

The Scandal of the Church in the Mission of God's People

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It is a pleasure to contribute to a volume paying tribute to Peter Cotterell who throughout his work in theological education has provided visionary leadership and inspired students with a rare combination of gifts, blending an undiluted passion for the gospel with high standards of scholarship and the attitude of a servant. His Principalship of the London Bible College has given the college a new sense of direction as he has charted the course through many changes, leaving the college quietly confident about its strategic place in training men and women for mission in tomorrow's world. He will be a hard act to follow.

The academic honours which have come Peter's way have never deflected him from his commitment to mission. Nor has he ever displayed the least concern for status, formality or the cumbersome organisational respectability which dogs the church and which sometimes inhibits the spreading of the good news. His attitudes to much in the church would be considered radical by many.¹ One suspects that, like many, his feeling towards the church is not so much ambivalent as schizophrenic, though these are my words rather than his. He loves it, knowing it to be at the heart of God's plan for the world and, on occasion, the most wonderful and grace-filled community which can be found on this earth. He hates it, for its failure to live up to its calling with the result that the spreading of

1 See e.g. Peter's view of ordained ministry: 'The Ministry: Time for Reformation', in Paul Beasley-Murray (ed.), *Anyone for Ordination? A Contribution to the Debate on Ordination* (Tunbridge Wells: MARC, 1993), 33-44.

***Mission and Meaning
Essays Presented to Peter
Cotterell***

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the gospel is inhibited or undermined. A paragraph in *Mission and Meaninglessness* summarises the struggle:

The Church envisaged in the New Testament is a radical new community, within which the meaninglessness of life is marvellously resolved. The contemporary reality, and especially the European reality, is vastly different: an institution, locked into its past, preoccupied with arcane irrelevancies, yet perennially confronted by a hurting, helpless world, its fundamental questions unanswered and its meaninglessness unresolved.²

The same dichotomy is deeply felt by many. There are those who gladly bear witness to the love, healing, acceptance, grace and holiness they have discovered in the church. There are occasions when it models its calling. There are others who claim sadly that the church has been a stumbling-block to their spiritual progress; an interference, rather than an aid to their acceptance of grace and of their growth in the gospel.

The conflict between the church as it is and the church as it both should and can be is crucial to our understanding of its role in mission in the world today. The issue might profitably be examined, as Peter Cotterell hints,³ through the concept of 'scandal'. At the heart of Christianity is a scandal – the scandal of the cross. It is the ultimate and unavoidable scandal without which Christianity ceases to be Christianity. The church, as a creation of the cross, the community of those who have experienced grace flowing from Calvary, cannot but be guilty of scandal by association. But the church is often guilty instead of unnecessary and avoidable forms of scandal. It is the double-edged nature of this scandal which this essay will seek to explore.

1. The Place of the Church in Mission

First, we must affirm, as Peter Cotterell does, the indispensable role of the church in God's mission to the world. It has been fashionable in recent missiological thinking to reject an ecclesiocentric view of mission.⁴ This has arisen from fears that the institution of the church, in all its cultural captivity and ethnic blindness, is a hindrance to

² Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder* (London: SPCK, 1990), 187.

³ Cotterell, *Mission*, 169.

⁴ For the history and details of the debate about the ecclesiocentric nature of mission see Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994).

mission and that as a sovereign creator, God is free to work directly in his world without channelling all his work and energies through the church. The focus has shifted from the church to the Kingdom of God, just as there has been a parallel move in some circles against Paul and towards Jesus. It has been said that the church rather than evangelising the world should be evangelised by the world; that the church should listen to the world; and that the church would be helped by talking less and listening more, especially to the children and the poor, with whom God particularly identifies.

As often, these sentiments contain half truths, and half truths can be dangerously misleading.⁵ The Bible affirms God's sovereign right to use whom he will to accomplish his ends, and that he is not confined to working through his chosen people alone, as the choice of Cyrus as his 'anointed' is sufficient alone to make clear (Isa. 45:1). This does not mean that he normally bypasses his church nor downgrades its significance in his plan (Eph. 3:9-11). Whilst we penitently acknowledge the failures of the church in its institutional form we must also gratefully acknowledge the way in which so many have been enabled to give themselves in selfless love for others through it. Its record may well contain dark passages but it also has chapters of radiant light. Whilst many have neglected the teaching of Jesus regarding the Kingdom of God, it is not right to drive a wedge between the church and the kingdom, nor between Jesus and Paul. The church is nothing if it is not the agent of the kingdom, both testifying to it and providing a demonstration of it in the world. Whilst the Bible reveals that God has a 'bias to the poor' and children, an undisciplined use of such terminology without careful qualification can lead to claims being made which cannot be substantiated from Scripture.

In the light of such challenges, and of the disappointment many feel within their own experiences of the church, the place of the church in God's mission, needs to be reaffirmed. And this is what Peter Cotterell does in *Mission and Meaninglessness*.⁶

2. The Scandal of the Cross

The scandal which is at the heart of the Christian gospel is the scandal of the cross. The word *skandalon* means 'an occasion of falling', and its cognate *skandalizō* means 'I cause a fall'⁷ and, so by

5 See Ken Gnanakan, *Kingdom Concerns: A Theology of Mission Today* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), esp. 200-202.

6 Cotterell, *Mission*, 133-51.

7 G. Stahlin, 'σκανδαλον', *TDNT*, Vol. VII, 345.

extension metaphorically, a cause of offence or a means of falling away. Whereas concern is expressed by Jesus that his disciples might be caused to fall away or be tempted to sin (e.g. Matt. 11:6; 18:7; 26:31, 33) our concern is with those passages which refer to the ministry of Jesus and his cross as an offence (e.g. Matt. 13:57; Mark 6:3; John 6:61; Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:8). These verses reveal that the New Testament use derives from its Jewish background, with a mixture of Isaiah 8:14 and 28:16 being called into support by both Paul and Peter.

The offence of the cross is brought into sharpest focus in 1 Corinthians 1:23-25 where Paul wrote to the Corinthians that '...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:23-24). Gordon Fee questions the NIV translation of the word *skandalon* as 'a stumbling block', arguing that the word 'scandal', that is, its extended meaning, is more appropriate 'since the word does not so much mean something that one is tripped up by as something that offends to the point of arousing opposition'.⁸ This interpretation seems confirmed by the other passage in which Paul speaks sharply of the 'offence of the cross', namely, Galatians 5:11, when the offence consists in the cross rendering circumcision irrelevant as a way to God; a thought which would have been offensive indeed to the Jews for whom circumcision was the great initiation rite of the covenant.

D.A. Carson explains why the cross should cause such offence to the Jews like this:

In the first century, it must have sounded like a contradiction in terms, like frozen steam or hateful love or upward decline or godly rapist – only far more shocking. For many Jews, the long-expected Messiah had to come in splendour and glory; he had to begin his reign with uncontested power. 'Crucified Messiah'; this juxtaposition of words is only a whisker away from blasphemy, since every Jew knows that God himself has declared that everyone who hangs in shame on a tree stands under God's curse (Deut. 21:23).⁹

8 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 75, n. 38.

9 D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 21-22.

For Christians to claim that the Messiah died in this way was the ultimate scandal, sufficient, in Robertson and Plummer's view, to be a 'decisive refutation of the claim that Jesus was the Christ'.¹⁰

To the Jews, this cause of offence has not gone away. It remains. For Gentiles, the cross is also a cause of offence, but perhaps for different reasons. To modern minds, that God should choose to deal with sin in this way, seems crude and barbaric. To those trained to think in Enlightenment categories there seems insufficient connection between cause (Christ's suffering on the cross) and effect (that we sinners are forgiven). To a world used to sorting out its problems by military force or the investment of money, the weakness and poverty of the cross seem a nonsense.

In these ways the cross is like a foreign language which we do not know and which, when spoken, leads to bewilderment and amusement rather than effective communication. But God has not left himself without an interpreter, both in the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-17; 16:7-15; 1 Cor. 2:6-16) and, more surprisingly, in the church (Col. 3:10). As Leslie Newbigin puts it: '...the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.'¹¹

3. The Necessary Scandal of the Church

If the church is to live by the gospel and at the heart of the gospel is a cross which is scandalous, the church, too, must share in the scandal. The church cannot escape it. The scandal cannot be reserved for the cross of Jesus Christ alone. The offence of the cross has to rub off on us who are members of the church. What, then, is the necessary scandal which the church must embrace if it is to engage in faithful mission today? The scandal consists of all those ways which contradict the deeply-held prejudices and values of our contemporary world. We shall mention just a few, in no particular order of priority, all of which are recognised to be problematic in contemporary theology.

(a) *The Scandal of Grace in a World of Justice*

It is not intended to suggest that there is not a great deal of suffering in our world caused by unjust regimes, oppressive policies and partisan governments. The world is full of injustice. Yet, in the

10 A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914), 22.

11 Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227.

western world there remains a deep commitment to the idea of justice. It can be seen in the way in which people readily resort to litigation against those who have not given them their just desserts in some way or another. The education authority which fails to deliver the school place; the doctor who makes a mistake in an operation; a financial house that fails; social services which do not prevent some human tragedy; and public companies whose plant is held responsible for some loss of life or limb are all subject to litigation because of this feeling that justice should be done. It is evident most in the area of criminality. As I write there is a suggestion that Myra Hindley, the Moors murderer, should be released from jail after serving thirty years of her sentence. But the public outcry has ensured that she will not be released and the Home Secretary has confirmed that she will remain in prison until she dies. Such is justice.

The concept of justice operates, too, in more subtle ways within our society. Much bureaucracy has the values of justice inherent within it. Bureaucracy pretends that any problem can be organised into a solution. So, for example, those who are homeless and without their own means of support in our society can be dealt with through the provision of social security. But the system must operate according to certain rules which require that proper procedures be adopted and that it operates as a system which is anonymous and fair to all. This, as Berger, Berger and Kellner have observed, is built on a 'general expectation of justice' and it assumes that everyone in the relevant categories will receive equal treatment. The system is based, they argue, on a moral quality of equality and depends for its success on 'moralized anonymity'.¹² In this way the commitment to justice is not only an explicit pursuit in our society but it becomes an implicit shaper of our consciousness.

The cross stands in sharp contrast to our attitude to justice. It speaks of God's mercy to the undeserving and of his grace to the unqualified. God does not treat us as we deserve or else none of us would know pardon. Shakespeare understood it well:

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.¹³

12 Peter L. Berger, Bridgette Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 52-53.

13 *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene 1.

The grace which flows from the cross received a remarkable demonstration in the conversation Jesus had with the criminal who was being executed alongside him. If anyone lacked a title to admit him to paradise it was this man, as he himself confessed, and yet he is assured by Jesus of entry into paradise (Luke 23:39-43). Both the secular and religious leaders of the day would have been scandalised. Yet the early church was unrepentant and continued to embrace those whom the world would have thought had disqualified themselves by their lives from a relationship with God and his people (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11). And at the heart of their message was the explicit statement that the cross had made the grace of God available to us all (e.g. Rom. 5:1-8; Gal. 2:20-21; Eph. 2:8-9).

As a community of the cross the church has to be a community of grace and in so being it will run counter to the prevailing atmosphere of our society with its emphasis on justice. The church must scandalise the world by its acceptance of those who have criminal backgrounds, mixed-up family situations, histories of substance abuse, experienced poverty and unemployment, committed sexual misdemeanours, and so on, knowing that all men and women are undeserving sinners whatever the socially acceptable or religious veneer presented. If martyrs were once spoken of as the treasures of the church, so now, people who lack a conventional moral background or religious upbringing or fail to meet the standards imposed by respectable middle class society must be our treasures today. Such is grace. Grace will seek to transform the lives of those who find it, as 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 makes clear, but it will first of all accept them.

(b) The Scandal of Acceptance in a World of Division

It is ironic that countervailing tendencies operate in our world. On the macro level the world has never been so unified as global telecommunications, the work of the United Nations, and the pressures to conform in the European Union remind us. At the same time deep fragmentation operates. No sooner had freedom come to the USSR than the various republics broke away from one another. The recent history of Czechoslovakia and, more tragically, of the former Yugoslavia witness to the same trend. In our own nation there are deep divisions between north and south, haves and have-nots, the employed and the unemployed, old and young, men and women, black and white. Most surveys show that whatever our public rhetoric may be, the majority of British citizens are racially prejudiced. Even spokespersons for the Conservative Government

have to admit that their policies for wealth creation have made the rich richer and the poor poorer.

No one has captured the irony and divisiveness of our modern world than Os Guinness when he wrote:

Modern cities make people closer yet stranger at once; modern weapons bring their users to the point of impotence and destructions simultaneously; modern media promises facts but deliver fantasies; modern education introduced mass schooling but fosters sub-literacy; modern technologies of communication encourage people to speak more and say less and to hear more and listen less; modern lifestyles offer do-it-yourself freedom but slavishly follow fads; modern styles of relationships make people hungry for intimacy and authenticity but more fearful than ever of phoniness, manipulation and power games. And so on.¹⁴

The world has, of course, never been anything other than a divided world. There is nothing essentially new about modern divisions even if they are clothed in new forms. It was a deeply divided world into which Jesus was born and it was to overcome the divisions and to bring into being the Old Testament vision of *shalom* that he died. It is no accident that the execution notice pinned to his cross contained the announcement in Aramaic, Latin and Greek (John 19:20). The great divisions of the world of his day were between Jew and Greek, slave and free, and male and female (Gal. 3:28). These ethnic, social and gender divisions were channelled, expressed and reinforced by theology and religion, as so often. But the cross rendered all such divisions irrelevant and serves as the instrument of reconciliation and peace. The great theological statement of Ephesians 2:11-22 explains how the cross abolished the walls which divide people from each other, whilst the early churches demonstrated that people of all races, cultures and social groups could be at peace with one another. Aware of the painful divisions of the world, Peter Cotterell speaks of the fact that hostility has ended as 'the genius of the church'.¹⁵

If, then, the church is a community of the cross, it too must render all divisions irrelevant. It is not that differences do not exist. Diversity of colour and culture, as well as of gender, is a mark of our colourful and imaginative creator. The church would be poorer if every member was melted down into some colourless morass, like gloriously diverse and flavoursome vegetables all being put into a blender and coming out as some bland soup. The differences remain but must not be used in any way to cause division or to suggest the

14 Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 241.

15 Cotterell, *Mission*, 146.

superiority of some and the inferiority of others. The differences no longer have any spiritual significance. They are neither the basis for acceptance by God nor determinative of place one occupies within the body of Christ.¹⁶

This is no optional stance but a necessary position if the church is to be true to the cross. So, although there may be some advantages in evangelism in working within ethnic, social or cultural groups, we must never pretend that homogeneous groups will match the biblical concept of the church. To perpetuate divisions in our structures and through our practices when the cross has abolished them is to remove the church from its proper place under the cross.

If this is no optional issue for the church, neither is it an issue about which we can afford to be complacent. Our fallen human nature takes the rightful diversity created by God and abuses it by turning it into a reason for fear, suspicion and alienation and into prejudice and hostility. It is scandal to many that the church should dare to attempt to be free from the divisions and prejudices which seem so natural. The Confessing Church of Germany during the last world war, some churches in South Africa during the years of apartheid, the story of Sheila Cassidy,¹⁷ or the Baptist churches of Serbia are but a few of the witnesses who could be summoned to show that overcoming divisions will be viewed as a scandal.

(c) The Scandal of Particularity in a World of Pluralism

A dominant feature of our contemporary world is that of pluralism. With the onset of postmodernity the trend towards pluralism is likely to accelerate even more. Pluralism is a multi-faceted concept the core of which is that we no longer live in a single world but a plurality of worlds.¹⁸ Industrialisation led to the fracturing of the unified world where work and home were one. Now most people live in at least two worlds: the public world, say,

16 On the issue, for example, of the implications of Galatians 3:28 for the question of females in positions of leadership in the church, see F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster, 1982), 189-90, where he argues that, 'No more restriction is implied in Paul's equalizing of the status of male and female in Christ than in equalizing the status of Jew and Gentile, or of slave and free person... If a Gentile may exercise spiritual leadership in church as freely as a Jew, or a slave as freely as a citizen, why not a woman as freely as a man?'

17 Sheila Cassidy was a missionary doctor in Chile who was imprisoned and tortured by the authorities for treating a revolutionary leader.

18 One of the best introductions to pluralism is to be found in Berger, Berger and Kellner, *Homeless Mind*, 62-77. The religious aspects, particularly as it affects evangelicals, are examined in Guinness, *The Gravedigger File*, 95-109.

of work or education, and the private world of home or leisure. A unified worldview, therefore, no longer fits, but two frameworks of interpretation, one for the public 'real' world, and one for the private 'expressive' world, are common. Religion belongs to the private, left-over, part of life when the public world has finished with us. It is not allowed to impinge seriously on the public world. That is why western people find it so difficult to cope with the claim of Islam that there is no divorce between their religion and their economic, political or educational views.

If that is where pluralism first made a serious impression on the consciousness of many people it has advanced rapidly since then. On every hand we are confronted by choice. Think, for example, of the number of breakfast cereals one can choose, of the number of radio stations or television programmes one can tune into, or the number of options one can choose when buying something like a new car, or even new spectacles! Choice abounds to the extent that we are punch drunk with it. And it seriously affects the way we think. In former days, when choice was not an option, a unified social world went hand-in-hand with a unified religious interpretation of the world. Those who thought otherwise were not only heretics but also traitors, or at least social deviants. Today the religious interpretation of the world has been blown into a thousand fragments and people are confronted with choice in that sphere too. The result is that many people do not hold any strong convictions about faith and do not see why any choices have to be made.

But the cross stands in contradiction to pluralism. Although God has spoken 'in various ways' (Heb. 1:1) the Christian faith has historically believed that he has revealed himself fully and finally in Jesus and, especially, in his cross. John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 stress that Jesus is the exclusive path to salvation. Today, interpretations which suggest that Jesus is the only way to God are greeted by many with unease, and dismissals of other religions as not equally acceptable paths to God alongside Christianity are unpopular. Yet these exclusivist positions are the natural interpretations of the writings of the early church and historic position of the Christian faith. The issues are complex and the reader must be pointed elsewhere to explore them further.¹⁹

For our purposes one simply points to Paul's argument in Galatians, especially 3:1-5, which asks the Galatians believers to reflect on Scripture, history, logic and their own experience as to

¹⁹ The issue has, of course, been much explored by Peter Cotterell, *Mission*, 36-83, as by many others.

how salvation is obtained. If there was another way, either as an alternative or as a supplement to the crucifixion of Christ, then Christ's death was pointless.

The church which proclaims the cross as the only way to God in a world of pluralism will provoke bewilderment, opposition and even derision.

(d) The Scandal of Judgment in a World of Tolerance

A concomitant of pluralism is tolerance. Again, human experience is ambivalent on the matter. There is a sense of justice, as we have already observed, which can reveal itself with profound emotion at times. In searching for 'prototypical human gestures' which might serve as 'signals of transcendence', Peter Berger listed our desire for certain people to be eternally damned as among them. He spoke of the way in which 'our sense of what is humanly permissible is so fundamentally outraged that the only adequate response to the offence as well as to the offender seems to be a curse of supernatural dimensions'.²⁰ He had in mind those who had committed Nazi war crimes and illustrated his point by reference to the trial of Eichmann.

Granted that some acts call forth such revulsion that our response is that their perpetrators should be damned, the general moral tenor of society has to become more tolerant.²¹ Attitudes towards children born outside marriage, couples living together without marrying, divorce, adultery and homosexuality are perhaps the most obvious illustration. When politicians and public figures are caught out for their sexual misdemeanours and resign, they are often not condemned for the act which was wrong but commended for their honour in resigning. Perhaps it was ever thus. But, if so, the attitude was privately accepted not publicly acknowledged. The public acceptance of such positions certainly alters our consciousness.

The point here is not to enter into an ethical discussion of rights and wrongs on the above matters but merely to highlight the fact that, given such a tolerant age, our concept of wrong, of wickedness and of evil has weakened and, inevitably, with it our concept of judgment. This may be a popular outworking of a more serious approach in the human sciences to seek to understand and explain human behaviour, however deviant, rather than to attribute moral

²⁰ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 84-85.

²¹ On the question of tolerance see, Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 45, 185, 245-46, and David Barker *et al.* (eds.), *The European Values Study 1981-1990* (The European Values Group, n.d.), 23-27.

judgments to it. For some time the medical model (that wrong-doers are suffering from a sickness that needs a cure) rather than the moral model, has predominated, calling for the response from one psychologist, 'Whatever became of sin?'.²²

In such a context the idea that sin matters, that it is a wrong for which the sinner must be held responsible and receive his or her just desserts, seems strangely out of touch. And yet, the cross demonstrates that God views it differently. For the cross not only demonstrates the grace of God towards us who are sinners but manifests the judgment of God on sin. Sin matters both because it destroys God's creation and because it offends the holiness of God (Hab. 1:13; Rom. 1:18-2:15; 5:9; Eph. 2:1-3). Isaiah spoke of the suffering servant as one who would be afflicted by God as a result of bearing our transgressions and iniquities (53:4-5). The New Testament writers saw in that an interpretation of the cross, and identified the suffering servant with Jesus (Mark 10:45, 1 Pet. 2:24-25). In the cross, the judgment of God against sin was meted out resulting not only in the pain and shame of the crucifixion itself but in the forsaking, by God, of his own son (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). The cross led to the early church proclaiming that the justice of God has been satisfied by the death of Jesus on the cross (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17, 1 John 2:2; 4:10) who died there, not for his own wrongdoing, but for ours.

To remind modern human beings that they are sinners who have put themselves on the wrong side of God's justice will not be popular and the church which reminds them will share in the unpopularity. But, as H.D. McDonald has written: 'If... modern man is not worrying about his sins it is because modern man has never seriously contemplated Golgotha. For no man can stand in the shadow of that cross and delude himself into imagining that sin does not matter. Calvary makes clear, once and forever, that it matters decisively for each one of us and it matters terribly to God.'²³

(e) The Scandal of Community in a World of Individualism

Our society is characterised by individualism, some would say excessive individualism, which erodes social obligation.²⁴ Ties of

²² Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973).

²³ H.D. McDonald, *Forgiveness and Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 14.

²⁴ On the mass of literature on this subject see, Robert N. Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) and Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Random

social obligation have certainly weakened, as attitudes to the family, as well as the wider community, show. People's essential referent is the self. This development has not been without cost. Many long for relationships but seem constitutionally incapable of making, or at least, of sustaining them. In Bellah's words, 'The question is whether an individualism in which the self has become the main form of reality can be sustained. What is at issue is not simply whether self-contained individuals might withdraw from the public sphere to pursue purely private ends, but whether such individuals are capable of sustaining either a public or a private life.'²⁵ His immediate comment on this is that perhaps only 'biblical forms of individualism' – those which see the individual in relation to others, to a community and a tradition – are capable of meeting our needs.

The cross creates community. John hints at it when the Greeks request to see Jesus, by saying that when he is lifted to the cross he would draw all men to himself and so to one another (12:32). And, in a touching, and surely unnecessary detail, John (19:26-27) records how in the midst of his agony Jesus committed his mother into the care of 'the disciple whom he loved'. What John hints at the rest of the New Testament states explicitly. Paul, as we have seen, speaks of the cross as creating a new community of peace (Eph. 2:11-17) and then develops the picture by speaking of Christians as 'members of God's household' and stones in God's temple, being 'built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' (Eph. 2:19-22). Peter, similarly, speaks of the way in which the work of Christ creates a new community of chosen people (1 Pet. 2:9-10). The language of community is common in the New Testament whilst the language of individualism is rare.²⁶ Individual Christianity cannot be said to be New Testament Christianity.

Again, therefore, if the church is to insist that the cross challenges our individualism and calls us to belong to a new community where we shall find both the grace and discipline of God channelled to us through others, many will find it offensive, and chose, rather, to remain in their private individualised world.

House, 1978). For the way in which people perceived of themselves as dyadic personalities, orientating their lives towards others in New Testament days, see Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (London: SCM, 1981) and Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 19-36.

²⁵ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 143.

²⁶ It is not entirely absent; see, for example, Galatians 2:20. But this might more properly be spoken of as personal language than individualistic language.

(f) The Scandal of Weakness in a World of Power

The cross further scandalises the world by its rejection of the way of power and acceptance of the way of weakness. Paul, in challenging the false or super apostles in 2 Corinthians uses the arresting phrase that Christ was 'crucified in weakness' (13:4). The phrase is consistent with his whole argument against those who would advocate that ministry is measured by the amount of power it generates and displays. Weakness is seen as a vice in our society. Power is a virtue. To be self-sufficient, not to be dependent; to be in control, not to be subservient; to be always on top, not to be at the bottom of the pile; to be living with plenty of reserves, not to be unable to cope is the projected image to which all must aspire. Contemporary human beings like to solve their own problems and work through their own difficulties, with as little aid from others as possible.

But the cross calls that into question and calls us to recognise that God's way of dealing with our problems is not to throw money, might and powerful solutions at them but to accept weakness and to become a 'wounded healer'. Although he was the one offended against, he chose not to assert authority, nor to engage in justifiable retaliation, but to humble himself, to take the very nature of a servant and become obedient to death – even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). It was not the way we would have anticipated, nor the normal means by which we would operate. In fact, the cross stands in sharp contrast to our normal methods which depend on power. But God's method has implications for us. We cannot gain its benefits unless we too are prepared to adopt the posture of weakness. And that many find offensive. Yet, we must insist that the cross not only demonstrates God in his weakness but also 'nullifies all human wisdom, and excludes all human cooperation in salvation'²⁷ and calls for us, too, to be weak.

4. Avoidable Scandal in the Church

As J. Guhrt asserts, 'While there is an offence of the gospel, which must not be removed, there is a human offence which must be avoided.'²⁸ Sad to say, the church often confuses the two, leading to the disappointment many feel with the church. Among the avoidable scandals of which the church is culpable today we mention three.

²⁷ J. Guhrt, 'Offence', in Colin Brown (ed.), *NIDNTT*, Vol. II (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 708.

²⁸ Guhrt, 'Offence', 709.

(a) *The Scandal of Absent Authenticity*

One thinks not of the scandals which delight the editors of the gutter press, as when vicars commit adultery or priests abuse children, dreadful as they are, but of a more subtle scandal. It is a scandal when the church fails to live up to its calling by refusing to accept the scandal of the cross. If the church is to be authentic, and to have any effective role in mission, it must be characterised by those very features which we have mentioned as aspects of the offence of the cross. Its failure to live by them and exhibit them to others is nothing short of scandalous.

Too often, the church fails to be a community of grace, accepting the undeserving, and imposes, instead, some test of respectability before it will have dealings with others. It is not a community of forgiveness but a community of rules and regulations where continuing participation is dependent on people observing those rules and regulations. Love is, therefore, conditional, not gracious. The rules to be observed often relate to no real biblical principle but, rather, are the rules devised by a particular denominational strand or part of the evangelical subculture. Rules of dress, or in regard to alcohol, or certain forms of entertainment, are well known illustrations of the point, but there are more serious ones. Similarly, the church is often scandalous in its failure to accept those who do not belong to its particular social group or have the right religious pedigree. It is a particular issue today, given that many who need the gospel do not come from conventional family backgrounds and when there is evidence that many of these find the church less accepting of them than other organisations and groups are.²⁹ As servants of Jesus, who was known as a friend of tax-collectors and sinners, it is scandalous that this should be so.

It is scandalous, too, when the church lacks confidence in its own message and downgrades it from being true revelation to one option among many. And it is scandalous when it fails to preach right and wrong, human accountability to God and the prospect of judgment, although it may need to learn a new language to communicate with contemporary society about concepts which are no longer in common currency. Simply endorsing the vague religious views of popular opinion or conforming to popular whims of morality contains a double error. First, it fails to take seriously that the church is accountable to God for its teaching of and faithfulness to truth. Secondly, it fails pragmatically in that people look to the church for a sense of meaning which they cannot find elsewhere. If all the church

²⁹ *European Values Study*, 24, 29.

does is parrot secular opinions it has no distinctive place in society, nothing distinctive to say, so why bother with it?³⁰ We need to learn from the early church which grew most not, paradoxically, when it was most popular, but when it was most feared (Acts 5:5; 19:17).

Equally scandalous is its endorsement of individualism, which much evangelical preaching, with its stress on a personal relationship with God and often inadequate concepts of the church, is prone to do. The social dimension of the cross needs to be kept clear. Christ was not crucified to rescue individuals from emotional discomfort and to give them warm feelings of personal peace which would leave them in their isolated boxes, cut off from others. He died in order to create a new community which would be the showcase of the kingdom, a kingdom where right relationships could be seen, and where *shalom*, that is, the rightful integration of people with themselves and with their God, and equally with their communities and their environment, could be displayed to the wider world.

The traits of individualism can often be discerned in many popular versions of evangelical preaching that offer healing, wealth, freedom from problems and success today. The common thread in these suspect forms of Christianity is that of power. The fallacy of these religions has been exposed vigorously recently (perhaps too vigorously!) in a book entitled *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*.³¹ Even if the judgment of that book is too severe, it is a necessary reminder that the way of the cross, to which the church is called, is the way of weakness, not of power. If the way of weakness is not the complete story, it is nonetheless an essential ingredient in the story, and to pretend otherwise is scandalous.

In all these ways the contemporary church lacks the marks of authenticity and that is a scandal.

30 This view is built on the sociology of religion expounded by Peter Berger and is set out in Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977). Kelley's thesis has given rise to much academic debate, and alternative explanations have been offered as to why churches who adopt conservative theology and demand distinctive lifestyles of their members grow. Even so, Kelley's thesis – that the more the church mirrors the world the less it will grow and the more it offers a distinctive alternative the more attractive it will be – contains a solid if elusive core of truth.

31 Michael Scott Horton (ed.), *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1992).

(b) The Scandal of Cultural Captivity

The second area of avoidable scandal to which we turn is controversial but central to our theme of the place of the church in God's mission. It is an area where fine judgments are called for and the absence of them causes controversy. It is axiomatic that the Christian faith is an incarnational faith, and that axiom determines the nature of Christian mission. 'The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14). God entered a particular culture at a particular moment in history to provide salvation. The death Jesus died was a particular form of execution at a particular juncture in the history of the world which captured at one and the same time all the Jews had learned about sacrifice and about God's curse, and fused them with a Roman form of execution. Taking that message of salvation to others also involves entering their culture and their particular moments in history so that they might understand the good news in ways which are intelligible to them. So, at least, thought the apostle Paul in his great statement of missionary principles found in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22.

The principle is readily conceded by western Christians sending missionaries to work in foreign cultures. The language and customs of the people to whom they are being sent are taught first before any effective communication of the gospel is expected. It is less readily conceded within western culture itself. There, the church is part of the cultural fabric and heritage and so the situation is less easy to see. Because the church has this traditional place in western culture it assumes that it is understood by others and that the language it speaks, the way it operates, the concepts to which it is committed and the lifestyle it leads are understood and accessible to all. But for vast segments of western people today this is no longer so. To them the church is a foreign country. So, if the church is to communicate the gospel in ways which are meaningful to them the church has to learn to leave the warmth of its own religious culture and enter the cultural worlds of those outside.

Many experiments are being undertaken at the moment in this area. In Britain, a number of youth churches have emerged, whilst in the United States 'seeker-friendly services' are being adopted by many as a way forward. The former adopt styles of music and forms of communication which would be alien to most churches but which relate to an emerging postmodern world. The latter are more recognisable, relating as they do to the modern, rather than the postmodern, world. Even so, the latter have provoked controversy because they have shed many religious elements which make sense to the already committed, like copious singing and praying, in order

to present the gospel through musical performance, drama, video, interview, question and answer and preaching. To some such a move leads to a serious compromise of the Christian faith and the means by which it should be preached.³² To others, it is a mistaken approach because people are currently exhibiting a greater desire for mystery and dimensions of awe in their spiritual quest. To remove such elements, therefore, and to make the services more utilitarian, might curiously mean missing the evangelistic boat.³³

Certainly, care needs to be taken. Adapting the communication of the faith to particular cultures is full of pitfalls. Cultures are never wholly neutral. Every culture contains that which is good and which mirrors the Creator, elements which are neutral, and elements which are unacceptable because they are based on the fallenness of the world. There is a long history which suggests that when Christians have tried to be culturally relevant it is the culture which has supplanted the Christian message rather than the Christian message triumphing over the culture. Then, in Dean Inge's oft-repeated words, care needs to be taken since, 'he who marries the spirit of the age will find himself a widower in the next age'. Culture is never static. For these reasons we must build churches which are both 'deeply rooted in Christ and closely related to their culture'.³⁴

Yet the greater fault of the church today is not that it is in the world (relating to it) but not of it (distinguished in values), but that it is of the world (similar in values) and not in it (unrelated to it). New cultural bridges must be built if the gospel is to be communicated at all to our contemporary western world. To do so is to be true to our evangelical heritage, since evangelicals have always adopted new forms of communication appropriate to their time (as with Wesley and open air preaching; Moody and his music hall style services; or Billy Graham and his use of film and satellite communication). To do so, more importantly, is to be true to teaching of Scripture about the responsibility God lays upon us in mission. To do otherwise would be scandalous.

32 For a popular rebuttal of this movement see John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993); for a serious academic critique of the trend and its wider evangelical context see, David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

33 John Drane, *Evangelism for a New Age: Creating Churches for the Next Century* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 115-48.

34 The phrase comes from the Lausanne Covenant, Clause 10, on Evangelism and Culture. It is a particularly fine and balanced statement of the difficulties involved.

(c) The Scandal of Spiritual Poverty

The final avoidable scandal is that of spiritual poverty. The great vision of the church created by the cross, in the New Testament, was of a temple in which God himself would dwell by his Spirit (Eph. 2:22). The dynamic of the Spirit would manifest itself in the exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-7); in successful engagement in spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10-20); in lives being transformed through conversion (1 Thess. 4:4-10; Tit. 2:11-14); in the progressive holiness of its members (Eph. 4:17-5:21, note especially, 5:18 as the pivotal verse in this section) and in enthusiastic mission (Acts 1:8, etc.) which provoked awe among those who observed it (Acts 2:43). The absence of these traits from many churches indicates that they are in danger of degenerating into religious clubs devoid of, or at least deficient in, the Spirit. The scandal is that they offer the world a substitute religion which unbelievers mistake for the real thing and which, because of its unattractiveness, inoculates people against the living power of the gospel. That this should be so is shameful.

5. Conclusion

We have argued that as a community of the cross the church must bear the marks of the cross and share in its scandal. That imposes on the church certain doctrinal positions and life stances which cannot and should not be avoided. Sadly, however, the church often shuns these very characteristics and adopts alternative positions which, although they seem attractive, render us ineffective in our mission to the world. The choice is not whether or not to be identified with scandal, only which scandal we are to be identified with. Only that scandal inherent in the cross, the centre-piece of God's mission to the world, can lead the church to mission effectiveness.