

Introduction



THE APPEARANCE, SPREAD, IMPACT, and survival of the Christian faith is one of the greatest and most remarkable facts of human history. Whether in accepting it or countering it, no one can deny the influence of Christianity, the most numerous of the religious communities, upon the shape of the world we inhabit. However else it may find expression, the essential nature of this tenacious faith is that it is congregational. It exists in hundreds of thousands of congregations and gatherings in a multitude of cultures and contexts across the globe. They take different forms and have many ways of worshiping and of governing themselves, but they exist and they continue to proliferate.

The congregation is an idea taken from the practice of the Judaism out of which the Christian faith originally emerged. For some centuries, probably beginning with the forced sixth-century exile of many Jews to Babylon and the subsequent destruction of Solomon's Temple, Jewish believers had begun to gather in local synagogues, community meeting places for study, fellowship, and prayer. When the centre of Jewish worship in the Temple of Jerusalem was once more destroyed in 70 AD, Judaism was able to survive because in the exile it had already pioneered the synagogue as a focus for its worship. Here the people gathered, the Scriptures were studied, and the law interpreted. It is clear enough that Jesus was in regular attendance at the synagogue in his village, and when the time came he made the local synagogue the place to announce the beginning of his own ministry (Luke 4:16–21). Synagogues were central to the community, used for schooling and education and as social centers, as well as places for worship.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

When Christianity came into being, the synagogue provided a natural example of how Christians might form their own faith communities (although

for a surprisingly long time believers in Jesus managed to maintain links to the synagogue itself). They formed their own assemblies, congregations, or communities, which became the primary social expression of their life together. Although since that time the word “church” has come to refer to just about any institution, denomination, or organizational form that has somehow sprung from Christian roots, actually “church” primarily refers to the gatherings through which Christian believers learn, share, worship, and evangelize together. The congregation is the true and proper form of the church. According to Peter Brain, an Australian bishop:

Local churches are the place where the church is visible and functional. Local assemblies constitute the church. . . . The week-by-week meetings of local Christians are the place where the Great Commandment, of serving love between Christians, can be visible for all to experience and observe. It is also the place from which the Great Commission can be obeyed, supported and its resultant disciples nurtured. The rubber hits the road in local church congregations. Not only is it the place where Christians meet each other, and where Christians are trained to meet the world, but where the world can meet Christ. It is an exciting but difficult place to be.¹

Any institutional form that does not emerge from and serve vibrant, creative, and faith-filled congregations is doomed to become moribund and obstructive. The health of congregational life is paramount. The local church is indeed the salvation of the world.

Yet Peter Brain’s comment is that congregations can also be difficult places to be. There may be many reasons for this—when people begin to relate genuinely and honestly there are challenges enough. But congregations continually face the danger of erosion, both from without and within. Life as we now live it can drain away the resources that are needed to maintain active and effective congregational life. The world of work imposes heavy burdens upon people’s time and emotional energies. Leisure opportunities provide numerous distractions from building up a faith community. Raising a well-educated, well-rounded family requires the investment of both time and attention. None of these things are of themselves wrong, but they are demanding and can sap the extra resources that congregations need to sustain themselves. In addition, the generally skeptical and unbelieving atmosphere in which believers have to live out their discipleship can have a corrosive effect on their confidence and motivations. There are few external forces that are hospitable to the building of congregations. Yet it is

1. Brain, *Going the Distance*, 216.

the erosion of forces from within that are more concerning. When church members lose a familiarity with the biblical sources of their faith, or have never gained it in the first place, congregational life becomes detached from the very wellsprings that will give it life in times good and bad. And when they are unsure about their convictions, about what it is they believe and why it is they believe it, then the very reasons for being in the church in the first place are undermined. It is just these convictions that this book sets out to explore and to affirm.

CHRISTIAN CONVICTIONS

Although many Christians have been brought up in the faith and so are in the debt of previous generations in particular ways, essentially the Christian faith is not something that can simply be inherited. It has to be embraced by each person on the grounds of personal conviction. It has been said that “God has no grandchildren,” and this is what is meant. If people are to believe, they should believe for themselves, not to satisfy someone else. This means that they should be persuaded on their own account that the Christian faith is true: they should be convinced, even if, as is inevitable, the depth of their conviction might waver from time to time. My preference in this volume is to refer to “the Christian community” as another way of speaking about the church or the churches. The language is used interchangeably. Convictions, although personally held, are also community constructs. The knowledge we have we share with others. In fact, knowledge of any kind is only really possible within a group of people who share certain assumptions, common starting points, and rules of logic, usually unspoken but sometimes quite explicit, about what can count as “true” and “false” or “plausible” and “implausible.” Christian communities, like all others, function in this way. Those of us who come to believe rarely arrive at that point without the influence of and engagement with a Christian community that has preceded us. What makes its message persuasive to us is that people, apparently ordinary, normal, and intelligent people, do believe these things. It is the sincerity and quality of their conviction that makes them attractive. Convictions are therefore heartfelt beliefs about the way the world is, about the significance of Jesus Christ, and about the reality of the God in whom he placed his trust. It is my intention in this book to describe and explore what lies behind these convictions and to offer them for the continuing commitment of the Christian community.

Christian communities that lose or weaken their convictions are in danger either of ceasing to exist or of degenerating into something that

is less than a church. Where there are no convictions to counter them, a community will be swamped by whatever happen to be the conventional or fashionable beliefs of the wider society. If all a church is seeking to do is reflect back to society what it already believes and accepts then it truly has no reason to exist. It offers nothing that cannot be found elsewhere, probably in a better form. But the churches actually exist to say something surprising and unheard of. Where conviction is lacking, so will be the power to convert or to transform others. Make no mistake, the church is in the business of converting men and women to Christ; but an unconvinced church will be an unconvincing church, unable to bring anybody to the point of decision. Convictions carry with them a sense of urgency and the need to act in the light of their content. For churches to be what they are called to be, therefore, the light of clarity and conviction needs to shine brightly. This emphatically does not mean that church members should be expected simply to parrot the party line. Nothing would be more destructive! Rather, they are to be drawn into an engagement with the community's convictions that enables them to understand them, grasp them, and internalize them so that they become a part of themselves, and then to express them with a generous spirit that is both open-hearted and open-minded towards others.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In offering this book for reflection and study I do not imagine that it will answer to the needs of every person found within the Christian community. We all have gifts and abilities that differ. We also possess varying kinds of intelligence. Experience suggests that not all have the same level of interest in, or aptitude and patience for, matters doctrinal and theological. This is entirely understandable, although it would be widely agreed that every church member requires a fundamental grasp of basic beliefs. What is essential however is that in every church community there should be a critical mass of people who have a deeper aptitude for doctrinal thinking (in distinction from equally necessary other forms of thinking) and who are willing to give themselves to the hard brain-work of engaging with the community's beliefs. There is no doubt that this is a demanding task. I have in mind that this book may prove useful for individuals who, having gained a foundational knowledge of their faith, now wish to deepen and extend their understanding, either for the sheer joy of doing so or to increase their usefulness to their own communities. Equally it might be used to inform the teaching or the preaching of pastors and others whose responsibility it is to shape the faith of their communities.

I have deliberately sought to avoid excessive complexity, while not sacrificing content, and to make the twenty chapters that follow relatively short. Because the book is intended for regular church members rather than academics, I have chosen to keep the number of external references or citations as few as possible, using them only when there is a direct quotation from another source. The books cited are listed in the bibliography, which also contains some titles for further reading. I am, of course, profoundly indebted to many thinkers and theologians who have influenced my own thoughts at many points, even to the extent of using or echoing words and phrases that come directly from them. Some readers may recognize these even though I give no references. I here acknowledge my many debts. Conversely, because our convictions emerge from the biblical sources, I have made reference and quoted relatively freely from the Scriptures and have sought to embody their witness within the argument of each chapter. Unless otherwise indicated, citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Different translations, the King James Bible, the Revised Standard Version, and the New International Version, are used when, in my judgment, they illuminate the point more effectively, and sometimes the reference is to the alternative translation contained in the notes, or margin, of one of the versions cited. Further biblical texts are referred to in order to substantiate the arguments from other sources, and readers are encouraged to follow these up and consider how they may be relevant. Readers will certainly notice, and I trust forgive, a high degree of repetition of some arguments in the chapters that follow. Though this may lack in literary elegance it will hopefully serve to reinforce some of the thought forms that are introduced here. In addition, it will be noticed that some significant verses keep re-occurring since, like diamonds, they have many facets. This should be taken as testimony to their centrality in identifying Christian convictions.

CLARITY OF THOUGHT

Stating Christian convictions involves weighing and articulating the intellectual content of the Christian faith in a way that is ordered, connected, clear, and faithful to the Christ who is at the heart of our discipleship. Christian teachings, or doctrines, are derived from the biblical witness that gives us access to the story of salvation as it is being worked out through the people of Israel and the early Christian community. In the Bible itself the project of summarizing and stating what is at the heart of faith is already under way and occurs with the intent to offer back to God the glory that is God's due (as examples see Deuteronomy 26:5–11, “A wandering Aramean

was my ancestor,” and the words of Ezra in Nehemiah 9:6–38, “You are the LORD, you alone”). In the New Testament the elements of basic statements of conviction can be found in verses such as 1 Corinthians 12:3; 15:3–11, and Philippians 2:5–11, words that some believe had already developed either into songs shared in the communities or poetic forms that could be committed to memory by the baptized. The New Testament refers to an emerging “standard of sound teaching” (2 Tim 1:13–4), intended as a summary of apostolic testimony. In turn, this was to develop into what was known in the post-apostolic age as the “rule of faith” and then, as the churches stabilized and became established, into the Apostles’ Creed (included here as Appendix 1) and, from 325 AD, the Nicene Creed, regarded today as the ecumenically agreed statement of normative Christian faith (Appendix 2). Such creedal statements, while remaining secondary to Scripture, can be understood as guides as to how to read those Scriptures and prompts as to how they should be understood and what should not be overlooked.

In formulating their convictions the churches always have in mind the biblical sources of their faith, the interpretations of those sources by previous generations of the Christian community all the way back to the apostles themselves, and the ways in which contemporary thinking about the world is likely to confirm or conflict with those convictions. The Christian faith is, after all, like a conversation that has been going on for a long time. Whenever present-day Christians take a Bible in their hands, sing a hymn, or recite the creed in worship, they are implicitly acknowledging the ways in which they are dependent on previous generations who handed the faith on to them in the first place. None of us invents the conversation as though from the beginning: we insert ourselves into one that has long preceded us. We should be willing to listen with humility to the wisdom of our mothers and fathers in the faith.

Although all Christian convictions are important, it is wise and possible to discriminate between those that are absolutely core to the identity of the faith and those that are not. To this end they can be classified as dogmas, doctrines, and opinions. The words “dogmas” and “doctrines” essentially mean the same thing—the principles, teachings, and tenets of the faith. But the word “dogma” is used to refer to teachings that are absolutely at the core, such that were they no longer to be believed, the Christian faith would lose its identity and become something else, a reformed form of Judaism, for instance. Roughly speaking, the church’s dogmas correspond with the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. It is expected that all Christians across the board share these beliefs. Doctrines are convictions that are of high importance but where there might be legitimate differences and disagreements, the kinds for instance that give rise to distinct denominations within the

Christian spectrum. In other words, there are truths that are non-negotiable and define what it means to be Christian; and then there are truths that are negotiable and that determine what kind of Christian we might be. Opinions (more strictly “theological” opinions) are where there is an accepted right of personal judgment in matters that are neither at the core of the faith nor determined by church doctrine. When opinions are made into dogmas friction and divisions will inevitably occur. Conversely, where dogmas are only regarded as opinions then the churches would lack conviction and resilience and would probably cease to exist. For the sake of the well-being of the churches, their preservation in both truth and unity, distinguishing between what is essential and non-negotiable and what is not, is an important part of shared conversation and life. This book seeks to honor these distinctions and to work within them.

GRACE AND TRUTH

Holding firm convictions, and caring deeply about them, is not without risk. Whereas it tends to be people who hold convictions who get things done, being able to persist in times of discouragement and to press forward despite opposition, it might also be the case that those of strong conviction can be over-forceful, both in expressing and pursuing what they believe, to the point of over-riding or compelling others. “Conviction politicians,” for instance, are not always appreciated; but then those without convictions are regarded as unprincipled. Similarly the very word “dogma,” that we have used, might for some have connotations of “dogmatic,” the inability to see or to value contrary points of view. Yet the heart of all Christian convictions is that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is the supreme gift of God and the highest example of what it means to be truly human. Christ was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), the perfect expression of truth humanly embodied in a compassionate and forgiving life. It is not enough therefore to have right beliefs (“orthodoxy”). These must be combined with right attitudes and living (“orthopraxis”) if they are to be congruent with the one who is the “way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). This book seeks to follow the way of “generous orthodoxy,” fully and gladly espousing normative Christian convictions and, for that very reason, holding those convictions in ways that are open to truth wherever it be found and seeking “peace, goodwill among people” (Luke 2:14 margin).

The starting point for this book, both in the way it is set out and the beliefs it contains, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ without which there would be no convictions of which to speak.²

SAMPLE

2. I am grateful to Wipf & Stock/Cascade, and in particular their UK editor, Dr. Robin Parry, for allowing this book to see the light of day. Accordingly the text follows the spelling and punctuation conventions of American English.