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HONOURING CHRIST

By David Phillips

We are beset by problems. Outside the Church is the collapsing nature of society as it abandons its Christian heritage; this impacts families, the workplace, school, and the Church. At its worst is the growing antagonism to Biblical Christianity. Inside the Church we see the fruit of theological liberalism in false teaching, decline and immorality. Ritualism is now accepted as the norm and much so-called evangelicalism now believes what liberals believed a generation ago.

In the midst of all this how can we honour Christ? No new advice is offered below, well known verses are quoted as a reminder and much more could be said if space allowed.

Be Realistic

You delivered them into the hands of their enemies... they cried to you, you heard from heaven and according to your abundant mercies you gave them deliverers... (Nehemiah 9.27)

Remember that bad though we think things are they have been far worse in the past. The pessimist in us will therefore realise that they could therefore get far worse but that should spur us to repentance, to faithfulness and to prayer. The optimist in us will know that God is sovereign and will therefore realise that He can change all this and so we will be spurred to repentance, to faithfulness and prayer. G.K. Chesterton wrote in 'The Everlasting Man' "*At least five times, the Faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases, it was the dog that died.*"

Keep the fundamentals

Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1.13)

Faced by pressures of whatever sort the temptation that comes to all of us is to give in. It is easier to flow with the current than against it and sometimes it is so tempting to stop struggling and just drift. But, to mix the metaphor, we are called instead to "hold fast". We have confidence to do this because "He who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10.23). The passage in Hebrews goes on to show us how to "hold fast" – by continuing to meet together and continuing to stir one another up to love and good works. Of course for some there are not many opportunities to meet together with like-minded believers and we hope that in such situations the publications of Church Society, and others, are a help.

Accept that false teachers will come

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons (1 Timothy 4.1)

This might seem to be a depressing thought, but understanding it is half the battle. The greatest damage is done by those who refuse to accept this fact and who therefore resist attempts to deal with false teaching and false teachers. But the Lord has told us it will be so, it is within His purposes, and so we must not be surprised. We must not stick our heads in the sand, but act as the Lord has said. Within the Anglican Communion we have false teachers in many important positions. The former Primate of South East Asia, Yong Ping Chung, reportedly said: "Satan has raised up pharaohs who do not know God and has plunged them into the hierarchy of the churches in the west."

Be Testers

Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1 Thessalonians 5.21)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4.1)

We should have the habit of testing what is said and done against Scripture. Some people will not like this and will accuse us of having a critical spirit, but we should simply see it as obeying God's Word. It is possible to take this too far in both what we do and in our attitude but as a principle it is vitally important.

And we mustn't just test others but also ourselves. One of the problems the Reformation unleashed is the tendency of private judgement to lead to novelty and error. Therefore, we should test our own views both against Scripture but also against the wisdom of other Christians in particular those of past generations. The magisterial reformers did this themselves, they weighed their opinions against past generations. We can see this too, for example, in the Book of Homilies which contain many quotes from the early Church teachers. But modern evangelicalism is prone to revelling in its own opinions and being disparaging of past wisdom. We need the humility to accept that sometimes, perhaps often, they were right and we are wrong. "*Look to the rock from which you were hewn*" (Isa 51.1).

Thoroughly equip

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3.16-17)

There are four uses of Scripture listed here, two concern how we live and two concern what we think or believe. Scripture shows us positively what we should do and believe and it shows us negatively what we should not do and not believe.

Many today are fearful of being negative, they are willing to teach sound doctrine and instruct in righteousness, but unwilling to reprove and correct. Thus people are ill equipped and are vulnerable to false teaching and to temptation. All of us can make use of the Bible in these four ways, but the responsibility lies on those who are called by God to teach.

When issues and errors arise in the wider Church some pastor-teachers will avoid talking of it as if it were the plague for fear of causing division or appearing negative. Others will see their duty to use Scripture to equip the saints.

Contend

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

Members of Church Society are expected to sign a declaration saying that they accept the 39 Articles and will contend for them. We are contenders, and we must contend for the faith. Many of us would rather not; it would be much more pleasant to sit at home or in a cloister enjoying our faith, but we are called to contend. We must use whatever means we have available, within what is permitted by God, to uphold the truth and refute error. This will take many shapes and forms but it has been a particular feature of evangelicalism that it is activist whether in politics, social issues, education, opposing error and so on. It is something which others dislike.

There are dangers in contending. There is a danger of relying on the weapons of worldly rather than spiritual warfare. There is the danger that we will be seduced by power and its abuses. There is danger that we become merely factious and party-spirited, which leads into the final point.

Love

Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1.13)

When you read this verse earlier in the article did you notice the word ‘love’ embedded in it? It is easy to miss, and it is easy to contend for the faith, to teach and train, rebuke and correct, and miss love, the heart of it all.

*If you face error then love must be your concern: Love first for God, in that you seek to be obedient to His commands
(Deut 11.1 etc, Jn 14.15 etc, 1 Jn 5.3 etc).*

Love for your fellow believers, in the desire to protect them from error.

Love for the outsider who will be misled by error if it is not opposed.

Love for those who have erred, in the hope that they will come to their senses, repent and return to the truth.

In all this Christ is our model for we see clearly that he did oppose error and do so forcefully, but he also forgave his enemies and laid down his life for them.

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