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THE NEED FOR EVANGELICAL COURAGE – Part 1

By Pete Myers

For young evangelical ministers in the Church of England like myself, who have perhaps four decades of ministry ahead of us, the situation we're inheriting is mixed.

We have much to thank those in the generations above us, who have passed on the essentials of the gospel and instilled in us the vital need for faithful expository Word ministry. However, every generation brings a new context and a new set of challenges. What are the trials we must face before we in turn hand the baton on to those who, at present, are still working out how to use the potty?

The matters we are called to tackle are not simple. They are both a part of who we are, and a part of the context into which we are entering. Yet at the same time many of the issues we are facing share a common root.

Some of the challenges we face are a lack of self-awareness about how others perceive us; an ambivalence to important secondary distinctives such as baptism or episcopacy; a theological confusion about the vital role of the 39 Articles; and the fact that we are simply unaware of what we have already lost within the Church of England.

Common to all of these is the need for *courage*. To effect real change for the better, we need *evangelical courage*.

But while some may interpret this by thinking we need to shout "Truth!" and "Repent!" and "That's wrong!" louder and at a shriller pitch than we have done before, such a response is the exact opposite of exercising courage. It is, in fact, mere cowardice; a retreat from the front line under the volley of cannon-fire, and a maneuver worthy of the promotion of Lord Raglan. And with no actual tangible *gains* to show for such clamour, one even wonders whether Pyrrhus himself would have shirked from claiming it as a victory.

Simply shouting critical remarks into the air is mere cowardice. Why? Because it is nothing more than an unintelligent retreat from the frontline. In contrast, courage requires us to stand and defend the name of Jesus.

We need courage not to retreat into those habits that feel so comfortable, but are so ineffective. The following is an example of three such ways that we need courage not to retreat.

1. Courage not to retreat from the CofE

The most obvious retreat is to leave the CofE. This is so often justified as a 'noble act of conscience'; a refusal to be tainted by all that nasty liberalism the CofE hierarchy is now full of. That's the faithful thing to do surely, isn't it? After all, we shouldn't associate with evil doers in the church.¹ We shouldn't taint ourselves. It's a no brainer...

...or is it?

The problem is, that reasoning is very... *individualistic*. Integrity in ministry isn't about keeping

myself free of impure associations. It's about the people I minister to. I am an undershepherd, and Jesus has charged me to care for his flock until he returns.

There are 1.7 million people who attend CofE services every week. When I meet Jesus, and he asks why I left those sheep, what will I say? "Well, I was in the fold watching the flock, and then loads of these wolves came in. They looked really dangerous! I got out of there as fast as I could."

"But what..." replies Jesus "...about the sheep you left behind?"

"Well, I didn't think you'd want me to get my shirt dirty," I answer "I mean there was sheep blood flying everywhere. I thought you'd want me to clearly disassociate myself from that in case I got confused for being a wolf."

Aren't shepherds supposed to *protect* the flock? Isn't it our *job* to fight wolves? *If* I think the Church of England is full of false teachers, then isn't that *precisely why* I should *stay*?!

And what about the CofE's other assets: the buildings, the money, the investments, the infrastructure, the cultural capital, the history, the international connections, the political influence—are none of these worth at least *trying* to retain for the name of Christ?

This is the legacy of the work and giving of faithful women and men over *centuries*. They prayed that people like us would ensure it got used properly for the name of Christ.

To retreat from the CofE is cowardly, not noble. It is to abandon our responsibility to the sheep and to abandon the incredible kingdom assets passed down to us by those who came before, and which we owe to the next generation.

2. Courage not to retreat from CofE structures

Many stay within the CofE for a variety of reasons. For those who do, the next level of retreat is the "live and let live" attitude. Put my head down, do ministry in my patch, and ignore the rest of the church.

This also sounds very noble. I have the cure of souls in my area, and I'm going to faithfully preach the word without getting distracted by all that church politics stuff. The Synods for example: Deanery, Diocesan, and General are just a distraction from word ministry. They are administrative, and administration is not my responsibility.

I can be polite about others who do this "valuable work" which "isn't my calling"; or I can look down on them, with a supercilious superiority that (unlike them) I truly have my priorities straight: *nothing* can distract *me* from obeying Paul's charge to "preach the word."²

However... this kind of logic is neither Pauline, biblical, or even that pastoral.

Paul was concerned with ministry *everywhere*. He returned to churches he had already established in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.³ He wrote to churches he knew in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonika, and to a church leader on Crete.⁴ And depending on the situation in each place, this sometimes meant writing collectively to a *group* of churches, rather than just a single congregation.⁵ He even wrote to churches he'd *never* visited in Rome and Colossae, and kept tabs on how the churches were doing all over Asia.⁶ At least some of his letters were deliberately written to be shared around.⁷

Paul's catholic concern wasn't just because he was an apostle.⁸ Paul sent men such as Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, Epaphroditus, Onesimus, and probably Artemas to check, encourage, and repair other churches.⁹ He included Sosthenes, Timothy, and Silvanus in his letter writing.¹⁰ And he encouraged churches to communicate and pray for one another, as well as share their finances.¹¹

The concern for the wider church goes beyond merely Paul. The writer to the Hebrews was clearly concerned about Christians elsewhere.¹² James and Peter wrote cyclical letters, and Jude was probably cyclical too.¹³ John's letter to the seven churches demonstrates both a clear concern for the gospel everywhere, and a desire that each church see what he's written to other churches also.¹⁴

The biblical case for church networking is overwhelming: and that is precisely why the denominational structures exist. Scripture compels us to engage with the wider church both in our dioceses and nationally.

But also from a pragmatic perspective, getting your head down and just focusing on your patch is not good even for your own congregation.

Your congregation see on their TV what the CofE says in public. Your youth and children will one day go to a church in another parish. When you move on or die, your bishop and diocese will influence the PCC choosing who takes over. And if you don't get involved, then one day your diocese will appoint a bishop you simply cannot submit to, which may force you and (some of) your congregation out of your building.

Putting your head down and "getting on with ministry" sounds very noble—but it's not. It's a retreat, and it's unfaithful to scripture. It's to retreat from working to promote the gospel all over the country, and to protect the future of the gospel in your own parish.

Part 2 follows in the next issue of Cross†way (issue 129, Summer 2013).

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Endnotes:

- 1) 1 Cor 5:9-13.
- 2) 2 Tim 4:1-2.
- 3) Acts 14:21-22.
- 4) 1-2 Cor; Gal; Eph; Phil; 1-2 Thess; and Titus.
- 5) E.g. the plural "churches" in Gal 1:2.
- 6) Rom 15:22-24; Col 1:4; cf. 1 Thess 1:7-8 and 2 Tim 1:15.
- 7) See Col 4:16; Ephesians was also probably cyclical, see the footnote to 1:1 in most English translations.
- 8) As in "universal."
- 9) 1 Cor 16:10-11; 2 Cor 12:18; Eph 6:21-22; Phil 2:19-30; Col 4:7-9; 1 Thess 3:1-6; Titus 3:12. Paul also urged Apollos to go to Corinth, but it wasn't possible, 1 Cor 16:12.

- 10) 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Phm 1.
- 11) Acts 11:30; 12:25; Rom 16:4, 16; 1 Cor 16:19-20; 2 Cor 13:13.
- 12) Heb 13:22-25.
- 13) Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1; Jude 1.
- 14) Rev 1:4-3:22.