There is even less in what I call 'evangelical show-business', where every gimmick in the book is tried in an endless quest to vary the 'programme' to amuse the audience. A. W. Tozer, who speaks of worship as "the missing jewel of the church", makes this staggering claim: "it is almost impossible to gather a crowd where God is the only attraction".

Finally, there are the *bureaucratic strait-jackets*, with a built-in resistance to change. Every institution has its own bureaucracy, even where it operates behind the scenes. Many of our practices and procedures, our rules and regulations, were evolved at a time when society was far less complex, when the church could count on the loyalty of most of the population, when education was limited to the favoured few. Now the

situation is very different. Take some examples from our own Church. Why should one minister be employed full-time in serving a hundred families in the country when another man is over-taxed in serving five hundred families in a largely secularised urban area? Or why should the church abdicate responsibility for the inner-city when it becomes impossible to maintain existing buildings or established structures? Or why should we slow down the move towards team-ministries because officials tell us that "we must not proceed too quickly"? It is not without significance that in North America almost all the growing churches are independent in polity. Personally, I do not believe that the concept of an autonomous church is biblical, but there can be no doubt that such churches are free to get on with the job, unshackled by stultifying traditions. We are at a stage where flexible organisation, readiness to experiment and new patterns of church-life are urgently needed. I often think of the progress of Singapore. Its growth and prosperity may be traced to an attitude epitomised in the words of her Prime Minister, Lee Kwan Yew: "change is the essence of life. The moment we cease to change, to be able to adapt, to adjust, to respond effectively to new situations, then we have begun to die". Oh that the church would learn!

This brings us to another factor that we must examine: *THE STANCE THAT WE TAKE WITHIN TODAY'S CHURCH*. Here many different things call for comment, and I can only say a brief word about each.

(i) *We tend to concentrate on maintenance rather than mission*. One of my colleagues, David Lapsley, put it like this: "If we maintain numbers, if we maintain income at a higher level than expenditure, if we can maintain our buildings, then we feel we have fulfilled our responsibility". He adds: "too often we dissipate our energies on trivialities . . . self-preservation and the cross cannot belong together". One glaring example of this can be seen in the mainline churches in the Republic of Ireland, where they seem to see their work merely in terms of a holding operation. There is no sign of vision of, or commitment to, the growth of the church. How often the agenda in church committees is taken up entirely with fabric or finance. Even where growth is sought, we aim at growth by transfer—that is by drawing members from other congregations—rather than growth by conversion—winning new people from the ranks of the unchurched.

(ii) *We preserve a middle-class orientation*. Writing of the North American scene, Bruce Kenrick says: "Instead of seeking the lost sheep—whether black or white or speckled—[Protestants] sought out those who thought as they thought, dressed as they dressed, talked as they talked . . . The Protestant church was cutting itself off from them and neglecting the fact that the sign of the Kingdom is that the poor have the Gospel preached unto them". David McKenna, in similar vein, pointing out that poor people, when converted, "move up a class", says: "by leaving the ghetto behind, the church has implied that its mission is meaningless to the poor, the hopeless, and the wretched—except where an ocean separates the church from the ghetto". What really vigorous evangelistic programme is sponsored by any of the mainline churches in downtown Belfast today?

(iii) *We betray a denominational bias.* Most of us are seen to be good party men and women. In larger gatherings, we gravitate to those of our own kind; often in all kinds of subtle ways we sell-short those who do not go to the same place as we do or believe exactly the same things as we believe. When major issues are involved, we are prepared to play it safe with people of our own sort, rather than risk an independent stand with Christians of other traditions. In all the thirteen years of Ulster's Troubles, for example, evangelicals have never once come together to speak a word to the situation. In a day of unprecedented opportunity in the Republic, where there is an open-door for a broad-based evangelical approach, what do we find? A hectic rush in denominational empire-building, all of us eager to advance our own little cause. So we face the frightening prospect of a proliferation of the denominational churches so vividly portrayed in Saturday night's *Belfast Telegraph*. And all in the name of Christian outreach!

(iv) *We accept the political captivity of the church.* In many places in this country Ulster Protestantism passes without question as biblical Christianity, when in fact the former owes more to our culture than to Scripture. Commonly we confuse loyalty to Crown and Constitution with loyalty to Christ and the Gospel. How sadly we have departed from the simplicity that is in Christ, importing into the Gospel ideas that are utterly alien to its truth. We will not accept people simply because they believe in Jesus Christ, but add as necessary to salvation all sorts of conditions of our own. "Faith-in-Christ-plus" is the formula we employ: faith in Christ plus allegiance to a certain political party . . . or to a certain cultural lifestyle . . . or to a certain social pattern. "How can anyone be a true Protestant and not be a Loyalist?" asks a correspondent to one of our papers, not aware of the fact that, rightly understood one is a religious term and the other a political term. Very seldom is it admitted among us that one can be a perfectly orthodox Christian and not be a Unionist; or that one can be a true evangelical and reject outright the politics of extremism. Indeed, if I may 'raise a hare', I have often wondered why Ulster evangelicals are so determined to maintain the link with what is a virtually pagan Britain whose spiritual values and moral standards are increasingly decadent. It cannot be argued that we adopt this stance on purely biblical grounds!

Lest it be thought that I am concentrating too much on diagnosis and too little on prescription of a cure, let me add some observations that are more positive. What would I like to see evolve as we go forward with Christ? What is *THE STRATEGY THAT WE NEED IN TODAY'S CHURCH*? All I can offer is a set of guidelines, guidelines which I believe can be deduced from Scripture itself. Here are my priorities for the church in our land.

(i) *A prophetic ministry:* that is, a ministry that brings "the whole counsel of God" to bear upon the entire spectrum of human life. We need preachers who will not only proclaim the Word of God faithfully, but who will apply the Word faithfully. Perhaps the gravest weakness of the Ulster pulpit lies just here. Haddon Robinson, who has written a helpful book on

preaching, makes this point:

"If a man or woman decides to live under the mandate of Scripture, action will normally take place outside the church building. On the outside, people lose jobs, worry about their children, and find crabgrass invading their lawns. Seldom do people lose sleep over the Jebusites, the Canaanites or the Perizzites, or even about what Abraham or Paul or Moses has said or done. They lie awake wondering about grocery prices, crop failures, quarrels with a girl friend, diagnosis of a malignancy, a frustrating sex life, or the rat race where only the rats seem to win. If a sermon doesn't make much difference in that world, they wonder if it makes any difference at all".

Not only so, but we must get to grips with something over-and-above such individual concerns. We must apply the Gospel to the complex issues of society with which people have to grapple from day to day: poverty, hunger, unemployment, social justice, the arms race, class structures. "These", as John Stott says, "are the questions which fill our newspapers . . . How then can we ban them from the pulpit? If we do so in order to concentrate on 'spiritual' topics, we perpetuate the disastrous separation of the sacred from the secular . . . we divorce Christian faith from Christian life; we encourage a pietistic withdrawal from the real world; we justify Marx's well-known criticism that religion is an opiate which drugs people into acquiescence with the status quo; and we confirm non-Christians in their sneaking impression that Christianity is irrelevant". To what extent, we may ask, is the state of our society an indictment of the church's failure to give the biblical point of view on the whole of life, to spell out and to drive home the moral implications of the Gospel? If a minister says, "I keep politics out of the pulpit", can he absolve himself from all responsibility for the sub-Christian sentiments that people express and the unChristlike attitudes they display?

(ii) *A charismatic community*, that is, a community of people saved by the grace of God and blessed with the gifts of grace. We must create structures and patterns of worship in which these gifts are recognised for what they are, brought to maximum usefulness, and employed for the enrichment of the whole church. We must keep saying to our people—and to ourselves—know your gifts; train your gifts; use your gifts. I do not believe that all the gifts given by God to the New Testament church are present in any of today's churches; but I am convinced that God gives to His church in every age and in every place precisely those gifts which are needed for the enrichment of the church's life and the fulfilment of the church's task. How much congregational life is impoverished by our neglect of the gifts of grace. From my own experience, I can say that I have been surprised and excited in discovering such a variety of gifts among God's people. Many leaders within the mainline churches are rather afraid of excess and excitement; others have been grieved because of the presence of spurious gifts. This must not make us fear the Holy Spirit. As Tozer says: "The Holy Spirit is always the cure, never the cause, of fanaticism". We

must look to Him, the Lord and Giver of life, to revive our stagnant congregations. Cardinal Newman likened the church to an equestrian statue: the front legs are raised, ready to leap forward; the muscles of the back legs stand out, bulging with strength. As you look at the statue you expect it to spring forward at any moment. But, come back in twenty years, and it has not moved an inch. How like most of the churches I know!

(iii) *An eschatological perspective.* Two things are stressed in the New Testament teaching on the Kingdom of God: it is in one sense "here and now"; in another sense it is "not yet". As Christians, we already share in the life of the world to come; united to Christ in His death and resurrection, we have been brought into a totally new order of existence. But, for all that, our salvation is not yet complete. We are on the way, but we have not yet arrived. Thus Visser't Hooft can say: "To build the church is not to build a solid institution . . . at home in the world . . . It is rather to organise a band of pilgrims on the way to a new and better country". The goal towards which we strive determines the direction in which we move. As individuals we are told to be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect", and though we shall never attain that standard this side of heaven, all our efforts must be directed towards attaining it. We are exhorted in Paul's Letter to the *Ephesians* to show that the church is one, and while we may never fully display that unity on this earth, all our planning and praying must be done in the light of the ideal. We are encouraged to look to the day when "the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ", and though that day may be yet far-distant, we must toil and travail to give expression to the values of the Kingdom in the here and now. These goals must be pursued continually, even while we recognise that they are always beyond us in this world. Church-life then must be a foretaste of the Kingdom that is yet to be. Stephen Travers puts it this way: "If we are pilgrims, if our destiny is beyond this present age, we dare not allow the church to be an unchanging institution with vested interests and fossilised structures". Rather let us seek to be "the community of the King"—on the march. Thus the church in the world must combine detachment and involvement. We are detached from it, since we know that it is passing away; we are involved in it, since we know ourselves to be agents of God Incarnate.

(iv) *A distinctive lifestyle.* If we are "partakers of the divine nature", if we are "being renewed in the inner man after the image of Christ" then something of this must shine through. "Politically", J. H. Yoder reflects, "the novelty which God brings into the world is a community of those who serve, instead of ruling; who suffer, instead of inflicting suffering; whose fellowship crosses social lines, instead of reinforcing them". David Watson points out that in secular Greek the word "glory" means either "reputation" or "opinion". He says: "It is a sobering truth that God's reputation in the world, or the world's opinion of God, will depend to a large extent on how far His glory is seen in the church". How well do we demonstrate the nature of God? Is what we present to the world not all-too-often a miserable

caricature of Him who is the one living and true God? One of the ways in which churches can evince a distinctive lifestyle is by cultivating fellowship-in-depth. People want to know that they belong, that they are accepted, that they are loved, but so often church-life fails to meet that need. In his book, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace says: "A dissolving of local congregations into house churches, independent communes or elite task-forces would not only disrupt communication; it might create structures which do not by themselves have the power to carry forward the whole people of God . . . with the same effectiveness as parish churches. The local congregation is like a whaling-ship. It is too large and unwieldy in itself to catch whales, so it must carry smaller vessels aboard for this purpose. But the smaller whale-boats are ill-advised to strike out on their own apart from the mother ship. They can catch a few whales, but they cannot process them, and the smaller boats can easily be destroyed". This gives us a useful paradigm of church-life. Commenting on the need for small fellowship groups, Lovelace can say: "Without such mechanisms for the interchange of grace and the movement of known truth into action, the weekly pattern of church attendance can become a stagnant routine consisting of the passive intake of truth which is never turned into prayer and work for the Kingdom". We must be seen as people who care for one another, who learn from one another, who work with one another, who trust one another, as members of the one family of faith.

(v) *An openness both to the Word and the Spirit.* Many Christians emphasise the Word but neglect the Spirit; this breeds a dull and deadening orthodoxy. It also accounts for the fact that so many who claim an unimpeachable orthodoxy display such unChristlike attitudes. Others emphasise the Spirit but neglect the Word; this creates a shallow sentimentalism or even a superficial sensationalism, and it can give such prominence to the gifts of the Spirit that it ignores the fruit of the Spirit. What we need to see with fresh clarity is that God acts and speaks by His Spirit through the Word. Thus there must be no false dichotomy between doctrine and experience; we need both. We live in a world where people are impatient of dogma. What they want to know about a thing is simply this: does it work? But, as Os Guinness says: "Christianity is not true because it works. It works because it is true . . . The uniqueness and trustworthiness of Christianity rest entirely on its claim to be the truth". So we cannot dispense with doctrine because we think it divisive or distracting. The quality of our experience depends upon the quality of our faith, but the quality of our faith depends upon the quality of our understanding of God's truth. On the other hand, those of us who emphasise the authority of the Word and the 'givenness' of what we have in Jesus Christ, must face the searching challenge of some words spoken by Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones: "Got it all? Well, if you have 'got it all', I simply ask, in the name of God why are you as you are? If you have got it all, why are you so unlike the New Testament Christians? Got it all at your conversion? Well, where is it, I ask?" There is no way in which the more traditional

evangelical can evade that question. If it is true that some have 'too much in the heart and too little in the head', the alternative is equally futile, to have 'too much in the head and too little in the heart'. What we need is to be, at one and the same time, obedient to the Word and 'under the influence' of the Spirit.

To sum up, I am not persuaded that revolution is necessary. David Watson rightly urges that "revolutions are aptly named: they revolve. They turn one lot of sinners out and put another lot of sinners in. The trouble with virtually all forms of revolution is that they change everything—except the human heart. And until that is changed, nothing is significantly different in the long run". I have no doubt that God is alive and at work in His church today, in judgment and in mercy, prompting us to prune away all that impedes the in-flow or out-flow of life, and to foster all that promotes the health of the Body. We are at a stage in Ireland where the pruning needs to be drastic, but we can tackle the task firm in the confidence that "God purposes a crop", as Samuel Rutherford put it. Howard Snyder reminds us that "there is something spontaneous about genuine growth. Normal growth does not depend upon successful techniques or programmes, although planning has its place. Rather, growth is the normal consequence of spiritual life. What is alive grows . . . the nature of the church is to grow spiritually, numerically and in its cultural impact". Looking at the wider perspective, we must remember that the church of Jesus Christ is growing more rapidly than at any time in its history—more than 25,000 new members being added to the church every day. We are part of something which has "a wonderful past and a glorious future".

We desperately need 'the wind from heaven' to blow upon the church in our land. And who can doubt that already there is a gentle breeze? On our part there is urgent need for a fuller and deeper commitment to the Person of Christ. Who can doubt that David Watson is on target when he tells us that the "vast majority of Western Christians are church-members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again believers and Spirit-filled Charismatics—but not true disciples of Jesus"? "If we were willing to learn the meaning of real discipleship, and actually to become disciples", he adds, "the church in the West would be transformed, and the resultant impact on society would be staggering".

Let me finish with this. Winston Churchill was very fond of Gibbon's book, *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. One evening during the Second World War, he had been viewing in his private cinema a long and sickening scene from *Quo Vadis?* which is based on Gibbon. Following a much-needed interval, Churchill recited with perfect accuracy this passage from the book: "While that great body [the Empire] was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigour from opposition, and finally erected the banner of the Cross on the ruins of the capital". There you have the glory of the church's

past; there too you have the hope of the church's future— a hope grounded in the very nature of the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and who works in us by His Spirit.