

446 A Witness and Keeper of Holy Writ

As we saw in last week's Reflection, the Lord Jesus Christ is described in God's Word as "a stumblingstone and rock of offence" (Isaiah 8.14 and quoted in Romans 9.33). This is how he is still regarded by many Jews and Gentiles of today, because he is such an awkward obstacle standing in the path of human pride and independence. But for all who accept Him as Lord and Saviour, Jesus' Person, words and deeds act as that great solid Rock on which we can safely base our lives.

So Jesus remains controversial, the main focus of "the long war against God", to quote the title of one of the late Henry Morris' fine books. Now the Church is appointed as "a witness and keeper of holy Writ" (from Article XX of the 39 Articles found within the Book of Common Prayer), entrusted with upholding and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in this lost, needy world, over which God's promised divine judgments are surely drawing nigh.

How is the Church faring in this task? To put it another way, how much difference does the Church actually make, as far as we can tell, in terms of shaping political decisions and actions, and hence in turn of promoting the general well-being of human society? If we are being honest, the answer seems to be – not much difference at all! In whichever country we may happen to live, but notably in "the West", we are now beset with numerous laws which are blatantly anti-biblical, the Church's views, (that is, God's views as made known across the spread of Scripture), even if these were clearly stated to those in political power at the appropriate times, having been largely swept aside.

So the Church across its denominations now faces a tricky question, "To what extent should we shape our beliefs and practices so as to keep in step with modern views and behaviours?". A "keeping in step" approach emphasises welcome, love, adaptation and a hoped-for acceptability – in short, "peace"; whereas a "we'll stand firm" approach emphasises faithfulness to the Lord and His unchanging Word – in short, "truth".

Two topical examples make the point. The first involves the inexorable progress of the great "homosexuality juggernaut" of recent decades. The Methodist Conference in Britain has recently voted by a large majority "to change the definition of marriage" so as now to allow "same-sex marriages". A spokesman said, "We are so grateful to our fellow Methodists for taking this courageous step to recognise and affirm the value and worth of LGBTQ+ relationships". Other church members

though are deeply upset, on the scriptural grounds on which Methodism was established, and may well feel obliged to move elsewhere. When faced with this decision, which follows similar ones taken by the Scottish Episcopal Church, the URC and the Quakers, but not (yet?) by the Church of England, is it not reasonable to ask “By what authority have you taken this decision? – can doctrinal truth and policy really be decided by democratic vote?”.

A second current example concerns the gradual return to “normal” church gatherings, with people being physically together once more for worship, instruction, prayer and fellowship. What about the many folk who have got used during the pandemic to following such occasions “online”, and perhaps not live? Should this new strand of “worship practice”, which offers flexibility over committed, regular, physical attendance, still be catered for? – and should this catering shape in part the “real occasions” now being held once again in the church building?

In effect, should the whole way of “doing church” perhaps now be radically altered as a result of new behaviour patterns arising from the pandemic? Obviously some faithful church members are no longer able to attend in person, and this online provision is a great blessing for them. Others though, who could gather in person but rarely or never do so, are inevitably in an “outer ring” of membership, who by their physical absence will give less to, and will receive less from, the local church fellowship (egs., Matthew 18.20 / John 17.20-21 / Acts 2.41-47 / I Corinthians 12.12-14 / Colossians 3.16 / Hebrews 10.22-25).

The answers to these questions, now facing both the Church and its individual members, concerning alignment with, or distance from, current trends in society, will depend in part on local circumstances, and must be sought humbly and prayerfully as matters unfold. Whatever patterns may emerge in local church life, be these starkly new, or long-established or a mix of both, the central task of the Church remains unchanged: as that “witness and keeper of holy writ”, we are to obey the Lord Jesus’ final command, “Go ye ... teach ... baptise ... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (from Matthew 28.19-20).

That command sums up the God-given methods by which God’s Truth is proclaimed, and, when that Truth in Christ has been duly received, then God’s true Peace in Christ is properly established (eg., Romans 5.1-21).