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THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS AT GILCOMSTON | by William Still

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*On 12 September, 1983, the Rev. William Still, Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen, universally recognized as the senior parish minister, both in years and influence, among evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, gave the following address to some fifty ministers at an In-Service course of his denomination, convened at St Andrews.<sup>1</sup> The address was published in The Banner of Truth magazine in 1984, and was drawn to the attention of the men at the 2010 US Ministers' Conference in Grantham, PA, by Craig Troxel, one of the speakers, who comments:*

*When I first read this article it helped to forge in my mind an all-important distinction. When it comes to the stewardship of the Gospel, there are two basic choices before the Church of Christ. Either the Church will be content to apply itself to God's ordinary means and trust him for their extraordinary ends; or, the Church will pursue extraordinary means and content itself with ordinary ends. In his reflection of four decades of ministry William Still describes the extraordinary fruit that God brought about through one congregation's simple devotion to God's appointed means of grace: Word, sacrament and prayer. In a day when there are so many voices calling for the church to do 'something more,' here is a plea for the church to pursue 'its own native activity' in the power of the Spirit. One need not claim membership in the Stillite clan to feel a deep kinship with our brother and his (still) timely word.*



I have been asked to share with you, and I quote, 'something of myself, and what has made my ministry what it is'; which would sound too prestigious if it had come from myself. In any case, 'it's far better felt than telt'. In fact, this would be better done by someone else.

I am of fisher stock from Banffshire, but have lived practically all my life in Aberdeen. Originally Church of Scotland, we were taken as children at a time of family crisis to the Salvation Army, where I worshipped and served until the age of 17. Then, for two-and-a-half years, I was organist of the local Methodist Church but, when nearly 20, I returned to the Salvation Army because of the deadness of that church at that time. At the age of 23, I went to the Salvation Army's International College in London where, after three months, my health broke

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<sup>1</sup> William Still (1911-1997) was the Minister of Gilcomston South Church of Scotland, Aberdeen, from 1945 until his death. This article was previously published in *The Banner of Truth* magazine, No. 244 (January 1984), and has more recently been included as an 'extra' with the electronic edition of the August/September 2010 double-issue of the magazine.

down, and there followed five years of almost complete inactivity due to some sort of nervous disorder.

Having left school for good at the age of 13 for health reasons and knowing little but music (which was my enthusiasm and which I sought to teach for a while), I now started to study English, Latin and Greek with a view to entrance to the University and the Divinity Hall for a modified course. I began my university course just as the Second World War began in 1939.

After five years at university, with more activity than study, alas, I went to Springburnhill, Glasgow, to assist the new minister of that old parish church, and then came to Gilcomston South Church in 1945 on the day the War in the West ended. I therefore began my ministry literally when the lights were going up and when a great deal of social life in the community was emerging from its hibernation, and when practically any activity was of interest and it was comparatively easy to gather a crowd. My evangelical faith, such as it was, had been dimmed somewhat during years of training, and if it had not been for three months in hospital, fearing I might lose my left foot after an argument with a train, and then a month or two on crutches, I would have felt I was vastly unprepared to commence any ministry at all. And yet, perhaps not!

As it was, I determined on a full-blooded evangelistic assault on my main street congregation — or its remnant, for it was incredibly run down; and soon the place was humming with evangelistic hymns and fiery gospel messages. Billy Graham came from America as an unknown young man the next March 1946, and he preached two nights in our church during a tour of Scotland. This helped to give the evangelistic urge a boost and we started Youth for Christ meetings in our church on Saturday evenings.

The novelty soon wore off, despite many gimmicks, although I must say that some of our most faithful members and office-bearers today, thirty-eight years on, were converted then; and I began to compare the seriousness of the ministry which was developing on Sundays with the gimmickry of Saturday evening Youth for Christ rallies. Towards the end of 1946 I came to the very definite conclusion that, the place being half-full of babes in Christ, someone had to feed them.

Roy Miller, later of Moray House, Edinburgh, but then of the Scripture Union, reminded me that a pastor was the feeder of the sheep. He suggested that I begin to write my own Bible reading notes for our congregation and offered me some models. (May I stress at this point the value of literary communication with a congregation!) So I began to try to prepare Bible reading notes and kept on, getting into ever deeper waters biblically, and many times wanting to run away from a task for which I felt so unequal.

It was at the beginning of 1947 that I commenced the Daily Bible Reading Notes (on John's Gospel) and these readings have continued in our monthly *Record* until now, during which time I must have covered the Scriptures almost twice. We also asked the Youth for Christ team to go elsewhere on Saturday evenings because we were to devote ourselves to prayer — the most important thing we ever did. I do not suppose there has been a Saturday evening since that some of us have not prayed at Gilcomston these last 38 years.

It was also at the beginning of 1947 that the systematic Bible Teaching ministry from the pulpit and platform began in earnest. I had been toying with the idea, having gone through Galatians chapter by chapter, and similarly the Letter of James, and parts of Romans. This way of ministering the Word of God continued on Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings, also slightly differently at the mid-week Bible Study, and in the Daily Notes in the monthly *Record*. We went

through the Bible book by book, alternating the Testaments and different parts of each, and this form of ministry has gone on from then until now. And that's about it!

Almost all along the way people have been saying about something which I simply stumbled upon quite unwittingly — 'How unusual!' But to us it became the most natural thing in the world, not least because we soon saw that it met virtually all the needs of the congregation: everything flowed from it, not only the growth in stability of the character of the people, but the individual searching of heart and conscience — all watered by Saturday prayers — until people were wanting to serve the Lord, not only in Aberdeen in the community, in social services, etc., but in the wider service of the church and at home and abroad.

At one point within twelve years, we had as many as twelve of our members serving Foreign Missions (as they were called then) in Nigeria, alone. But also, people were coming to me about places I had never heard of — Ludhiana, where in the world was that? And I had to polish up my geography.

Now, I am claiming nothing new or unusual by this form of ministry: it is other people who have raised their eyebrows at something which simply grew. In recent years James Philip of Holyrood, my eldest 'son' in the faith, took a Sabbatical to study this form of systematic exposition of the Scriptures throughout church history. He says that he found, that apart from the Early Fathers and the Reformers, any such systematic teaching and preaching of the Scriptures was short-lived, and even the Puritans, who certainly covered the Scriptures in depth, used textual rather than systematic expository preaching. One is not saying that our practice has not been done by preachers throughout history and even today, but I think you will agree that it is far from the accepted form.

However, the abundant fruit of this form of ministry, which I have documented in a book called *The Work of the Pastor*, is such that only a lunatic would have abandoned it despite all that was said against it.

Now there must be something over 200 similar ministries known to me in Scotland, some in England, Ireland, and further overseas, including Australia and the United States. Not all these may be equally conservative, but I think all who have even begun to adopt this method of ministry would confess the dimensions it has added to their churches. Certainly the fruit of it is seen in the quality of Christians it produces and in the strengthened impulse to serve Christ in his church. But, 'good wine needs no bush'. I am here, however, to tell you what you asked for.

After an initial eighteen months of fiercely evangelistic preaching, and of red-hot gospel (which has branded me for life!), the ministry at Gilcomston took a very definite turn, the emphasis becoming that of the Apostles in the Acts after the choosing of the Seven. That emphasis was on prayer and the ministry of the Word.

It took years, of course, before other competing social interests and activities were finally shed from the congregational life, not without sundry troubles. Today all that goes on, apart from office-bearers' meetings, are four gatherings in the week, attended by representatives of all ages in the congregation including children; there is absolutely no segregation whatsoever. These meetings are made up as follows: two services on Sundays, the evening at least as well attended as the morning, often better, partly because we have people from other churches who are deprived of an evening service; mid-week Bible Study when anything from a half to a full hall of people will attend. (I took mid-week Bible Study myself for the first twenty-five to thirty years, until there was a small army of men more than fit to lead it, and so as many as forty to fifty men take

turns at leading it and we have, therefore, the benefit of biblical expositions and applications by men from nearly every walk of life from academics to plumbers, fish merchants, grocers, etc. Now I take Bible Study on an average once a month.) The other gathering is on Saturday evening for prayer, the office-bearers meeting beforehand for half an hour in the vestry.

I may say that the office-bearers' gathering for prayer has done more to bind us into a homogeneous team of Christian brothers than anything, and that has had a remarkably mellowing and warming influence upon our whole congregational life. After the meeting in the vestry we repair to the general gathering for prayer, which lasts for two hours and a half precisely, some people with children slipping out quietly at various times as it proceeds.

Now, I wonder if any are saying, 'How incredibly narrow this is as an example of congregational life! Such intense spirituality!' Perhaps you think you could not stand it, let alone your congregation! Well, all I can say is that from that fount of praise, prayer and Bible Study every conceivable kind of outreach goes on into the wider church and the community.

I can recall when council housing estates began to spring up in my youth that the church used to make its slogan, 'The church in the midst', and in the centre of communal life, so that the church as a church had its finger in almost every legitimate pie in the parish. That is one way of doing things, but by what I would be inclined to call, dilution — whether there is much dissemination to it, or not.

I take the opposite view, having seen the dissipation and dilution of effort by such all-inclusive activities on the part of the different denominations I have been in. I felt that my time as Pastor could best be employed by concentrating almost wholly on feeding the sheep and tending the lambs in their spiritual growth through a corporate life of prayer and the ministry of the Word. Then let the congregation go out — and encourage them to do so — with an absolutely free commission to be leaven throughout the community and to live their life out there amongst the people as the good Lord guided.

Let me give you a comparatively trivial example of how this has worked. One of our chief men, responding to some of the younger folk this summer, wanted to have a summer outing, and he spoke to me about it. I said, 'This is precisely what you should not have done: you should have gone ahead with your outing, not making it a church affair as such, even although many of the people attending belong to the congregation. If you involve me as minister, then sooner or later it will become a church affair, and later still a part of the traditional, and then official life, of the congregation: and all we have striven for through years of blood, sweat, toil, and tears to bring the church back to being the church will be lost, in that we will have become again a largely social fellowship, and that is precisely what Gilcomston formerly was!'

You see, you could get crowds to come to pie suppers and dances in the hall, but precious few to church on Sunday, until things were so bad that old J. T. Cox — the compiler of our Church Law Book, who was Presbytery Clerk back then — twice tried to close our congregation down because it could not pay its way. Serve it right, too!

I hope you see what I am saying: let the church be the church, and let it not incorporate into its fundamental constitution anything but its own native activity, and let all the rest be as much in the nature of an unofficial activity and outreach as possible. Now, even some of my own associates tell me this is crazy, but I wonder whether they really think so when it works so fruitfully; or whether the thought of such a revolution in the life of the congregation simply appals them.

However, if the Soviets came and took us all over, which, says Solzhenitsyn, is more and more likely, what sort of church do you think would survive? I recall that when the Communists moved into China, and the missionaries were driven out, it is said that practically the only Christian church to survive was that which was called 'The Little Flock', because they were so structureless and simple in the form of their fellowship that they were able to fit into the new regime less obtrusively and did not come under the same suspicion as other denominations. And since authentic news has come out of China, we learn that the Christian church has grown boundlessly, despite persecution.

That argument does not apply here yet; but it does point to the basic nature of the individual congregation of the Christian church as a simple, family fellowship, in which the centralities alone are incorporated into the essential life of the church as an institution, and for the rest Christians go out into the world and find their feet as witnesses there in the midst of its affairs.

Relative to the family idea in a congregation, and the fact that all our own four weekly gatherings are attended by our children, the only separate activity we have is a Primary Sunday School for children up to the age of 8, but younger children than that are present at other times and enter into the Sunday services and week-day meetings to various degrees.

I owe something to David Searle, now of Larbert Old Church, for putting this into practice; for when he was at Newhills, Aberdeenshire, he went round Presbytery propounding a view which greatly attracted me. He reminded us that Sunday Schools at first were never intended for church children, who were expected to be taught by their Christian parents and in the church services. Sunday Schools were founded as an evangelistic outreach to children who had little or no connection with the church — the Ragged Sunday Schools and all that! (I recall here the tremendous shock it was to me when I was first told that there was no emphasis upon youth in the New Testament.) What David Searle said rang a bell with me, for we had many parents capable of teaching their children on the basis of the systematic Bible teaching ministry in church. This of course was linked with the fact that we took the doctrine and practice of infant baptism seriously. In that connection, it has astonished me to find that, whereas I would have thought that nowhere in Scotland would that doctrine be held as firmly, and its implications practised more assiduously, than in the Highlands and Islands, yet although infant baptism is on the whole faithfully practised there, the tacit assumption seems to be that children will grow up unregenerate and very likely in their teens sow their own wild oats before being converted as adults.

This absolutely astonished me, but it was confirmed by a family from Harris who had never heard of anything else until they came to us. But surely the implication of infant baptism is that parents by faith take hold of God's Covenant of Grace; and the quality of faith which parents are called upon to exercise is not that which merely hopes and prays, rather ineffectually, for their youngsters' salvation. It should be faith which claims them as the Lord's, telling the children so as soon as they have intelligence to understand — which may be very young indeed! For it is amazing what very little children can understand of spiritual things, contrary to certain current educational theories; that is, if they are nurtured properly and wisely in them. They may then soon be incorporated into the active life of the congregation.

Some of our children in their own simple way take part in prayer at the gathering for that purpose on Saturday evenings, sometimes bringing tears to the eyes with the penetrating

directness of their petitions. Then with their parent's consent, they are permitted to take Communion from a younger age than is customary.

Before I saw this and put it into practice, having the usual Sunday Schools like all other churches, we lost the children of even our most committed people as they entered their teen years, because these children had never got into the way of attending church, only Sunday School. And nothing will make them attend at the ages of 12 to 14 if they have not got into the way of it long before that.

And I can tell you that since over 25 years ago when we stopped Sunday Schools for all children from the age of 8 upwards, and required that they attend church, morning and evening with their parents or guardians, we have not lost one of our young folk. They all attend twice a Sunday.

Indeed, we have had the practice for some time now of youngsters from the age of say 12, and even younger, professing their faith publicly, although not at that time being added to the church roll. Generally about their mid-teens they request their names to be added to the church roll. So that in a congregation which all my days has been milling with students and nurses, most of whom came to us as perfect strangers at the age of 18 or thereabouts, we have now a goodly congregation of our own native born-and-bred youngsters growing up amongst us, which is of great satisfaction to us, and we are humbly grateful to God.

Of course, there are further implications of this practice, and I have yet to see some of our youngsters become the 'pillars of the Kirk' which formerly the Boys' Brigade used to produce when that youth organization was a spiritual force. I look to the day.

The biblical doctrine one has sought to recover and practise is this: that it is God's intention for the Israel of God to continue and survive and even prosper to a thousand generations — emphasis on the generations, not excluding Gentiles! Therefore the children of believers ought to become the chief pillars of the church which is to be, from generation to generation. To my knowledge this is not the case today, for even some of the most devoted members and office-bearers of the kirk, and even indeed some ministers, cannot get their teenage youngsters to come to church at all, or they may make as few token attendances as looks respectable.

Almost everywhere one goes, one finds that the age groups almost certain to be absent from church in any numbers, are teenagers and young people in their 20s; so much so that it seems almost to be assumed that the growing young folk of church members and office-bearers and even in some cases of ministers, will not be expected to attend church except perfunctorily, or at exceptional times.

And all I am saying is, that by stripping away the pre-occupying youth agencies associated with the kirk, including Sunday Schools, and requiring children to attend church from an early age, they have all gone on to do so into adult life.

I know all about the protests, that children do not understand what is going on at these young ages, and I have gone through with determined parents all the experiments of their youngsters bringing books to read and other surreptitious interests to keep them content during the service, and particularly during the sermon — and our sermons are longer than twenty minutes! The idea of aids was largely exploded for some of our parents some time ago when on their own testimonies, it was proved that in discussing the service and the sermon over Sunday lunch — the menu including 'roast minister' — some of the youngsters were able to discuss the

issues and some even put their parents right on what the minister actually said, and I know of a few parents who then deliberately took away the children's aids, and accepted, that whatever antics they seemed to get up to, they were on the whole listening and often taking in more than had been assumed.

I was saying that in our experience the whole future of young folk attending church — to put it no higher than mere attendance, although I can put it higher — right up to early adulthood, has hung on getting them to attend regularly, preferably in the family pew, during childhood. To say that we cannot do this in our modern age is surely the most pathetic admission of failure in our elementary responsibility as Christian parents.

From all this you may see that what I am seeking to propound is a view of the church which is likely to perpetuate her from one generation to another, which is, I am sure, what God intends. Without this there is no way to ensure that our nation remains at its heart truly Christian. And I therefore entirely refute the assumption that we must necessarily accept as inevitable (although we do find it in the Old Testament prophets and kings) that a godly generation must produce a next generation of mere nominals, and the generation after that those who have nothing whatsoever to do with the church, although, alas, this is what we have seen too much of in our land during my lifetime. But then, that is all part of the great crisis of authority which goes right back, I believe, to the loss of biblical authority, because of the loosening of many strands of belief in the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. And one has sought with all one's heart and strength to repair that, not so much by presenting strong apologetic arguments for the Bible as the Word of God — that is a field in itself, and this is where I may differ from some of my conservative brothers who have defended the faith *ad infinitum* rather than declared it, and who have perhaps sometimes unnecessarily antagonized people by doing so.

I have gone into all that and have lived with it all my ministerial life and no one is in any doubt where I stand. But instead of arguing with people that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God and presenting a wealth of apologetics, as many conservatives have spent their time doing, one has felt that the way to press people into the kingdom, especially thinking young people, is to preach the Word and teach it, and let it do its own work by the Holy Spirit in their consciences, 'precept upon precept, line upon line' (although I know that these phrases were perhaps first used by Isaiah for a different purpose). I mean preaching in a dogmatic way, not in the aggressive sense of the word but in the positive sense of it. And it is axiomatic and essential that we must present the truth with that backing of prayer and that dependence upon the Holy Spirit (in both the study of the Word and in the declaration of it) which releases the latent power of the Word to reach not only the minds, but the consciences, hearts and wills of the hearers. Our purpose must be nothing less than life transformation and, consequently, the calling of many into the Lord's service.

When I met the Vacancy Committee of Gilcomston South Church on 1st April, 1945 (Easter Day), having preached twice, I said that I would not be prepared to lead a congregation without a gathering for prayer. And those dear people who wanted me because I had filled the largest churches in Aberdeen in my student days during the War for Sunday afternoon music recitals, said, so patronizingly, 'O, but you can have your prayer meeting.' That was the only thing I asked because next to the Word of God (and Luke records the Twelve as putting prayer even before the ministry of the Word!), a work of God cannot be wrought without the wrestling prayers of the saints.