

## **"Contending for the faith...." - Week 90**

When coming to write each new Weekly Reflection I am very conscious of the need these days to go for good cheer rather than deep gloom! Unfortunately, because Christian eyes do need to be open as to how things are going on around us, be it globally, nationally or locally, we cannot deny that hostility to the Christian Faith and Gospel is increasing, and is apparent in many different guises.

By way of a brief example, the forthcoming "ReNew" conference of evangelical leaders in the Church of England will be addressing questions such as these, (and I quote): "Why are there swathes of the country with no Bible-teaching Anglican ministry? What are we going to do now that there will be female bishops in the Church of England? How do we respond to the proposed "shared conversations" on "Sexuality, Scripture and Mission"? What should we do when the Church of England is actively seeking to prevent gospel work taking place? How do we live in a country that is increasingly hostile to gospel principles?"

That is quite a list! - and the underlying issues, such as spiritual headship, sexuality, opposition and mission, face all parts of the Church across the denominations, and in different parts of the world. Notice also that several of those questions involve deep division within the Church itself, quite apart from any hostility towards the Gospel from beyond the Church.

There is no need for us to be too surprised over all this, or to run away in terror to hide somewhere, but clearly major things are happening, both by the Lord's allowance and by His direct action. He is evidently speaking very loudly to His Bible-believing people, to wake up and buck up in these turbulent times.

For a long time the Church has had it "pretty easy" in the West, due in no small part to the deep-rootedness of the Christian Faith down through the generations, achieved, often at great cost, by our Christian forebears. The cutting-edge of the Gospel has become blunted, or watered down to avoid giving offence or getting out-of-step with current social values. It is an irony that while we have had many apparently-successful new ways of "doing church" - hopefully sincere attempts to proclaim the Gospel more effectively in changing societies - the influence of the Christian Gospel within those societies has grown less and less before our eyes. We only have to consider the succession of increasingly anti-biblical laws which have been enacted in western countries in recent decades.

So? - we go to the Lord in prayer of course, and we go to His Word. The Israelites frequently faced the same sorts of dilemma - the lure of "the world" on the one hand, and the realities of the covenant on the other. When they turned to the Lord of the covenant, in repentance and obedience, the Lord forgave and blessed and protected them. Just look at the way Josiah for example, the young king of Judah, got "stuck in", sweeping away the idolatrous corruption that had crept into Judah over the years (II Kings 22 - 23.28)! Here was one godly man in a position of leadership who turned things right round for the Lord's people. Yet after his death (23.29) things quickly slipped back for Judah, leading, after all those years of warnings, to the Lord's judgement - defeat and exile to Babylon. It just shows that wilful defiance of the Lord and His ways has consequences too.

The Early Church faced similar trials - rampant paganism, hostile religious hierarchies, widely-scattered communities, false teachers, active persecutions - and in the earliest days, no New Testament. No wonder there was confusion and argument. But yet again, the way forward was to look to the Lord, to abide in Him, to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3,AV).

*How* they did that contending, and how *we* are to do that contending, is an important but secondary issue. The key issue is that the Christ-redeemed people of God - the Church - are to continue proclaiming the biblical Gospel, clearly and relevantly, whatever the consequences may be.

That is only what our Christian forebears did, and the Lord honoured their work. That is only what we are to do - that the harvest of souls may be brought in, and that the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may have all the glory.

Praise the Lord - the gloomier the gloom, the brighter the light of the Gospel!

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