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THE POWER OF GOD

By David Phillips

The statistics concerning the Church of England continue to make grim reading. The decline in attendance has not abated, the number of clergy continues to fall and there are signs that even if there were more clergy many dioceses cannot afford to pay their stipends. The Church is also losing influence in the national life and whilst the Archbishops do make occasional forays into the public domain which go down well they are not upholding in public, or at least are not reported as upholding clear Biblical teaching. At the same time whilst there are some encouraging signs there is considerable unease, even fear, about the consequences of legislation to consecrate women Bishops and the apparently growing acceptance of sexual immorality. The nation meanwhile seems to be not only drifting further from its Christian heritage but our government is schizophrenically trying to push religion out of the public sphere whilst at the same time being apparently bewildered by rise of militant Islam.

There is much ground for pessimism and it may be that we are witnessing the judgement of God on our Church and nation. Our first response to such things must always be to repent and to cry out to God for mercy. But we are called to do more, and part of what we must do is reform the Church. Will it be reformed by campaigning, getting people elected to Synods and so on, or will it be reformed through the work of local churches?

Church Society exists because we believe that both are necessary. When we look at the English Reformation of the 16th century we see men like Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell who were placed by God in positions of influence. They may have compromised at times and regrettably so, but when opportunities arose they took them. At the same time in the background to the Reformation were ordinary Christians suffering for the faith over nearly two centuries and the spiritual reformation that followed the preaching of the unfettered gospel in Northern and Western Europe. In addition, in England, and elsewhere, the spiritual revival was sealed by the blood of the Martyrs.

Church Society has a particular role in tackling issues in the nation and national Church. We do that on behalf of individual laity, clergy and parishes. We rely on people recognising the value of the work we do and supporting it by their own time and efforts, through prayer, through giving and through encouraging others to support it. But we also have a role in supporting local churches and especially in relation to ordained ministry. What must happen for such ministry to flourish today?

First, people must be called. There are declining numbers of clergy and yet there is good evidence that young people are wanting and willing to offer themselves for full-time ministry. The problem appears to be that many are put off by the Church of England or by the idea of ordained ministry. It is important to persuade them of the value of both otherwise the future of the Church of England as a national church looks bleak.

Secondly, people must be trained. Church Society has only a modest role in this primarily through small grants and reduced subscriptions. Nevertheless it is encouraging to see some of the colleges taking a clear stand for Biblical truth in the face of strong opposition. It has been important in the past and will continue to be so to protect these colleges from those who would wish to see them weakened in their stand.

Thirdly, people need to be appointed to parishes. Church Society is not itself involved in the

appointment of Curates though this is an important area and one where there is always a sense, which is difficult to quantify, that some Dioceses are discriminating against classical evangelicals. Where the Society has a particular role is in its own patronage work and the annual report of Church Society Trust is contained in this issue. We are acutely conscious that the wholesale use of suspension is sometimes used to frustrate evangelical appointments and that some clergy are finding it difficult to get appointments. Sadly many churches are ill prepared for interregna, and it ought to be a key task of all clergy to leave a church thoroughly prepared when they move.

The new Ecclesiastical Offices Measure is going to make a difference to appointments and how they are made. However, it is difficult to know precisely what impact it will have because so much depends upon how it is used and abused, and how willing people are to challenge the abuses.

Fourthly, it is important to keep people in gospel ministry. On the one hand people do drift theologically, particularly if they do not experience “iron sharpening iron”. Part of the role of the Society is to do just that, to provide good robust material that will keep people sharp. Others get disillusioned, particularly if they feel isolated and unsupported. This is probably even more so for some laity who may not have the same natural networks with like-minded folk. Again we see it as part of our work to ensure that such folk do not feel alone, and from the comments received this is something many value.

The new Measure will also make a difference in this way too. Many are afraid that it might be used to frustrate ministry that does not fit a norm set by the liberal majority. This is a justifiable fear in some places. However, overall, if the provisions are implemented well then they should provide a means by which clergy can look honestly at themselves and their ministry. That should be a spiritual exercise, considering before God our strengths and weaknesses and how we can grow and better serve Christ.

The heart of ministry

In all these different areas; campaigning, patronage, support, new legislation and so on, we always need to keep before us the heart of the calling we have as followers of Christ. Whilst many things could be listed two in particular come to the fore in Scripture.

Paul writes in Colossians chapter 1:

To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labour, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. (Col 1.27-29)

Paul begins by speaking of the work of God but then describes the work of the Christian, and what has therefore become associated with the role of those set aside for ministry.

This work is not easy, it involves ‘labour’ and ‘striving’, and the work is not done in our own strength alone, it is God who is working Paul says, and He works ‘mightily’ so that as Christians seek to serve Christ in this way, God works through them and does so mightily. It is the work of God, verse 27, and the might of God, verse 29.

What is this labour, this ministry? Two things are mentioned in particular in verse 28.

Proclaiming Christ

The first is to proclaim Christ – or to preach Christ. The particular Greek word used here (*katangelo*) is only found in the New Testament in the letters of Paul and the book of Acts though it is related to the word *euangello* or gospel. The thing being proclaimed is different in

different verses, it may for example be the mystery of God, or the word of God, but here in Colossians it is simply Christ. Therefore our labour and striving as Christians is to proclaim Christ.

What is more we are to proclaim Christ to all. We can be in no doubt about this because the words 'all men' come three times in this short verse. There is no distinction, no discrimination, it doesn't matter who people are, whether they are pagans, atheists, secular humanists, nominal Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, whatever, we are to proclaim Christ to all of them.

We are to do this with a warning – it is not simply about telling people how wonderful it is to follow Christ, or about how wonderful it is to go to Church, which seems to be the focus of the message in many churches, but we must also warn. We warn of the consequence of remaining under the wrath of God without the forgiveness of Christ. Moreover we are to teach wisely, not everyone is the same, not every circumstance is the same, a scattergun approach to evangelism can work but more often great wisdom is called for in how we proclaim Christ without blunting our message. There are examples in the New Testament of how the Apostle Paul himself approached different situations – but his aim was always to proclaim Christ.

What lies behind all this is the conviction which Paul expresses at the start of Romans and clearly lies behind his own work and his exhortations to churches and individuals – the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1.16). Therefore, faced with the present decline in the Church of England and the turmoil in the nation our first and most important response is to employ the power of God by proclaiming Christ.

Perfection

The second area of ministry is seen in the objective which Paul says we have – perfection. That is to say that the aim of Christian ministry is to present all men perfect in Christ.

The aim of some churches seems to be very different. Indeed there are churches which seem to want to proclaim Christ, but then more or less give up on people. But our aim is not just to see people converted, it is to present them perfect in Christ. Paul modelled this in his own ministry, in his compassion for the churches, in his own teaching and in opposing error and ungodliness. The aim for individuals is to grow, to change, to put off the old and put on the new, to become more holy – more Christ like. This therefore is the goal of the Christian ministry in the local Church, to present people perfect in Christ.

Supporting Churches

These things shape the work of Church Society too. Our concern as patrons is to see men appointed who will have these priorities in ministry. We hope that our publications will equip people better. We administer funds and properties largely in relation to these concerns. But we also campaign on behalf of others, so that individuals and churches can be freer to focus on their calling to proclaim Christ and present people perfect in Christ.

Heavenly Father, we beg you to pour out your Spirit in these days. Awaken the unconverted and revive those who love you. Grant your people a true vision of your glory, a renewed faithfulness to your Word, and a deeper consecration to your service so that through their witness your kingdom may advance and all peoples be brought to fear your holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (An English Prayer Book)

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