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LIVING AND WITNESSING IN A PAGAN WORLD

Church Society Conference Report 2010

By David Meager

Church Society met in May for its annual Conference at High Leigh. The aim of the Conference was to encourage us to stand for Christ in an increasingly hostile world and also to reflect on some of the issues in the Church of England that confront us as conservative evangelicals. The talks were complemented by three bible expositions on Philippians by Mark O'Donoghue from St Helen's, Bishopsgate. James Crabtree, Chairman of the Council, introduced and interviewed the speakers and oversaw time for questions after the talks.

Gordon Warren, vicar of St Anne's, Limehouse, gave two talks on the opening day of the conference encouraging us to live and witness effectively in a pagan world. Gordon reminded us that British society had been founded on God's commandments, but by the 21st Century the general population knew little of saving faith and consequently had sought release from the restrictions of God's laws. The situation of living under God's commands was now reversed as the unredeemed sought to judge Christians by their own liberal views, consequently Christians today are having to adapt to an increasingly hostile environment.

In his second talk Gordon gave us advice as to how we can witness in a multi-cultural society. Using Limehouse as an example of a multi-cultural parish, Gordon explained how he sought to evangelise his Muslim, Hindu and Jewish neighbours. Using the example of Paul ('in becoming all things to all people') he sought to adapt to their culture so as to be able to engage them with the gospel. In practice this meant being careful about what foods he ate and how he dressed in their presence so as not to cause unnecessary offence. He had also attended courses to increase his understanding of other religions and cultures.

On day two John Cheeseman, vicar of Holy Trinity, Eastbourne, addressed the problem of homosexuality in the church. John explained how homosexuality had been gradually accepted over the last 15 years by many clergy and bishops in the Anglican Communion. The current Archbishop of Canterbury was sympathetic to it, and two practicing homosexuals had been appointed bishops in the U. S. Episcopal Church. Some 'evangelicals,' such as the Bishop of Liverpool, were trying to make it a 'secondary issue.' Would J. C. Ryle, a former bishop of Liverpool, think it a secondary matter?

John then reminded us that we need to be clear on the Biblical teaching on homosexuality. To counter the liberal arguments that homosexual practice is just one of God's Old Testament laws which doesn't apply to the Christian (such as eating prawns), John helpfully explained that the forbidding of homosexual practice was part of God's moral law because the prohibition was upheld in the New Testament. John then explained the New Testament teaching on homosexuality and also the physical and spiritual consequences of those who continue in this lifestyle. According to Jesus those who live unrepentant lifestyles and those who encourage people in sin both face the danger of hell, therefore to warn homosexuals is the most loving thing to do – if their house was on fire they would want to know. Discipline in the church needs to happen at the local, national and international level.

After the Church Society A.G.M, Rohintan Mody, assistant curate at Christ Church, Virginia Water, under the title 'Empty & Evil' addressed the issue of how Christians should engage with the

worship and practices of other faiths. The issue is of real relevance today given the presence of large other faith communities in our society. Rohintan explained that it was a practical issue for him because he was converted from an Indian Zoroastrian background and therefore he still had to deal with family gatherings where there might be food sacrificed to idols. To give some practical advice on these issues Rohintan expounded 1 Cor 8-10 where Paul deals with food sacrificed to idols in Corinth – God has not left us without guidance! Rohintan then explained the link between idols and demons. Although idols are fictitious, behind the idol (such as Krishna or other false gods) there is a demon. Therefore although the worshipper may have good intentions and feel that they have met with God they have actually been deceived. Pagan worship is ‘co-opted’ by the demons, whose aim is to keep people away from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Rohintan then explained the theological battle the church faced in holding onto the orthodox position when there was pressure to be pluralistic (i.e. to say all religions lead to God) or inclusivist (i.e. to say people can be saved without hearing the gospel). Rohintan then discussed some practical applications: we should be very careful of interfaith events, and we should also avoid situations (such as family gatherings) where people worship other gods or eat meat sacrificed to idols - this should be done for their sake.

Following Rohintan’s talk David Phillips, General Secretary of Church Society, gave an overview of engaging in the Church of England structures. David explained why it was important that conservative evangelicals should be involved in the structures (such as the various synods, PCCs etc) of the Church of England. If we are not prepared to sit on committees then we may as well leave the CofE altogether, however sitting on committees does not mean having spiritual fellowship. After explaining how to get involved and the potential costs and hardships, David listed the good reasons for involvement, these included limiting liberal influence in the church, the opportunity to oppose unbiblical innovations, and because the CofE (like the N.T. Church) is a connexial church.

George Curry, vicar of St Stephen & St Paul’s, Elswick (Newcastle-upon-Tyne) ended the day by reminding us of the Biblical teaching on women’s ministry and how society and the CofE had rejected this. After outlining the social changes in 20th Century Britain and the demise of Reformed theology in the Church of England, George described how the Church of England had largely rejected the biblical teaching on gender roles. He then listed some of the reasons ‘evangelicals’ gave for accepting women into ordained ministry, these included the misinterpretation of texts such as Gal 3 v28, and pragmatic reasons such as ‘submitting our conscience to the church’ or ‘God seems to be blessing women presbyters.’ George then advised how we could uphold the biblical teaching on gender roles, this included exposing false views of male and female, explaining that it is not a ‘secondary matter’ and showing that it is contrary to historic Anglicanism.

On the final day Duncan Boyd, chairman of the Finance Committee of Church Society, explained why our Protestant Constitution is worth defending. Duncan showed from the Old and New Testaments the Biblical principles for government, and how this country, empire and commonwealth had benefitted from Bible based laws. However this had been undermined in recent years by governments which have passed laws contrary to God’s Word and if we continue like this it will destroy us as a nation. Therefore, since governments are not morally neutral, we as Christians should seek to uphold our country as a Protestant Christian nation. Our Coronation Oath is a wonderful thing because it puts the Bible centre (unlike the American Constitution).

On each day of the conference Mark O’Donoghue, from St Helen’s, Bishopsgate, gave an exposition on Philippians. Under the titles ‘A Passionate Man,’ ‘A Passionate Mindset’ and ‘A Passionate Ministry,’ Mark exhorted us to follow the Apostle Paul’s example of a gospel centred life. In the first exposition (Phil 1 v1-27) we were encouraged to share Paul’s affection for other

Christians in gospel partnership and to share Paul's passion for gospel advance as Christ is proclaimed. This should result in us being ambitious to use each day for fruitful labour. Is our ambition in life to see gospel growth?

In his second talk (Phil 1 v27 - 2 v30) Mark exhorted us to share Jesus' sacrificial mindset for the sake of others' salvation and also to imitate the models of Gospel-centredness shown in the examples of Jesus, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Mark challenged us in his final talk (Phil 3 v1 - 4) to grasp why the gospel of the Lord Jesus matters most. This is because the gospel is based on a relationship and not religious works and it will result in the hope of the resurrection from the dead. Because we have this hope, we must run the race, overcome the hurdles and win the prize. Ultimately this is the 'secret' of the contented life!

Overall the conference was a great encouragement as we were reminded and exhorted to uphold the truth on various contentious issues in the Church of England and the nation. It was also a spur to evangelism and for recommitting ourselves to have gospel priorities in our lives. There were also good opportunities during informal times and over meals for fellowship with friends and other attendees we had not met before, and also the chance to talk informally with the speakers (which can often be limited at bigger conferences). CDs are available of most of the talks.

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