



# IN THE INNER CITY

## How Can We Tell if God is at Work ?

Greg Smith



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**BRITISH CHURCH GROWTH ASSOCIATION**

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1 A Story	
2 Assumptions	
3 The problem	
CRITERIA	4
1 Biblical/Theological	
2 What do people recognize as the work of God?	
3 A sociological approach	
APPLICATION AND EXAMPLES	12
1 Do numbers count?	
2 How are lives changed?	
3 Fellowship or fences?	
4 Loving the world	
5 Faith and works	
CHRIST OUTSIDE THE GATE	20
1 God's sovereignty	
2 Common grace and redemptive grace	
3 The work of the Holy Spirit	
4 Cross and resurrection	
CONCLUSION	24
REFERENCES	

# INTRODUCTION

## *1 A Story*

A christian woman in the New Testament Church of God stands up to give a testimony of how the Lord protected her from being run over when crossing a main road. 'I'm thanking him because even though I didn't see the car coming something held me back from stepping out'. And all of us in the congregation shout 'Praise the Lord'.

A group of mums from a bible study group hear how a little boy was killed by running across the same road. They pray for and visit his family. They launch a campaign for a pelican crossing, lobby their councillors, eventually stage a demo where they walk continuously across the road with their prams and stop the traffic. Eventually the crossing is built.

A christian councillor and a christian town planner meet with others to discuss ways of reducing the traffic flow on the road. They receive support for their plan from the local cycling campaign group (two christians on the committee), the tenants' association (christian secretary) and the parent-teacher association (christian chair). The plan goes through.

Central government rate-caps the local council because of their heavy spending on subsidies for public transport. Bus services in the city are halved. Car traffic doubles, and the accident rate goes up, as does mental illness among the poor who cannot afford to go out. A bishop speaks against the government in the House of Lords, and is told to mind his own spiritual business by the Chairman of the Tory Party (who incidentally is also a member of General Synod).

Where was God at work in all of this? And if he was, on what basis can we describe and evaluate his activity? Christian life in inner urban areas in the 1980s presents many parallel situations, in fields ranging from exorcism and evangelism to racism and rate-capping. In this paper I shall attempt first to define the problem, secondly to examine biblical, experiential and sociological ways of approaching the question, thirdly to apply these to some examples arising from the life of the inner city church and finally to reflect on the issue in the light of some traditional doctrinal themes.

## *2 Assumptions*

There are a number of philosophical/theological positions which could be taken on the question of whether God is at work in the world today. For the atheist it is of course a non-question, for the agnostic a question which is intrinsically unanswerable. The Deist position, as I

understand it, is that a clockmaker like God made the world and left it to run according to the rules he set for evermore, but does not intervene in any way today. People from a Hindu or Buddhist background might stress God's 'being' within the created world but without using activity-focussed or 'God at work' language.

Whenever anyone talks in terms of God at work there is an underlying assumption that God is a living God, and probably a personal God. It is of course possible to believe in two or more gods who are at work in the world in conflicting ways for good and ill. Monotheistic faiths like Islam on the other hand would stress the sovereign work of God in the whole of creation, life and history, at times tending towards fatalistic acceptance of the will of God.

However, the idea of God at work fits best the conceptual framework of biblical christianity. Such language is often used by evangelical christians in statements relating their beliefs about ultimate reality to personal experience. In fact we could go so far as to say that one of the essential elements in a living christian faith is an awareness that God is not dead, but is alive and active in the present day world. Yet within the christian framework a variety of views can be found. Some christians with hyper-Calvinist tendencies are relatively close to the Islamic position. Others of a more pentecostal disposition would stress the work of God through miracles of conversion, healing and prophecies, etc. Sectarian christians who see the world as fundamentally evil would find it hard to see God at work outside the lives of the body of believers. On the other hand a more catholic understanding of the relationship of church and world would stress that God is at work in all good things around us, in culture, in society and in government, as well as within the church.

The assumption in this paper is that each of these christian views contains at least a grain of truth and can be integrated into a biblically rooted approach, which does not contradict what can be observed in the world around us. Given that this is the case, let us look at the types of events which christians describe as the work of God and see what can be said about them.

### *3 The Problem*

In ordinary circumstances most christians (and Church Growth scholars) would report on the state of the work of God in their situation in terms of

*a Numerical growth:* e.g. 'When Pastor X came to the church there were only fifteen members, now we have a regular congregation of three hundred'.

'In Korea, where there were no christians a hundred years ago they have prayer meetings a million strong, and one church alone has 400,000 members'.

*b Personal transformation:* e.g. 'Before I met the Lord I was on drugs and had spent several spells in jail. Now I've got a regular job, a

beautiful wife and a nice house. Praise the Lord'.

'I used to be depressed and suicidal, but since I learned to trust the Lord and to give everything over to him in prayer, I'm a lot happier'.

'I used to suffer from a bad back, then the elders prayed with me, and God healed me'.

*c Development of christian community:* e.g. 'We've just set up a prayer chain in our church; whenever anyone is in trouble they just phone up one of the leaders and within an hour we will have half a dozen people praying for them'.

'We are learning to love and trust each other. We share our lives together and we've got several of our families living in community at the vicarage'.

*d Incarnational growth and influence on the world:* e.g. 'Our aim is to be effective as christians in the life of this borough. We encourage our members to be involved in the tenants' association, as school governors and in the political field. We've got one of our members on the council, and believe that God is working through him'.

'Our church set up a day centre for the elderly, and an English teaching scheme for Asian women'.

The next important step is to ask how often any of this happens in the church in the inner city. For the social and religious environment of the inner city is generally regarded as 'difficult', and is not likely to produce too many exaggerated claims that the millenium is already upon us; in fact the reverse is rather more likely. Nonetheless, my impression is that, with the exception of rapid numerical growth, there are plenty of examples of changes definable in terms of God's activity in churches in urban priority throughout Britain. Yet in most cases there is a certain ambivalence in what is happening, enough to raise the question of whether the developments are really the work of God.

In the urban areas church attendance overall, and particularly in the mainline denominations, is in decline. The proportion of the population involved in worship is usually below 5 per cent and growth through conversion of grass roots working class people is rare. However, there are enough exceptions in terms of numerical growth and of newly planted churches to suggest that decline in attendance is not inevitable.

In inner-city churches it is likely that the stories of personal tranformation are matched with those of continuing struggle, with examples of backsliding and disappointment. Born-again christians, just like their neighbours, remain unemployed for long periods, while those who do succeed tend to move away to 'better areas', or become psychologically and culturally distanced from the local community. People do experience physical and emotional healing, yet for many urban christians the pressures of poverty, powerlessness, bad housing, racial violence, traffic noise, etc. present unbearable stresses.

Fellowship in urban churches often does develop in quality; indeed it is likely that the only churches which survive, let alone grow, are

those in which strong bonds of personal loyalty and love are built up at the practical and spiritual levels. Clergy in 'one man band' situations almost always go under. On the other hand body ministry does not always work, since there are numerous examples where relationships in inner-city churches and christian projects are under strain, and many of the new independent churches are the result of breakaways and splits from older bodies. It seems sometimes that the aggro and conflict within the community is projected onto the body of Christ.

My impression is that inner city churches lead the way in terms of incarnational growth: perhaps because the needs are greatest there, perhaps because of the tradition of "Mission" in such areas, perhaps because they have had such poor returns on the other indices of growth, perhaps because of the need to contextualise the gospel in a concrete and tangible way. However, it is not always easy, and resources are scarce. Even where finance is found for buildings and salaries, skilled and committed christian people are difficult to find. Urban christians are drawn into strange alliances when working for the Kingdom of God or for the good of the community as a whole. When they get involved in campaigning for justice or in political processes they are misunderstood or criticised as radicals or neo-marxists by some inner city, and by many suburban, christians.

Another important set of questions follow when christians become involved in work alongside inner city people. To what extent is it right to see God at work outside the body of believers? Where can we see Christ working in and through people of other faiths and of no faith? For instance are saintly Muslims, or Marxists who work for social justice, servants of the Kingdom? Where can we detect the hand of God in the historical, political and social movements of our generation? Is God at work through the Government, the Council and the political parties, and if so, when should we see this as a work of judgement, and when as a work of grace? Here we need to attempt to develop new ways of thinking to handle the idea of God at work 'outside the gates' of christendom.

## CRITERIA

Having posed the problem we can now go on to ask what are the criteria by which we can measure whether God has been at work in the inner city situation. There are three main possible sources for criteria: the biblical record; the experiences and interpretations of christians in the urban world; and reflection using sociological categories and techniques.

### *1 Biblical/Theological*

The bible has been described as the record of God's acts in history. Psalms such as 78, 106 and 107 spell out the works of the Lord in songs



of praise. One strand of modern biblical theology talks in terms of 'salvation history'. The OT speaks of many mighty and fairly overt interventions on the political scale, although there are also references to the 'day of small things' which is not to be despised.

The works of God are plain for all to see in the world he has made. The creation stories tell of a God who works, produces and transforms matter, then rests. This becomes the model for human activity as humankind is entrusted with the stewardship of the earth. But after the fall God is also active in redemption. The Exodus is repeatedly celebrated as God's greatest work of liberation and deliverance. And again, human activity is to follow the divine pattern, as the Torah envisages a society based upon the just and righteous character of Yahweh, as revealed in his work in the history of Israel. In contrast the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile show God at work in judgment of the nations, including the covenant people, Israel. Yet in this judgment God is still working for good, in the redemption of a righteous remnant, and in the development of the Messianic hope.

However, if we step into the shoes of the OT saints, and try to empty our minds of the great sweep of history which we can now look back on, we realise that it wasn't so obvious at the time. It is rather like climbing a mountain on a cloudy day, with everything except the next few yards obscured in swirling mist. And when the road is rough and steep... no, we can't keep our eyes upon Jesus because he is still five hundred or a thousand years ahead. But now in the twentieth century we are nearer the summit and the cloud clears and we can look back over a great panorama across the whole land. But for Abram, who set out by faith not knowing where he was going, for Moses waiting forty years in the wilderness between murdering the Egyptian and next meeting Pharaoh, or standing by the Red Sea with the water in front and the army behind, or for Elijah alone against Ahab and the prophets of Baal, there can have been no certainty that God was at work, or would work again. Still less for Jeremiah, with all the false prophets preaching shalom and victory when there was no shalom and was to be no victory. To be sure their message was a biblical one, based on historical precedent. God has worked wonders for Israel before. Surely he would do it again. There was little comfort in the idea that God would send his Messiah at some unspecified time in the future... 'that's all very well but what we need is action now!'

By comparison the work of God in the NT is relatively obscure. Jesus was born in a stable, of doubtful parentage, in a remote province. He grew up as the son of Joseph, a carpenter from, of all places, Nazareth. He did not argue or shout, or make loud speeches in the streets (Mt. 12:19), rather he kept on telling people not to reveal who he was. Ministering among the poor and outcast in Galilee, choosing fishermen, tax gatherers and prostitutes as his companions, never entering a palace until his trial, entering Jerusalem on a donkey and, of all things, washing people's feet! Yet the NT writers are in no

doubt that this was the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord of all. And while the cross and resurrection are presented as the very opposite of 'media events', the life and death of Jesus are portrayed as being of ultimate significance, as the key to an eternal and universal Kingdom.

Nonetheless the gospels (particularly John) and Acts are full of references to the work of the Father, the work(s) of Jesus, and the mightier works that his followers will do afterwards. These works are summarised in Lk 7:22-23, as 'the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are hearing the good news': and in the Nazareth manifesto (Lk.4:18) release for the prisoners and the oppressed are also mentioned. In the early church we see God the Holy Spirit at work, through signs and wonders, healings, evangelism and church planting, economic sharing and in confrontation with the powers that be.

There is an awareness of salvation history in the NT too. The Kingdom of God is the new age which has broken into the present age in Jesus Christ. God's plans and purposes are being worked out, as prophesied, in the defeat on Calvary of sin and death and the powers of this world. God's work continues in the spreading of the Good News, the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in the church, in the transformation of relationships between masters and slaves, men and women. It is all leading up to the return of Christ in glory, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Till then the whole creation groans with longing for redemption, which will come in the new heavens and new earth, where every tear will be wiped away and there will be healing for the nations. In the age between, the Lord's supper is symbolic as a feast of the Kingdom, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for humankind. For there rich and poor share at a common table, remembering in the everyday material objects of bread and wine the Lord's death until he comes.

It follows that if we see such activity today we should be able to say 'God is at work here'. Yet the question remains, what counts as such activity? Do we insist that the parallels are literal and material, or can we include metaphorical and spiritual works of God? Do only the obvious and immediately beneficial signs of God at work count?

For example 'the lame walk' can happen as people are healed of arthritis in hospital (if there are any beds available!) or in the Pentecostal church by laying on of hands, or perhaps when someone who has been crippled by guilt finds forgiveness and new life in Jesus, or when a group of Bangladeshi workers in the clothing industry find new confidence to fight racism and exploitation through the development of a co-operative union. Good News will be proclaimed to the poor, when unemployed people from the tower blocks respond to the message that Jesus died for them and start coming to church, but also when 'Thatcherism' is defeated, supplementary benefits are increased and unemployment returns to an acceptably low level. Whether we accept any or all of these as the work of God will depend not so much

on what the bible actually says, but on the theological presuppositions, social experiences and ideological conditioning which has shaped our world view. Many inner city christians would want to affirm that God has been at work if and when any or all of these things happen, and are committed to work for them all. We may be biased, but there is a strong case to suggest God is too.

## 2 *What do people recognize as the work of God?*

This cannot be an infallible test since all of us have from time to time made mistakes in our understanding of God's work and will. Furthermore all of us are biased and our experience and world view is structured by some ideology, whether it is explicitly thought out, or merely the result of exposure to the social norms of a peer group or of the mass media. However people's testimonies and stories are usually based on authentic experience and reveal how they understand God at work. Perhaps there are three main types of people in this respect, though obviously these types are not mutually exclusive:

a Simple believing christians, who accept without question that the Lord saved them, speaks to them, guides them, heals them, etc, and see God at work when similar experiences in the 'spiritual' field happen to other people. The structure and language used to describe such divine activity is usually learned from the peer group within the evangelical sub-culture, but no believer can deny that there is usually a real experience behind it;

b The questioning christian who will not always accept such testimonies at face value but will reflect on them in the light of psychology, sociology and theology, and who conversely will detect God's hand (though not make such specific claims for it) in the workings of the wider secular world;

c The outsiders (and some churchgoers), most of whom still believe in God in a folksy sort of way, or in the context of another faith. They will probably see God in natural revelation, perhaps in their own lives, especially in good fortune or narrow escape, and sometimes in extraordinary publicly reported events like the lightning strike on York Minster.

It should be possible by sociological research to gather a fair sample of these different types of perceptions of God at work and then perhaps measure them by theological criteria. One of the aims of the *God at Work in the Inner City Project* is to do just that, using questionnaires, group bible studies and in-depth open-ended taped interviews with a range of inner-city christians.

Preliminary findings from a church membership survey in a multi-racial Baptist church in East London suggest that ordinary christians (rather than church leaders) can often testify that God has been at work in their personal lives in terms of healing, receiving comfort, strength and guidance, and in growing commitment and faith. Others claimed that God had been at work in a very general way in their lives,

but were not willing or able to give specific instances. Respondents also recognised God at work within the church, primarily in terms of numerical growth and baptisms, in building up a sense of christian fellowship and caring, and in the provision of financial resources for church projects.

However, the majority of people were unable to suggest ways God had been at work in the wider community and neighbourhood, and almost all of those who did, talked in terms of the outreach of the institutional church through the work of their youth centre. It appears that the majority of christians are either simply not aware of what is happening in the neighbourhood, or that they did not have a theology which could interpret events outside the religious sphere as the work of God. Further research in other churches suggests that a minority (we should stress it is a minority) of christians see God's hand at work in the good community spirit of their neighbourhood, in the social changes that have brought people from many cultures and races to the inner-city, and sometimes in the political arena, especially where christian MPs or councillors have been elected.

### *3 A sociological approach*

Most christians do not know very much about sociology. As a result they tend to be either suspicious of it as a mysterious art which will tend to dilute the 'simple gospel', or to use it in a naive and accepting way. In fact there are many different forms of sociology available. Several possible approaches might be of use in our attempt to understand the life of the church in the inner city. In this section we shall look at three in particular, trying to explain their strengths and weaknesses. However, when we move to consider our theologically-based suspicion that God is at work beyond the church, and indeed beyond the 'religious' sphere, only the third enables us to tackle the 'God at work' notion in a meaningful way.

*a* The Church Growth movement has in recent years made a substantial impact on the evangelical churches in Britain, and the sociological methods it employs are familiar to many christian leaders. National statistics have been compiled (1) and materials to enable local churches to examine their own patterns of congregational life abound (2). However, much Church Growth sociology has been little more than descriptive religious sociology (*sociologie religieuse*), a mere collection of statistical information about the institutional church and its membership. While this data collection and classification is often useful in 'dispelling the fog' that so often exists, and in providing evidence to test specific hypotheses, (e.g. whether our church is reaching Council tenants, or under 25s), it is not usually very satisfying at the explanatory level, at least for the sociologist or theologian. Church Growth studies may help to highlight long-term national trends, and may even be useful in providing guidance on future policy in particular local settings. However, statistics often lead to paralysis in

inner city situations, usually because the task of mission appears overwhelming, or occasionally now because net growth figures which are boosted by the transfer of ethnic minorities and incomers into urban churches can encourage complacency.

A fundamental weakness of the Church Growth school is found in its underlying philosophy. In this mainly empirical approach 'facts' are assumed to be non-problematic and independent of values. All that is needed is to collect and analyse data which fit the obvious social categories, for example class and race. In reality this assumption elevates the sociologist and/or planner to the key position of primary producer of knowledge, for they alone determine which 'facts' are interesting or relevant. But what if the people who are objects of the data see things quite differently? For example while the white church growth consultant talks of the Asian community, the Asian people think in terms of Mirpuris, Sylhetis, jats, patidars and many other religious and regional groups, and the white kids in the church youth fellowship think of them all as 'bloody Pakis'.

A second problem is that the role of the statistician or church growth consultant is not neutral. He or she will tend to be regarded alongside planners, social workers, vicars and council officials as one of the powerful 'them' rather than one of 'us'. In the inner city, statisticians usually fail to communicate effectively anyway, and the 'experts' and their solutions are often rejected on the grounds that 'X is an unknown quantity, and "spurt" is a drip under pressure'.

The usual presuppositions in this Church Growth approach include an unquestioning acceptance of empirical 'scientific' methods. Presumably these could be applied with equal success to the study of secular as well as religious organisations. For example observation may prove that social clubs, political parties and churches for separate ethnic groups grow faster than mixed ones. It would be meaningless therefore within this framework to suggest that God was at work in the growth of the church but not in the other cases. Unless some value judgments are introduced, why should Christians bother to work for a multicultural, racially just church and community?

Thus the Church Growth method, like most 'pseudo-objective' or 'value free' positions on social and political issues, often confounds what 'is' with what 'ought to be'. It tends therefore, to mask an unconscious, uncritical acceptance of the status quo. Policy applications resulting from such research are usually pragmatic, often based on unexamined presuppositions which arise from the prevailing cultural consensus rather than from Scriptural norms. Thus for example 'everyone' accepts that bigger is better, and that 'God wants his (our?) church to grow'. In this context the discovery that educated white middle class people in the under 35 age group are most likely to join the church might lead to a prescription that denominational resources should be concentrated in Surrey and Hampshire and that individual churches should major on family worship and mother and toddler

clubs. Other possibilities might have crossed the mind of Amos and Jesus, to name but two!

*b* Having come to the conclusion that statistics alone are not enough, then we need to explore a second school of thought which might enrich our study. Here we can draw on the pattern of classical sociology of religion, for example on the lines laid down by scholars like Durkheim and Weber. This approach is more explanatory as it seeks to discover the structures and functions of society and its religious institutions. Sociology of religion can help to uncover the processes and value systems by which religion brings cohesion or division to a society at large. It can help us understand how religious beliefs and values are related to social institutions such as the family, state and church, and how they serve to legitimise authority in society.

Such study is normally done by sociologists who commit themselves to be methodologically atheist; i.e. they assume that their interpretations and analysis are valid irrespective of whether they are themselves believers, or indeed whether or not God in any shape or form actually exists. Having excluded God from the analysis it is inevitable that 'society' itself becomes the ultimate explanation and rationale for thinking and action. Because each society is to be seen in its own terms, moral values and religious terms become purely relative. As a result we are left with the choice of making purely subjective statements about God, or saying nothing at all.

One of the more fundamental tasks of this approach to sociology according to Berger is 'debunking'. By this he means the 'procedure of looking for levels of reality other than those given in the official interpretation of society' (3). Thus sociological technique can be used to show up where people's perception of God at work is merely wishful thinking or ideological conditioning. However, there are intrinsic difficulties and limitations to any such approach to the concept of 'God at work'. The 'methodologically atheist' sociologist who is in fact a believer inevitably faces problems over intellectual integrity. Anyone, believer or not, who 'debunks' believers' claims that God has been at work, by uncovering explicable social processes, will probably be rejected as 'sceptical and without faith', thus eventually cutting himself off from the community in which work is to be carried out. It is possible of course that s/he will succeed in convincing people (including him/herself) that everything can be reduced to sociology, and that therefore the reality, or otherwise, of a living God is irrelevant. Even if this latter proposition were demonstrably the case, a sociologist with moral scruples might think twice before making it public at a popular level, on the grounds of the hurt that might be caused to people of faith.

On the other hand, if the sociologist as a believer believes that what is discovered reveals both God AND social processes at work, or God at work through social processes, then there is a danger of being labelled totally 'unscientific'. The problem now is that the category

'God at work' potentially includes everything in the universe, and is totally beyond empirical falsification. There is no conceivable scientific evidence that could bear on the issue. Nor will it be possible at this late stage to introduce normative evaluations from religious sources, since they will not mesh into a framework based on atheistic presuppositions.

c A third approach involves an attempt to develop a sociological perspective which is grounded in a biblical world view. It seeks to integrate christian presuppositions with sociological understandings and techniques drawn from a wide spectrum within the discipline (4). Such a post-empiricist sociology clearly provides a more honest and more useful framework in which to set a study of God at work. Within such a framework the sociologist would make explicit the theological and philosophical presuppositions that are relevant, e.g. that God is a living God active in the real world today, that there are normative absolute standards of good and evil, that the purpose of God is to extend his Kingdom in quantity and quality, etc.

Data gathering and descriptive analyses of churches would form a backcloth to this approach, and the sociologist would also draw on the insights of sociology of religion in identifying social processes and structural and ideological forces at work. But in the last analysis claims that God had been at work, which were not readily falsified by empirical evidence, or 'debunked' by sociological interpretation, could then be measured against the value framework. The problem now becomes one of specifying the particulars of this value framework clearly enough to be used as a yardstick for what had been discovered. There is also a philosophical catch here; is it possible, having made the assumption that the bible provides a set of absolute, objective moral values, to choose from them and apply them other than subjectively?

Yet if this could be done, on the one hand it would be possible to challenge misleading enthusiasm, and on the other to identify where God is at work in society without being recognised; the silent working of the hidden leaven in the lump.

For example, in the case of a numerically growing church we would look first to see whether the growth was attributable merely to people moving into the area, etc. If the growth was mainly 'conversion growth' we would then need to check it against wider processes in society. For example, was it centred in a sub-group of the population who were upwardly socially mobile and needing a version of the Protestant work ethic, or among marginalised poor people who needed solidarity in struggle, reassurance of human dignity and perhaps a certain amount of 'opium' to take their minds off the pain of daily life? Finally we would apply our value framework; for example if the resulting fellowship was highly authoritarian, ethnically and socially exclusive, narrowly pietistic, and manifestly into individualistic prosperity religion, in short totally opposed to our biblical understanding of the Kingdom of God, we would have a right to question if God had

really been at work. On the other hand a small inner city church, set in an area of falling population, but which was multiracial, generous in its sharing, and prayerfully and effectively involved in the wider community might be a sign that God was still very much alive.

To look at the possibility that God has been at work beyond the churches we would simply reverse the process. Our biblical value system would suggest that massive inequality in access to decent housing is displeasing to God. A political and social analysis of the housing finance system would show how inner city council tenants are penalised, while prosperous suburban owner occupiers are subsidised through tax relief on mortgages. When a commission headed by the husband of the head of state suggests major reforms we might then have reason to believe the voice of prophecy was not totally silent. If in the future, legislation for a fairer system was enacted, despite the vested interests, and ideological conditioning of the three fifths of the population who are owner occupiers, then we might have strong reason to believe God had been at work.

Such an approach undoubtedly assumes that the sociologist is a committed person, committed that is to the work of Christ's Kingdom. This rejection of an unobtainable 'objective neutrality' is no bad thing, for it also helps at the levels of method and application. It enables the sociologist to move with integrity from the position of the armchair academic, to that of the active participant in the life of the church and community. For example in interviewing people about how God has been at work in their lives, the committed christian can with honesty empathise and develop a better rapport. A participatory style of research becomes appropriate, in which ordinary members of ordinary churches are involved in defining and solving particular problems in their mission. In this the sociologist becomes an enabler, helping christians to grow in their faith, understanding and commitment. And the findings of any research become not merely technical documents gathering dust on the shelves of the diocesan office, but experiences and stories to share for the encouragement and exhortation of God's people. Sociological research thus would become part of the cycle of action and reflection which is the hallmark of Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (5) and the foundation of the liberation theologies of the Latin American base christian communities.

## APPLICATION AND EXAMPLES

Having suggested ways in which we can approach the question of whether God has been at work, we can now go on to examine some of the features of christian life in the inner city. There are examples of hopeful developments in each of the four conventional areas of church growth, and also beyond the usual limits. In all these cases some



christians would claim God is at work. But for each example, is it really the work of God, or could it be just the result of social forces, human activity or even of Satan?

*I Do numbers count?*

Numerical growth of congregations is observable in some inner-city settings. However, such growth can be the result of social processes and as such needs no supernatural explanation. Patterns of church expansion sometimes follow demographic trends which affect other organisations. For example the migration of YUPIs (Young Upwardly-mobile Professional Incomers) into parts of Inner London in the last few years, as a result largely of pressures in the employment and housing markets, has transformed the character of many local churches, and many local branches of the Labour Party. While not denying that many christian YUPIs are responding to the call of God to work in the inner cities, or even that God may be at work in the political field, what appears to be happening is simply that such incomers are more likely than average to be organisation joiners and to have the skills to make their presence felt in religious and political institutions. It is clear that social forces in inner London act as constraints and incentives in ways they do not in many other cities. In inner Bradford by contrast such committed incomers are rare.

Similar arguments can be applied to the emergence of many of the new ethnic churches in British inner cities. Many of them are the result of immigration of communities of christians, racist rejection by the wider church and a subsequent development of the desire to maintain a cultural identity. Sociologically speaking, at one level, they behave in similar ways to Sikh gurdwaras or Bangladeshi mosques. There are hints in the NT that the christian church ought to be far more than this in terms of a reconciling fellowship cutting across many different social groups.

The lively style of many of the newer churches and renewed fellowships suggests to many that God has been at work. Yet in many cases the emphases of theology and worship are partly explicable by reference to the social setting. Some sociologists tend to stereotype all black churches as millennialist sects of the oppressed, implying that 'religion is the opium of the people', which they see as functional in taking worshippers' minds off their real socio-economic conditions. If we accept there is any truth in this argument, the worship, the spirituality and the publicly recognised 'conversions' in such churches may not in fact indicate God has been at work.

However, it seems to me that this interpretation of black christianity is a gross over-simplification and to many black christians an insult. James Cone (6) argues that, while it is true that in worship in the Spirit the believers' minds are taken off the trials and tribulations of this world, it is primarily as a way of 'recharging batteries' for the day to day struggle against poverty and racism. It is in Christ and in the

church that black people find the dignity, status and solidarity they are denied in wider society. The impressive record of many of the black churches in evangelism, pastoral care and social action, when measured against the theological criteria set out earlier, is the clearest evidence of God at work.

A further problem in respect of numerical growth is that many of the newer churches in the inner city are, as elsewhere, the result not of church planting and evangelism but of breakdown in relationships in existing fellowships. The development of many of the black-led churches can be seen in many cases as a reaction to the racist exclusivism of white denominational churches in the 1960s, racism which in the 1980s is generally recognised as sinful. The more recent proliferation of independent congregations in the Pentecostal and House Church movement is typified by repeated splitting of fellowships, often as new charismatic (in the sociological sense) leaders have emerged, and where the adolescent institutional structures of such groups have been unable to contain them. Some of the newer groups are subject to theological criticism on doctrinal, ecclesiological and lifestyle grounds. However, the fundamental issue is whether the undoubted numerical growth, some of which is conversion growth, observed as a result of the proliferation of such sectarian groups is truly a work of God. After all there are many scriptural exhortations to catholicity, and that christians should love and accept one another 'as Christ has accepted you'. It seems to me that the history of the Whitefield/Wesley split in the eighteenth century and the latter's sermons on 'the Catholic spirit' and at Whitefield's memorial service have interesting parallels and much to teach us (7).

## *2 How are lives changed?*

One of the strongest evidences for the gospel put forward by evangelicals is that Jesus Christ has the power to radically change individual lives for the better. Many christian believers throughout history and today would back this up with their personal testimonies of deliverance from drink, drugs, dishonesty or violent lifestyles, or of massive improvements in the quality of life and personal relationships. While not wishing to question the authenticity or importance of such personal transformation, or denying that this is the work of God in Christ, a number of problems do arise. Firstly, there is the theological and psychological question of whether such changes can occur in individuals outside the christian framework of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Can you be 'born again' outside of Christ? In the inner-city you are likely to come across dried out alcoholics, converts to Hinduism, newly committed community activists and happily remarried divorcees who will testify to parallel experiences, without naming the name of Christ.

Secondly, at the societal level, religious changes in individuals tend to be associated with upward economic and social mobility, the

phenomenon of 'redemption and lift'. John Wesley predicted that his Methodist converts would work harder, get richer and more respectable and then grow cold in their zeal for God. While first generation christians experience salvation, second generation ones tend to respectability and later generations to legalism. In the inner-city churches this process is destructive to the life of God's people, as new christians have acquired middle class cultural values and aspirations, become divorced from the lifestyle of relatives and neighbours and invested their time and money in objects of delayed rather than instant gratification. Before long they have moved out of the inner city except for two hours each Sunday. There are signs of this pattern developing today among the younger generation of believers in some of the black-led Pentecostal churches. Can we say that God is at work in individual lives when the end-product is a lifestyle which is indistinguishable from that of the middle class world, when the outcome of evangelicalism is a type of prosperity religion, when the inner city areas are ineffectively touched by the gospel, and when christians by 'adding house to house and field to field' are collaborating in the processes of injustice which oppress the poor?

Signs and wonders are often cited as evidence of God at work, and at the end of the twentieth century it seems that only a minority of christians are sceptical about them, or believe that they were reserved for the apostolic age. Modern manifestations range from healings, prophecies, visions, tongues, divine guidance, unexpected provision and answered prayers to rumours that God intervened in the middle of international crises, or struck York Minster with lightning because of the unorthodox views of the Bishop of Durham. The majority of inner-city people, from whatever religious or ethnic background, seem predisposed to accept and be impressed by such signs and wonders, rather than subjecting them to rationalistic investigation. It may be right for theologians and sociologists to investigate further but where 'miracles' lead people to faith in Christ, or bring greater peace, joy and love into the world, then christians will want to affirm that God has been at work.

There are huge theological and philosophical problems in this area but at heart it is a problem relating to the interpretation of such events. The eye of faith will see differently to the carefully measured observations of the scientist or sociologist. Francis Schaeffer (8) has pointed out the need to maintain biblical presuppositions that there is a real but unseen world which does impact on the natural world of what is scientifically observable. Otherwise the legitimate field for religious explanations will be increasingly narrowed to what is beyond the present scope of science. Is it possible therefore to develop a both/and approach as an alternative to a 'God-of-the-gaps' theology?

Part of the problem here concerns the use of means and can be illustrated from the field of physical healing. A member of my own church had a back problem which laid him flat. Our fellowship prayed,

fasted, laid on hands, but nothing happened. Various medical treatments were tried but finally only surgery solved the problem. Yet we recognize that God has been at work and has clearly spoken through the experience, painful as it was. Some groups in the history of the christian church have relied totally on faith and prayer, even going to jail rather than allow their children to be treated by a doctor. The bible may give some support to a 'both/and' approach to this issue. For where King Asa was criticised for relying *only* on physicians and not on the Lord (2 Chr. 16:12), Hezekiah trusted God and was healed via the means of poultice of figs (2 Ki. 20:7). And while Jesus healed the leper (Mk. 1:41) by an act of will, he was taken unawares by the woman in the crowd (Mk. 5:30) and used spittle to cure the blind man (Mk. 8:23). Paul also performed miracles, but we have no reason to suppose that his companion Luke would not respond to the cry 'is there a doctor in the house?' But in our attempts to understand the work of God in such incidents, be they biblical or contemporary, we are thrown back on the mystery of the sovereignty of God.

### *3 Fellowship or fences?*

Fellowship or the 'family feeling' within a church is often cited by christians as a sign that God is at work amongst them. It is such a common comment in the inner-city churches that it suggests that an authentic felt human need is being met. In neighbourhoods of high mobility, pluralism of lifestyles and social and economic insecurity there is a strong need for identity, solidarity and mutual concern. Where traditional working class communities have been uprooted there is a tendency for the church to become a surrogate extended family. It is against this background that we need to see the rediscovery of the scriptural stress on the *koinonia* of the body of Christ.

However, we need to point out that fellowship and solidarity can be purely human and social in origin; there are for example many organisations and social groups (though fewer in the inner city) where communal bonds are strong and the quality of interpersonal relationships is high. And the tendency of churches to attract 'people like us' be it in terms of race, age or educational level, suggests that much of the quality of fellowship is nothing out of the ordinary, constrained as it is within well-defined social limits. Indeed many churches congratulate themselves with the myth that they are just one happy family across age, race and class barriers when the extent of relationship is not much deeper than the cup of tea they share together each Sunday after the service. The underlying conflict of values and interests between groups within the church is not allowed to come out in the open. In order to be sure that God has been at work in building a christian community we need to apply strong biblical criteria based on self-sacrificial love, economic and personal sharing and the breaking

down of barriers between social groups which are hostile to each other in the wider society.

Furthermore a fellowship should show signs of openness to those on the outside; otherwise the solidarity may be based more on the hatred of a common enemy than on christian love. For example it is possibly true that some Pakistani christian fellowships in Britain have a rich communal life and solidarity, but this may be a reaction to the perceived threat from the larger Muslim community and the low level of acceptance on the part of the white christian community. This results in an inability to communicate with or serve the wider community in the area in which they live.

One of the most encouraging signs of hope in parts of the inner city is the growth of Kingdom networks, where christians from radically diverse traditions, some of them sectarian in origin, are coming together in fellowship. Evangelicals, catholics and radicals are sometimes working together in groups based on relationships of love and trust, in a common concern for a holistic mission to the inner city. It may be a response to the weakness of the church and the acceptance of the fact that we now live in a plural society. However it can be argued from the gospels that this style of working is nearer to the style of Jesus than are the traditional patterns of doctrinal exclusivism (See Richard Lovelace's comments on Jonathan Edwards notion of 'live orthodoxy' (9)). Is this not a sign of God at work today?

#### *4 Loving the world*

Incarnational growth is a very difficult process to evaluate for a number of different reasons. First of all very few christians appear to include incarnational ministry in their conceptual framework, especially if it goes beyond the activity of the institutional church. There is often confusion between the concepts of witness and evangelism. For example, many people regard youth clubs or projects with the unemployed as failures if they do not add to the numbers in worship. While most christians are happy about the idea of individuals or churches engaging in social welfare activities, there is less consensus about social and political action. And even where it is seen as a good thing for christians to be involved in politics, there are party political conflicts reflected in the church, usually based on cultural conformity to the political norms of one's social group rather than on radical obedience to the ethics of the Bible.

Even in the context of church-based social welfare projects there are complicating factors which make it hard to judge how God has been at work. Churches and voluntary agencies do not always achieve more than statutory agencies, and often less because of lack of resources and professional skills, or because they have a different underlying philosophy. In the present climate of privatisation of the welfare state the voluntary agencies are liable to be loaded with extra

burdens which have in the last half century been shared by the whole society (on the basis of a 'christian' consensus). Thus what may seem a new 'christian' initiative in social caring may be in fact an indicator of the decline in christian values, and a judgment on the church for its failure to preach prophetically to society as a whole. And since it is impossible for most churches in inner-city areas to meet a fraction of the needs around them from the human resources within the small body of believers, para-church organisations and government funding, often employing non-christian full-time workers, are becoming normal. There are some interesting if inconclusive insights from the story of Nehemiah which may apply here. For in his urban renewal project for Jerusalem, which began in prayer, he happily accepted government sponsorship and finance (Neh. 2:8) but is very clear that the work is reserved exclusively for God's people (Neh. 2:20).

Such schemes can of course be evaluated against stated social policy aims or management objectives. However the aims and objectives are usually set in secular terms and even then can be contested by people who do not accept the political consensus. For example YTS projects in which many churches take part can be criticised as a "sticking plaster" approach which merely keeps kids off the streets and falsifies the unemployment statistics. It can be argued that structural changes in society, even revolution, afford the only long-term solution. How then can we see God at work in christian social action other than in the limited sense of 'it's doing some good to some people, therefore God must be in it:'?

### *5 Faith and works*

To explore further the theology of God at work in social action through his people we need to look afresh at the doctrines of justification and sanctification, as they have been applied in modern church history. A fundamental question which has surfaced many times in the history of christian theology is to what extent people can work together with God. It has been cast in terms of the dialectic between faith and works, justification and sanctification, and the Arminian/Calvinist controversy. Theodore Runyon (10) summarises a number of the issues in an article on Wesley and the theologies of liberation. Starting from the doctrine of creation, part of the image of God in humankind is the creative ability and need to work (and rest). Yet the fall has meant that work becomes toil, in Marxist terms alienating, and that however hard we try we cannot make ourselves right with God. At this point, the Reformers stress God takes the initiative in grace. Christ died for us and the believer is justified by faith.

However this stress on faith and forensic justification has dangerous side-effects. If everything depends on the grace of God as in Lutheranism and hyper-calvinism, there is a tendency to quietism ('let go and let God') and antinomianism ('let's continue in sin so that grace

may abound'). Thus some have suggested that this tendency linked with Luther's doctrine of the two Kingdoms lies behind the German church's collusion with the Nazis. On the other hand, the protestant work ethic developed most clearly in Calvinist cultures, perhaps because of a stress on the 'works of faith' and those who believed most strongly that they were justified by the grace of God seemed to spend the most time, energy and guilt in working with/for God.

Wesleyan theology seems to offer help at this point, especially in his doctrines of sanctification and the use of means. Wesley, in resisting the quietism of the Moravians and the legalistic mysticism of William Law, stresses that faith is social and piety must result in works, because the source of christian faith is the redemptive work of God in Christ. Wesley understands that people can and do work together with God and that God works through people. Thus while saving faith is the result of an initiative of God, it is right for the seeker to make use of the means of grace offered through the church (the sacraments and preaching, etc.). And while sanctification and christian perfection are also the gift of God it is important for the christian to be disciplined (methodical) and to make every endeavour in good works. Thus the Methodists and evangelicals of the revival threw themselves into campaigns for liberation and social righteousness, the Tolpuddle martyrs and the black churches of the Americas from the underside, and Wilberforce and Shaftesbury from the top down.

Applying this to the present day inner-city situation there are some signs of a recent return to this synthesis of faith and works. Twentieth Century evangelicalism, with its stress on faith as belief system and privatised religion, has failed to impress the inner city, while the liberal modernist social gospel has rarely found the spiritual dynamic to distinguish it from humanism. More recently a radical discipleship movement is emerging where biblical faith, renewal of worship, community life and incarnational involvement coalesce and where there is an expectation of God at work in the midst of human life and work. To be a 'secular saint' involves a separation from, incarnation in, and transformation of, the world (11). In so far as inner-city christians live up to this ideal then we can surely see that God is at work together with him.

The problem for many is that incarnation involves taking positions, in particular conflict situations, often in alliance with the powerless and the Marxists in confrontation with the powerful, amongst whom are many sincere christians. It takes grace to admit that God may in some mysterious way be at work in the Conservative Party. But how can Latin American christians be expected to interpret the 'born again' faith of such leaders as Rios Mont in Guatemala, or Pinochet in Chile, when the fruits of such faith include torture, and assassination of other bible-believing christians?

## CHRIST OUTSIDE THE GATE

Do the areas of growth outlined above account for the totality of the work of God, of the Kingdom, of the Spirit? What about the movements for justice and kingdom values which are partially or totally outside the church? In what sense can we identify God at work in them? In trying to answer this question we move into controversial territory, and the more specific we are in giving examples the more difficult the issue becomes. To help explore this area we shall do well to consider some traditional christian doctrines and how they might apply to these issues.

### *1 God's sovereignty*

Most christians would accept the biblical assertion that God is omnipotent sovereign and Lord of history. The particular assertion that Jesus is Lord has become a common-place, but in its original context and if taken seriously is absolutely radical. The problem of course is that in the age between Easter and the Second Coming the Lordship is not overt or complete. Many deny Christ's Lordship, and evil and sin are still permitted. Some christians become obsessed by the signs of the times and read modern history as it develops into the apocalyptic of Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation. To me this seems dangerous and totally unhelpful to christian discipleship in the inner cities in the 1980s.

Yet in a more general sense it is helpful to see the urban crisis in apocalyptic terms. Just as it has been argued that the province of Judea in the Roman Empire was the planned setting for the birth of Christ in the fullness of time, and the church grew because of roads, cities, the Greek language and the pax Romana, can we not argue that the twentieth century growth in communication and of the world church is in God's plan. The rise and fall of the British Empire follows biblical precedents, and the subsequent arrival in London of settlers from all parts of the world is surely a crucial stage in the evangelisation of the nations, and the development of a multinational people of God. Surely we must see it as part of the ongoing plan for the redemption and renewal of the whole universe, and draw inspiration from the prophets' visions.

But what do we make of other less desirable historical developments, such as the growing arms trade, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in Britain and throughout the world. How can God be at work in this? This in fact was Habbakuk's problem as he saw the Babylonians marching on Jerusalem. But he came to understand that God works justice in judgment, even through a people more wicked than we are. While his intellectual problem was not resolved he saw God's hand at work, recognized God's right and need to act and ended saying 'Hallelujah anyway!'



We should also note here the importance of developing further our theology of the principalities and powers (12). Whether these are personal demons or social structures, or a combination of both, is an unresolved debate. But there is a wide agreement in inner city christian circles that the struggle we are engaged in has unseen spiritual dimensions. We are engaged in battle alongside God in the campaign to mop up the forces of evil which were dealt a decisive blow at Calvary. Thus we can see any blow to the evils of poverty, injustice, racism, materialism, sexual exploitation and violence as the work of God and a sign of the Kingdom bursting in.

## *2 Common grace and redemptive grace*

A second doctrine which could be of help is that of common grace (or its Wesleyan equivalent preventent grace). This depends on the teaching that all good gifts come from God, and that while the whole of life is marred by human sin, the image of God remains in humanity and evil is not totally unrestrained. Social institutions are a gift from God, which prevent the worst from happening and witness to the order which will one day be fully restored. Thus the state is God's agent for justice. In this context it becomes appropriate for churches and parachurch agencies to make use of state funding for programmes of service to the community and to see God's providence in this; providing of course that we are aware of the evil powers and principalities which can corrupt the state, and can discern when to refuse to compromise the Lordship of Christ. Likewise, individual conscience and social norms lead to good deeds from unregenerate people, reminding us of the potential for good and pointing towards God's desire to redeem all people. Surely God must be at work in this.

Yet this is always to be sharply distinguished from redemption. Traditionally the urban British working class attitude has been that 'you can be a good christian without going to church', and in many ways the traditional churches have colluded in this by providing 'hatched, matched and dispatched' services, while failing to reach the masses with evangelism, teaching and in-depth pastoral care. The result has been that while such churches have tried to maintain a presence in 'different areas', and to redeem the local culture, few individuals have been redeemed into the church, and the resulting small disciple groups have been swamped by the local culture. Thus the work of God as measurable in the usual terms has been limited.

In contrast biblical, reformed, evangelical and sectarian groups have maintained a clearer distinction between religion and christianity, and insisted that conversion to Christ means redemption *out of* urban working class culture. But is this sort of change and upward social mobility really a sign of God at work? Is there not after all some truth in the working class gut feeling about what 'christian' involves, and are not some of the old virtues of solidarity, neighbourliness and warmth signs that God is at work in people who are not churchgoers? Are such

qualities the fruits of redemption, even though the individuals do not involve themselves in any institutionalised religious sub-culture? My theological answer would be to say that it is possible for a person to be 'saved' outside the institutional church and without orthodox doctrinal understanding, but that this is not the usual nor the normative christian experience, for as Wesley put it, 'the Bible knows nothing of a solitary christian'.

However, my impression is that, since the breakup of local working class communities, such virtues are increasingly rare (particularly in Inner London), so it is unlikely that we would be able to identify many signs of God at work in such contexts, in terms of either common grace or redemptive grace.

### *3 The work of the Holy Spirit*

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a third strand in a doctrinal framework for discerning God at work, although it is hard to draw boundaries between this and providence, or common or redemptive grace. John Taylor (13) examines the work of the Spirit in the world, and as 'the chief actor in the historic mission of the christian church'. If God the Spirit is sovereign it is obvious that he can be at work way outside and long before Christ is acknowledged by name, let alone before the church gets there in institutional form. In Isaiah it was a heathen king, Cyprus, who was described as God's anointed one, his Messiah, his Christ. So although we would want to maintain that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ in a unique and total sense, and that while christian believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit are anointed ('christed') in a special sense, it is still possible for God to work through his Spirit in those outside the church and who do not in fact believe. Thus a non-christian political leader fighting racism and unjust housing policies may be enabled by God's Spirit more than a believer who keeps his religion and politics in separate boxes.

At this point we need to grapple briefly with the issue of 'the unknown Christ in other religions'. From a baseline which sees other faiths as incomplete rather than intrinsically evil it can be argued that the teachings of Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism are a preparation for the Gospel, but also that when the values and lifestyle of the kingdom emerge through them God is indeed at work. At this point a personal example is appropriate. One of the formative influences in my own thinking on racism and justice issues over the last few years has been a protracted dialogue with a Muslim acquaintance who has repeatedly and deliberately confronted me with my personal involvement and vested interest in the institutions of an unjust society. Through him I have become aware of the social realities for Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets, and the way in which the university for which I worked and the christian church of which I am part has colluded in the process of oppression. My friend himself refuses to compromise, he lives 'by faith' refusing to take a penny from state

resources. Despite imperfections in his personality etc., I cannot help seeing him as in the tradition of the prophets, and duly feel uncomfortable in his presence. But I cannot deny that God may be at work in him and through him.

#### *4 Cross and resurrection*

A final fundamental question is whether the work of God always implies success? There are some christian groups, stereotypically in the North American electronic churches and some of the charismatic House Churches, who seem to be teaching a prosperity religion. 'If you trust and honour God He will bless you with health, wealth and happiness, a victorious and abundant life on this earth'. There would seem at first sight to be some backing for this view from OT passages, notably in Deuteronomy, and from the down to earth Hebrew view that Shalom is not just a psychological state but implies prosperity and the welfare of the whole community. Yet a deeper reading of the OT points out the danger of saying Shalom when there is no shalom. There is no cheap grace, God abhors religion without righteousness, and prosperity of individuals which is based on exploitation and injustice within the community as a whole is wicked in his sight. Shalom and prosperity in OT terms is the state of right relationships between people and God, and between the different members of the community. There is a sense in which Israel was most blessed by God in the times of greatest failure, in the wilderness and in the exile.

In the NT too there is much teaching about the reversal of worldly values in the Kingdom of God. It is Lazarus, not the rich man, who is the hero of one parable, the despised foreigner of another. It is a motley crew of fishermen, revolutionaries, tax gatherers and women who follow Jesus. Jesus himself is not a spectacular 'messiah' but a 'king' riding on a donkey and then dying on the cross. Peter and the other disciples go through denial and failure before God can work through them after the resurrection and Pentecost. Yet no christian would want to deny that God was at work in these failures, above all in the failure of the Cross, which becomes the triumph procession of the victorious Christ over the powers and dominions of this world and the unseen world.

In what ways then can God be seen at work in situations of disastrous failure which are so common to those of us who work in the inner-city church? Congregations decline and churches close, church leaders break down emotionally, physically, morally and mentally, promising new converts lapse and the best laid plans for community work schemes crash in ruins for lack of finance or human resources. We get cynical about instant recipes for victorious christian living, even when they are limited, as they usually are, to the fields of spirituality and personal morality. Constantly we are reminded of Jesus' saying that unless a seed dies and is buried it cannot grow and bear fruit. There is always the challenge of taking up the cross daily, and it is not

usually much fun. But as people of faith we do see God at work, and hope keeps bursting through in most unlikely ways even in the darkest hours.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has been an attempt to set out some criteria by which we can judge whether God has been at work in the context of the inner city. The further into the issue we have gone the more unsatisfactory the attempt has become. We are left with more questions than we started with. It would be easy to suggest that other christian thinkers should apply their minds to some of the issues raised, so that the best of theological, philosophical and sociological scholarship could be put at our disposal. But while such thinking could be of help to urban mission in the long-term, there are at least two reasons for resisting such academic developments. Firstly the situation in our inner cities is too urgent, as poverty, racial injustice, unemployment, bad housing conditions and violence grow, while the church achieves little. It is time for all British christians to make urban areas priority areas. We need christian pastors, evangelists, community workers, and political activists to work with God to transform our cities, rather than armchair theologians to write about them. Secondly, writing papers using long words is not half as much use as working alongside urban people, in the non-book culture, developing new models of reflection and action. New forms of christian education and biblical theology for the inner city will come not from professors in the colleges, but from the cell groups and 'base' churches of Brixton, Canning Town, Handsworth and Toxteth. One can only hope that ways of working together across these divides will still remain open.

However, I doubt that seeking to discover how God has been at work is a task which is really ours to undertake. In the last analysis we must wait until the last day when all of God's works and ours will be revealed. In the meanwhile it is for believers, seeing with the eye of faith, to assess how God has been at work in their own situation and to take encouragement from that. As William Cowper, the depressive hymnwriter, put it:

Blind unbelief is sure to err  
And scan His works in vain;  
God is His own interpreter  
And He will make it plain.

I am conscious that in challenging some of the received wisdom of the christian world I am cast in the role of a prophet. I believe passionately in the assertions that I have made, and that the questions raised are vitally important. Yet unlike many 'prophets' I have had no supernatural visions, dreams or words of knowledge. I dare not use the

words 'Thus saith the Lord' save perhaps in the case of the plain sense of passages of scripture. These thoughts are offered to the wider church for consideration, for testing and for action. As in the case of the prophet referred to in Deuteronomy 18, only time will tell if I am on the right track.

However, if by applying sociological and theological plumb-lines to people's suggestions of how God has been at work in the inner city, we can temper misplaced enthusiasm with stark realism, and in doing so present a challenge and a vision of what God could do, and still wants to do in His plan for the redemption of this world, then the exercise will not have been in vain. May we each discover the part God wants us to play in working with Him.

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## THE BRITISH CHURCH GROWTH ASSOCIATION

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