

# William Still and the Church as Community

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I recall vividly the first occasion on which I met William Still. As a young undergraduate at St Andrew's University I sat spellbound in the University Christian Union one Saturday evening in the winter of 1956 listening to him speaking on the Christian's devotional life. I was deeply impressed by his radical thinking which was so far removed from the accepted IVF code of strict rules for a daily 'quiet time'. For William Still, prayer was a life, not merely an activity which occupied fifteen or thirty minutes once or twice a day. Since that first meeting, as I corresponded with him and visited his manse, those early student contacts flowered into a long-lasting friendship. I write this article therefore out of a close personal association with William Still over a period of forty years. It is well known that during his first three years in Gilcomston South Church he covered Union Street (Aberdeen's main street on which the church is situated) with banners. Those early heady days of intense evangelistic activity saw the church packed with hundreds of people, both on Saturday and Sunday evenings, until quite suddenly, he replaced the Youth for Christ rallies on Saturday evenings with a church prayer meeting. After only three years as minister of the congregation, the backlash in the city was considerable so he set out in a congregational letter the reasons behind his thinking. The excerpts quoted below were written in June 1948.

My dear Friends,

We have been together for three years and the present ministry is beginning to take shape. We have gone through various phases, no doubt each contributing to our knowledge and experience, but there comes a time when we must ask ourselves precisely what we are trying to do. It is the simple truth to say that our policy has been shaped by a Higher Hand. This is seen in the changing style of the services, especially the sermons which reveal a sequence that can only be attributed to the guidance of the Spirit. Where is it leading? In short, this has become a teaching ministry.

The whole emphasis of the ministry is here. Some may think too much so, and may wish for more social fellowship. But are they not looking to the Church for the wrong thing? If those who wished for that showed their love for Christ by attendance at the gatherings for which the Church was founded,

their argument for the other side would carry weight. We have a full day on Sunday, a mid-week service on Wednesday and a prayer meeting on Saturday. There is nothing exciting or outwardly attractive in that. Intentionally so. It is solid meat all the time, the sort of thing for balanced, intelligent Christians. It does not provide a system of complete leisure time occupation, nor does it offer social facilities. Why should it? If we train, educate and establish our people in true Christian living, they will learn to employ their leisure time properly and find desirable social intercourse without the aid of the minister. Many have found for themselves Christian friends at Gilcomston.

May I tell you what I would like to see at Gilcomston?

I would like to see the Sunday morning service to be the family worship of the whole congregation, no segregation of age groups, all must learn to worship together. Sunday afternoon is obviously for the young folk and although the teaching must be graded I want family worship there also part of the time. Sunday evening is devoted to preaching the Gospel.

It should be pointed out to those who are not familiar with the pattern of congregational life in many congregational parish churches in the post-war years that the changes which had taken place in Gilcomston South Church were both far-reaching and prophetic. Many congregations of this period had a huge round of social activity — badminton, drama, dancing, basket whist and an extraordinary number of Saturday and week-night evening events with cups of tea and mountains of home-baking. William Still swept all of this away and led his people into a New Testament simplicity in which teaching the Word, preaching the gospel and praying for the divine blessing on the church were the sum total of congregational activity. The change was prophetic in that while there were to be various developments over the course of the coming fifty years, early in his ministry his course was set.

## *Children in the Church*

It appears that the letter quoted above evoked a hostile reaction from within the congregation. If that conjecture

is correct, then the congregational letter of August 1948 took his thinking a little further, concentrating, as it did, on the issue of children in the church. He wrote about the problems of the adolescent years and the way in which the church has been ingenious and prolific in devising new methods of combining the spiritual with the social in earnest and even desperate attempts to lead young men and women into the reality, vitality and felicity of Christian fellowship.

But he scorned such attempts as failing to address the necessity of *decision*. He claimed that such methods had clouded the issue in a fog of friendliness.

After defending his practice of challenging young people to take a firm, courageous stand for Christ early in their teens, he then addresses the problems his earlier letter had apparently raised:

The question has been sincerely asked by several who are concerned about the young folk in our Church: 'What are you going to provide for the young people who do not or will not, come to the Sunday services, the mid-week service and the Prayer meeting?' The answer is 'Nothing!' If by adolescence young people have not learnt to enjoy the services of the Church, then we have failed or they have failed. To say that we must provide alternatives for those who have no taste or inclination for what Christ and his Church provides, is an impertinence which insults our Lord Jesus Christ.

If the Gospel were preached and Bible instruction inculcated in a hard, dry unattractive manner, there would be some cause to demand a lighter alternative, but that is not the case. Then let all who have influence over youth encourage them to attend at least two of the three services on Sunday (why not three?), and the mid-week on Wednesday. If the ministry fails in this, it fails indeed, and no amount of financial or numerical prosperity can hide the fact.

He concluded the August letter with a strong appeal to parents to avoid trying always to 'allow too many amusements' for their children but rather to encourage them 'to make the church the heart and centre of their lives'.

During the years 1964-65 I was living only two hundred yards from Gilcomston South Church, while I served as assistant minister in the North and East Church of St Nicholas which is also situated on Union Street, about half a mile east of Gilcomston. I therefore had opportunity to slip in at the back when my own evening service had concluded and sit under Mr Still's preaching. It was not uncommon at this point in his ministry for a sermon to last an hour and twenty minutes. However, in 1966, sensing that his sermons were too long for many of his congregation, he courageously acknowledged this and made a resolute decision

to preach for a maximum of fifty minutes. The result was that parents began to bring their children back to the evening services and this is evidenced in a congregational letter, dated September 1966.

We have had an interesting summer at Gilcomston. There have been many visitors and the shorter services and children's addresses have encouraged parents to bring their children to Church in the evening as well as in the morning.

There follows a strongly worded plea to parents to bring their children with them to both services during which younger children could be kept in reasonable behaviour by discreetly giving them suitable reading or writing material or some other seemly occupation.

The emphasis remains the same — family worship without segregation into age groups, the whole Christian family worshipping and learning together. The thinking moved forward and we find him writing in June 1970 that many Sunday Schools are virtually an abdication of Christian parents' responsibility to train and bring up their own children. He continued:

I want us therefore to transport the Sunday School into the Church, and let us do it there, as the children sit in the family pew. Nor does this exclude children whose parents do not belong to our Church: there would still be need of teachers or guardians to meet those, and bring them in and make them feel wanted. The basis of the whole thing would be children coming to Church and sitting with their parents and guardians.

It should not be thought for one moment that his concept was of 'all-age worship' in the modern sense of 'family services'. Not that at all. His preaching continued to be aimed at intelligent adults who were prepared to listen to long, expository sermons, who rejoiced to sing the best hymns containing profound theology and who would enter into his remarkable prayers with profound piety and reverence. The children of the congregation learnt to sit through such services which were seldom, if ever, shorter than ninety minutes. That was his concept of 'all-age worship'.

His deep conviction that worship should be 'all-age' relates very pertinently to another aspect of his thinking — that the entire congregation should be a kind of 'therapeutic community'. It is to that that we turn next.

### *The Congregation as a Therapeutic Community*

William Still's gift for counselling is legendary. However, let me point out that for him counselling was not at all what passes for counselling in many church circles today. He saw the counselling he gave as essentially

arising from the ministry of the Word of God. It was a natural continuation of that ministry and an intensely personal way of applying the message. While he had a ministry to literally hundreds of people by telephone, letters and personal interviews, his pastoral counselling was concentrated on his own flock after the evening service and two full and telling expository messages.

In the mid-sixties he had visited a small fellowship south of London where I myself had been a minister for three years. There he found a group of men and women who enjoyed very real and edifying Christian fellowship in the social setting of a home. They ate together and then studied the Scriptures and he found himself ministering to hungry but growing young Christians in an environment very different from a Presbyterian place of worship. On his return to Aberdeen, we discussed the experience at length, and since, as always, he was willing to change course, he resolved that the hitherto despised cup of tea and biscuit on church premises might not, after all, be a bad thing on Sunday evenings at the close of the service. So some social interaction on Sunday evenings became formalized.

It was not that his congregation had ever rushed out of church within minutes of the benediction being pronounced. Far from it! Rather it was that the after-meeting when people gathered round in groups quietly to enjoy fellowship together, and not least to welcome and get to know any newcomers and visitors, became a firm part of the Sunday programme. The cup of tea or coffee provided a point of contact and was a positive signal and encouragement that the worship which had up to this point been mainly (though not wholly) vertical became now mainly (though not wholly) horizontal. That was how he saw it.

In the early 1970s the Crieff Fellowship was born. It had begun with six gatherings over nine months in a manse in Crieff where Dr Geoff Dixon, a psychiatrist and member of Gilcomston church, gave the dozen or so ministers present a course in pastoral care of those who were in some way wounded or hurting people. What impressed me during those six gatherings was the way in which Mr Still's thinking emerged as seeing his fellowship as a therapeutic community. His belief was that many of his people had caring gifts which ought to be developed so that those who came off the street to

services, attracted by the notice-board, bright lights and open doors, should be met by a community of people marked by genuine love and a sensitivity of soul and who were able to express that love in the most spontaneous and natural caring over a cup of tea. And that was what Gilcomston church was becoming, covertly and overtly, the most caring of communities.

Another change in the church building contributed to this ongoing development of the sharing, caring community of worshippers. In the early 1970s he had the idea of removing the pews downstairs in the building and replacing them with free-standing, comfortable seats. It was his view that rigid pews militated against the 'horizontal' aspect of the coming together of God's people. He wanted more flexibility and saw that church buildings needed to be up-to-date with wall to wall carpets and more homely seating arrangements. Though many may consider this to have been an insignificant and merely cosmetic change, it proved to be far from that. An environment was created which enabled the fellowship to relate to each other more easily. Social interaction steadily increased and the depth of fellowship grew to a remarkable degree.

During the last year of Mr Still's life I preached on several Sundays in Gilcomston since because of his frailty, he himself was no longer able to conduct worship. The first Sunday morning I was there, in February 1997, only two people left after the benediction. Over an hour later, at least 50% of the congregation were still gathered in groups, engaging in the caring and sharing they had learnt from their revered pastor. The evening service was even more marked by the most gracious, mutual concern of the members, one for another. The counselling gift he himself had exercised so fruitfully (he once told me that he saw it as about 50% of his ministry) had become extended to the entire fellowship.

William Still has given much to the church of the twentieth century. For those who have the ears to hear, the eyes to see and the minds to understand, his theology of the congregation as a family is by no means the least valuable of his prophetic gifts to us.

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