

## Mission and Evangelism - Week 85

Across the western world, various long-established branches of the Church are finding themselves in trouble. Most methods used to assess the Church's health - to do with numbers attending, demographics and financial giving - tend to give a rather gloomy message: unless these parts of the Church turn things round and quickly, they will no longer exist in a few decades time. Perhaps that does not matter anyway?

By contrast, there are hundreds of new Christian fellowships that have sprung up all over the place, meeting in cinemas, schools, redundant church buildings, pubs and sports halls. The leaders of such churches, usually self-appointed, sincerely believe that they are getting things right in the service of the Lord and of His Kingdom. They can point in many cases to biblical preaching and teaching, warm and informal worship, devout discipleship, many young people and families, sacrificial financial giving and community involvement. So in comparison, poor old "St Snooks" down the road, with a draughty building, huge repair bills and a small, elderly congregation, apparently has very little to offer.

So what is to be done? - for the task of evangelism is as important as ever. Nothing has changed in what actually matters: the Church across its branches is still entrusted with proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in all its fullness, for individuals, families and wider society.

How vital it is then that the Church remains clear as to its priorities, and as united as possible across its branches in these demanding days. The splintering we see all around us, of Christians breaking away into more and more small, rival groups, each "doing their own thing", does none of us any good.

For Christians do actually need each other! The longer-established denominations offer stability, rhythm, tradition, liturgy and musical heritage. Their presence reminds us that we ourselves are merely the latest in a long line of Christian people, and the problems facing us today have been faced and overcome in years gone by by those who have gone before us.

Equally, the newer-established groups, which over time tend to become new denominations in themselves anyway, of course play their part too, offering liveliness, freshness, warmth and immediacy, and often an easier threshold for newcomers to step across into the life of a local Christian fellowship.

So there is surely a place for both "types of church" in today's confused society, with mutual respect and support overcoming rivalry or competitiveness. Neither old-established nor newly-established Christian groups in themselves are guaranteed to get everything right. Surely the ideal is a blend of the old and the new, under the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Our shared task of evangelism is further helped by our remembering that ultimately this is not human work, but the work of the Holy Spirit. Of course we must be sensitive to the people and cultures in which we are placed, doing our

best to speak in language that is relevant and understood. But when all is said and done, it is the Holy Spirit who is the Bringer of the new birth, the Enabler for "the spiritual penny to drop". For our part, humility, patience, prayer and silence all have their place as we seek to get things right under the Lord. Too often we neglect such behaviour, choosing instead to rush about in well-meant but frenzied efforts to crack the problems ourselves. "Be still, and know that I am God" still holds good at the heart of our spiritual walk with the living God (Psalm 46.10).

Second, we remember that the cross, to the natural man, is foolishness, an offence, a stumbling-block (eg I Corinthians 1.18ff / Galatians 5.11 / I Peter 2.8). The cross obliges natural man to give up, to acknowledge helplessness and deep need, a need that is only met by faith in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus. The cross banishes human pride or worth or merit: by grace we are saved - Ephesians 2.5,8-9. Natural man does not care for that sort of message! No wonder therefore that evangelism will remain hard, sometimes dispiriting, work (Matthew 7.13-14); throughout, we are to remain dependent upon the Holy Spirit to bring about those vital changes of heart.

But that is the old, well-trodden path of evangelism that still stretches before us, even in these turbulent times. Whether it is eight elderly faithful souls at St Snooks, or a new trendy bunch in the converted cinema down the road, is of secondary importance: either group can thrive or wither with the passing of the years and Christ's Church will still stand tall. Of prime importance is the presence of true Christian worship and discipleship - communities of Christian people, embedded in their local communities, who "know it, mean it, and live it".

The irony is that when such communities exist, mission and evangelism tend to "look after themselves", for outsiders are drawn in by what they see and hear. That is how things were in those wonderful days of the Early Church, and that is how they need to be once again in our own day.

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