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Changing the Church

David Phillips

Facing the facts

Five years ago I stood as a candidate for the General Synod on behalf of Manchester Diocese and recently I dug out my old papers in preparing to stand in St. Alban's (I lost my place when I moved to Watford). Then and now I was deeply concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of our Church, that it was drifting further and further away from Biblical doctrines and morality. Such a perspective is not shared by a large proportion of the Church, indeed they consider the changes to be necessary and good. However, five years ago there were certain facts which were of deep concern to all. Firstly, the Church had been declining numerically for a long time and this showed no sign of slowing. Secondly, clergy numbers were dropping dramatically. Thirdly, the Church Commissioners had lost hundreds of millions of pounds through bad investment decisions. It is interesting to see how these facts are treated now. The widely held view is that the Commissioners' losses have been made good, but this is nonsense; what was lost was lost for good. If nothing had been lost before then the gains of recent years would have been far greater. Indeed there are those who consider that there has been a substantial cover up and fudging of facts. With regard to clergy numbers it has been a great encouragement that numbers have increased, but as yet this has not been sufficient to stem the net loss. Then of course there has been all the argument about the church attendance statistics and whether fewer people are coming or whether they are coming less often. Either way there are grounds for concern.

Five years ago many were deeply concerned about these facts. The big issue was what to do about it. Since, despite all the attempts to put a brave face on things (or spin the facts), these problems persist what is being done about it now? I detect three main strategies at work.

Strategy One : Break down the barriers.

The practices and customs of our churches, the way we worship, our attitudes to others and so on are seen as a major hindrance to the spread of the gospel. We cannot expect people to become Christians unless we make Church and our message more attractive - or so it is argued.

For many this has been a key issue in liturgical revision. The motive is surely genuine but misguided. However, it is an outlook which also governs the approach to doctrine and morality.

Many today speak of the love of God but they will not proclaim His holiness or the reality of judgment and hell. This was all too apparent in the Doctrine Commission report 'The Mystery of Salvation'. The failure to address the wrath of God, His just judgment and the reality of hell means that we cannot truly offer the means of salvation. By taking the uncomfortable truths out of the message we are left with no message at all.

Likewise many want to be able to welcome into fellowship those whose lives may not accord with what Christians have typically believed were acceptable standards of behaviour. At a recent hustings for the clergy almost all the candidates seemed to affirm stable committed homosexual relationships and some were prepared to go even further. They do not want to put up barriers to people receiving God's love by appearing to condemn the behaviour of others or suggest that some lifestyles are wrong.

The effect of all this is to round off the edges of the Church and our message. The theory is that if we are less sharp in the world's eyes this will make people more likely to join us. The truth is that we lose our cutting

edge, we appear to the world to have nothing to say and whilst they will not hate us they will also not join us. The Church that is left will consist of the bland leading the bland.

Strategy two : Modernize the Church

The Church is stuck in ways of doing things that are at best a century out of date, at worst five centuries. In order to meet the concerns of a modern age and respond to the needs of the day the Church must modernize, sort out its structures.

Over the last five years there has been a breathtaking programme of change in Church legislation. The National Institutions Measure (known as Turnbull) was described as the biggest change in the Church since the reformation. Whilst this is rather over-stating the case it does highlight the scale of change. To this can be added the Churchwardens Measure, the Clergy Discipline Measure, the Cathedrals Measure, the Pensions Measure and more. But this is not the end of it, over the next five years there will substantial changes proposed to Patronage, Freehold, the position of Clergy, the Dioceses Measure and so on. This is not just accidental, there are many people who believe, and believe strongly that all this legislation is necessary. It is part of a strategy, embarked upon out of sincerely held convictions that the Church must modernize.

The problem with this strategy is that it provides a solution to the church's problems based on an analysis copied from the business world. This has been ably illustrated by the American theologian David Wells in his various books. In 'No Place for Truth' Wells comments 'Leadership is now substantially in the hands of the managers.' (p133) Whilst he is describing the evangelical churches of North America this fits perfectly with the complaint, emanating from many quarters in the Church of England, that Bishops are now appointed primarily for their apparent management skills rather than any spiritual qualities. Wells goes on to say 'evangelicals are not driven by a theological vision, and those who have risen to positions of leadership most commonly reflect this diminished outlook.' The end result is that a world derived analysis will lead to a church shaped by the world lacking spiritual power or vitality.

Strategy three : Make the Church more responsive

This is related to the former strategy in as much as the Archbishops' Council has been deliberately set up to enable one body to exercise managerial oversight over the whole of the Church of England. At present the members of that body appear to be aware of the dangers but there is an inherent danger in the system and it could prove a real problem in the future.

Such a shift is being witnessed in Dioceses too as power is slowly but surely moved away from parishes towards the Diocesan bodies and Bishop. On the international level there have been calls for the Archbishop of Canterbury, or some other body, to exercise discipline over ECUSA. Whilst, in this case, we may sympathise with the motive it would be a regrettable step changing the nature of the Church and moving us a step forward towards the Roman Catholic position.

The Church of England is not a congregational Church but it is parish based and historically through patronage, churchwardens and parliament the doctrine and management of the Church has been safeguarded by laity. Where changes are necessary we must ensure that the fundamental character of the Church is not sacrificed.

Responding to the problems that face us.

The current strategies being pursued to deal with the problems we face will ultimately make matters worse. They are worldly strategies which will make the Church more worldly, powerless and ineffective to meet the spiritual needs of the nation or to live out the call of God. Of course there are issues that need addressing in

our structures and our witness, there are changes that can be made but this is neither the root of the problem we face nor the heart of the solution required.

Instead of turning to the world for answers we must turn to God's Word. The nation of Israel in the Old Testament was the assembly of God, the Church, and is a model for the New Covenant Church. We do not have to read far in the Old Testament to see the sort of spiritual problems they faced and the similarities to our own day.

A strategy for change:

In the light of God's word I offer a spiritual strategy for change:

The second thing we must do is repent. The heart of our problem is our spiritual rebellion against God, the Church has turned away from His truth. This must never be a matter of pointing the finger and saying simply that others have sinned, our response should be as Isaiah in his vision - to admit that we have sinned as well.

I have said that repentance is the second thing we must do, because there is a prerequisite. We may be tempted to think that repentance must come first, but it cannot. There cannot be repentance unless we recognise the reality of the problem and the consequence of our rebellion. Therefore our first priority must be to pray and to preach. To pray because it is only as the Lord works through His Spirit that people will wake up to the spiritual realities and see their need. To preach, because it is our calling. Preachers will never be popular just as the early disciples and the great Old Testament prophets were opposed. Indeed, though I dislike the idea, if Church Society is to be faithful to God in a rebellious age many will oppose and despise us. Yet we have a message to proclaim and we must proclaim it.

The third part of the strategy is to turn away from what is wrong, which is part of repentance. There is much that will need to be changed in the Church but it must be driven by repentance and a biblical faith. For example the lack of discipline either in local churches or more widely has led us to be more and more accepting of false teaching and immorality: we are caught in a web from which it is difficult to break free. It will be no easy task to address this and unless it springs from a change of heart it will be mere legalism and thus counter productive.

The fourth part of the strategy is to pursue holiness. In his books David Wells has highlighted this as the fundamental problem of the evangelical churches in North America, they have no passion for holiness. To do this we must be clear that God's word does not pass away and that in Scripture we can learn how to live for God not by obedience to a set of rules but by living to please Him who has given us life.

Finally, it must all be genuine. If it is genuine it will last. One of my favourite bible characters is Josiah. During his godly reign much was done to renew the spiritual life of Israel. There were sweeping changes to worship, to the national institutions and to behaviour of many in the nation. Yet it is clear from the book of Jeremiah that despite having such an outstanding and spiritual leader the changes were only skin deep. Josiah's reward for his faithfulness and holiness was to die; to die young so that he would not have to endure the calamity that was coming. Repentance can be shallow and just for show. If it is genuine it will endure.

These then are spiritual priorities. The temptation is always to look for practical things we can do, to want to set up this and organise that. Unless we recognise the true root of our problems and turn again to the living God then the monument that we are building will soon crumble and fall.