

THE APPEAL TO FOLLOW CHRIST: Felt needs and the Office of Christ

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Dr. Williams' article wrestles helpfully with the issue of to what extent the church should respond in its presentation of the Gospel to the felt needs of the receptor group. The points raised have a widespread application.

We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the primitive Church grew by three thousand as a result of one sermon (Acts 2:41). Such enormous growth was not maintained, but nevertheless within thirty years the Church was present in large parts of the Roman Empire, and from then on it grew sufficiently to be a perceived threat to many emperors. Today however many churches and denominations are even experiencing negative growth, while in contrast others grow dramatically. There are many factors involved in Church growth, and the subject has stimulated many books in recent years. The subject is complicated, but I want to look at one aspect, the perceived appeal to join the church, comparing a couple of successful churches with the less successful. Finally, by looking at the appeal that Jesus made, and at his role or 'office', I want to suggest what the aspects of a full and legitimate appeal are.

I have served as an evangelical minister and missionary for over twenty years in Southern Africa. In that time, while I have observed moderate growth in both black and white churches, it has not been dramatic. However, in other churches, things are not the same. On the one hand, in the 'white' church environment, my church was just 3 miles from another, which during the four year period of my pastorate, mushroomed from an initial fifteen to a regular congregation of over four thousand. While this did not affect the members of my church directly, everyone was aware of it, and asking why the new church was seeing such dramatic growth while we just continued much as before. This pattern was repeated in other major centres, evoking considerable reaction from already existing churches as well as from the popular press; in particular, less successful churches have examined themselves, asking themselves why they have not experienced such results. On the other hand, in the 'black' churches with which I was associated, similar questions were asked,

although this time the churches that experienced growth were outwardly very different.

Quite clearly the answer to that difference is that the appeal of the growing churches is attractive, whereas that of other churches is not. It is necessary therefore to ask what the appeal of these successful churches is.

The 'White Scene': Prosperity Churches

At least in some aspects, these churches are ordinary. The major part of their doctrine is orthodox, with agreement with traditional churches on the nature of God, the way of salvation and other fundamentals. It is not these that constitute their distinctive appeal. This is to be found rather in the following:

- (a) They preach that a Christian has the right to both perfect health and material prosperity, and announce the way in which these are to be attained. This is bound to be attractive in a society which rates material wealth so highly. Health is also important, but perhaps secondary except to people who have particular health needs, especially where ordinary medicine has proved ineffective. The religion preached is experienced; it is seen to work. It is not the place to consider the authenticity of these various claims, except to note that these effects *may* have causes other than the divine action claimed. What is important here is that in an age which rates science, and the testability of any claim so highly, such authentication of the church is significant.
- (b) Psychological needs are also met in such churches. The services are conducted in a dynamic way, with singing, preaching and other parts of the 'service' all done in an enthusiastic way. The emotional satisfaction achieved in the congregation

from this very positive approach contrasts markedly with more traditional churches, although this type of service is also found in the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches which have also experienced growth, but not as markedly. A further result of this is a real sense of belonging to the congregation.

- (c) Another feature is the strong claim made to authority. These churches are fundamentalist, so rate an inerrant Bible as a source of their message which then cannot be contradicted. This is coupled with the authoritarian nature of the Church leadership, and is very attractive compared to the variety of opinions and contrasting authorities experienced both in traditional churches and in the secular world. In near contradiction to this is the frequent claim of the leaders to authority on the basis of individual revelation, particularly visions (Morran & Schlemmer 1984:75).
- (d) Particularly in the South African situation with its preoccupation with politics, these churches do not mention secular politics. This is not simply an attraction because it is refreshing to escape from politics, and the associated feelings of guilt that many experience, but the absence of political utterance can be taken to indicate a support for the status quo (Morran & Schlemmer 1984:13, 171).

I want to suggest that the common factor in these features is that the prosperity churches have successfully taken the values of the culture and Christianized them, such that a person finds the church is advocating precisely the things he thinks are important. The Church 'scratches where it itches'. Moreover, if the adherent had any doubts that these matters were right, these are dispelled because he has regard for the standing of the church.

The 'Black' Scene: African Independent Churches

African Independent churches are also demonstrating great growth, although the growth is more dramatic in the multiplication of the number of groups than in the number of adherents, although this too is marked. Again there are a number of factors involved.

- (a) These groups offer a form of practical liberation; they match the aspirations of the people. Of course, once a group has separated for organizational reasons, it will tend to continue to split for the same reasons, resulting in a large number of independent groups. It is also frequently pointed out that such churches have arisen at a time of rapid social change (eg Mullings 1979:65).
- (b) Healing is also a primary feature of these churches (Ndiokwee 1981:68), in contrast to the parent churches which generally have not practiced it. This is a felt need which was formerly not met, so a church meeting it, even with limited success, is appealing (cf Walker 1979:25 of the Harrist Churches). The provision of money is also present in these groups, but to a much lesser degree (for an example see Ndiokwee (1981:278). Noting this point, Mullings (1979:84) says concrete results

are vital. West (1975:80, 83) notes that most joined the churches because of healing or being helped by the Church in some other way.

- (c) On this latter point, Wilson, in the introduction to West (1975) points out that these Churches provide emotional support in the jungle of the townships and thus provide security. She notes that recruitment is mainly from the very poor. West (1975:193) notes the belief of Peel that economic deprivation is one reason for joining the church, but doubts whether this is the main reason, feeling that insecurity has social causes. He does however mention the mutual aid in such churches (West 1975:198).
- (d) Again the emotional needs of adherents are met with services conducted in an African way with dancing, drums etc.
- (e) In the claims of the leaders to be leaders, the supernatural is also much in evidence in these churches (Ndiokwee 1981:77). Calling always involves visionary experience, and inevitably leads to a strong leadership. West (1975:48) notes the strong authoritarian leadership in these Churches and feels that the urge to lead has resulted in many splits to form independent groups. In particular this would account for the great multiplication of Churches in South Africa, where the leadership role is otherwise often denied. The attitude to the Bible is again fundamentalist, providing an authority.

Again it is clear that what is present is a synthesis of Christianity with traditional culture and values. Bond (1974:14) remarks that it is '... a blend of a garbled form of Christianity with a primitive tribal religion' and Nida (1965:100) says that '... some of the pseudo-Christian prophetic movements in Africa have developed with phenomenal rapidity largely because there has been no radical conflict with existing pattern'.

A Comparison with traditional Churches

It will be observed that when allowance is made for the different cultures, similar features exist. The African Churches, with a non-scientific background, will not be so troubled by empirical verification; because of their non-materialist views, money will not feature so markedly, but on the other hand demons will likely be more troublesome.

It would seem, however, that both groups of Churches are successful because they satisfy the needs experienced by those around them in a way which the other churches do not. The evangelical Churches, on the one hand, preach salvation from sin, but whereas a consciousness of sin may have been a problem to previous generations, it is doubtful if it is such to a generation which has lost an appreciation of ethical absolutes. Moreover, the satisfaction of needs is perhaps even of growing significance in a society becoming disillusioned with materialism and so seeking more meaning than that provided by society's values. However, at the same time, it is doubtful if the offer of forgiveness from sin is seen as relevant to the bulk of the population, which is seeking answers to immediate and pressing needs.

Thus whereas man's real need is of reconciliation to the God who gives eternal life, such a need is often not perceived by modern man, who is indeed guilty of 'suppressing the truth' (Rom 1:18). In such cases, it is viewed as a waste of effort to simply demand repentance, as indeed Paul found at Athens (Acts 17:30), unless God has also worked in the person's life by the convicting work of the Spirit (Jn. 16:8). Thus although this has traditionally been the Reformed approach, it has difficulty in being heard beside all the other competing claims of other ideologies, whether Western or African. Bavinck (1960:129) asserts, '... above everything else its central note is the proclamation of redemption'. Later (1960:148), however, he decries the fact that young Christians have a poor realization of guilt. He appears to infer that they have come to Christ for the wrong reasons. He seems desperate to *introduce* a sense of need which he can then answer (1960:141). Nevertheless elsewhere he makes a very telling comment. He says (1960:116), '... pagans spontaneously come to God because they see that God is with his people'. In other words the attraction of the gospel is when it is seen to meet *already felt* needs. Francis Schaeffer (1968:119f) has a point when he insists that the need of man must be appreciated before Christ can be presented as the answer to that need.

Schaeffer's approach is however intellectual. He seeks to drive a person to an appreciation of the result of his presuppositions. This is effective in the student and intellectual world, but is of doubtful value for the average man, who perceives his needs at a more basic level. He also really adopts the same line as the Reformed position, that of finding it necessary to arouse a need which can then be met.

It is here that the attraction of the methods of the Prosperity teaching and the Independent Churches of Africa is evident. The need does not have to be put, it is obvious, and so a gospel which claims to be the answer is readily accepted.

Moreover the offer of an eschatological heaven is meaningless to a world which has become secularized, which demands empirical verification and moreover demands instant results, not a future hope. Likewise the appeal of the African Independent Churches over the mission Churches is that they offer this—worldly solutions rather than just an eschatological hope; they fill a role of more than just the religious (West 1975:191, 126). Again, the Church fills the need for an absolute, which was lost in the breaking up of traditional culture and values.

Although they would criticize the other churches for their neglect of the real issue, seen as reconciliation with God, it must be asked whether evangelicals too are neglecting a valid aspect of the Gospel which can make their appeal more attractive. In order to be effective, the gospel must be shown to be relevant to the felt needs of those who hear it, not just to needs which may not be appreciated. If the presentation is made in this way, growth naturally follows, for example, McGavran (1959:50) notes the great growth in an area where Christianity was believed to have power over evil spirits. The need which they experienced was met, so they responded. In short, the gospel presentation is made with due reference to the

target group, an idea readily adopted in Sunday Schools, but which in general has not been fully applied to the world as a whole. Thus, cognisance must be taken of the *specific* felt needs of the *specific* target group in the presentation of the gospel to them.

However, if results and growth were all that was required (as the Church growth movement, following McGavran, often seems to be saying), then the church must follow the example set by the prosperity churches, or by the African Independent churches. It is in this however that they are wrong, both in presenting belief as always leading to this worldly benefits, and when their appeal is centred upon those benefits.

The Gospel and 'felt needs'

It is clear that the gospel cannot be presented simply as the answer to immediate needs. It is not presented as such in the Bible, and neither is it such in experience. Both Jesus and the Early Church demanded repentance and obedience to God because the basic need of man is his separation from God. What we can legitimately say, however, is that the gospel does often meet the needs felt by both adherents of the prosperity teachers and the African independent churches while dealing with that basic need of reconciliation with God.

Healing is real, but Christianity does not *always* result in good health. It is only a matter of observation that some in the Bible were sick (e.g. Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:27)), or that there have been many distressing examples of those today who have trusted the 'faith' message with disastrous results (cf. Farah 1980:1f). Although Christian faith may result in healing by supernatural agency, this must not be overstated as a right.

Similarly, it is well established that a Christian lifestyle, on the individual and on the collective level, leads to prosperity. This point has particular reference to the usual missionary method of 'identification'. The argument for identification is that by becoming as similar to the receiving culture as possible, extra barriers to the gospel's reception due to cultural differences are removed (cf. Bavinck 1960:93f.). The problems with this are many. It may be misinterpreted, and it is in any case impossible to totally identify. However, I question whether it is really desirable in the material sense. If the gospel has been the cause of western prosperity, that fact is a powerful attraction, and should not be hidden. In any case, is it really moral to hide it? West (1975:192) believes that many Africans embraced Christianity simply because they saw whites (ie. 'Christians') as being in touch with more power than their traditional religion.

Nevertheless, Christianity does not *always* result in prosperity. The claim of the prosperity teachers is that a failure is due to lack of faith, citing James 1:6 (Copeland 1974:103), but this is a defective view of both God and faith. Again there are Biblical examples of Christian poverty (Phil. 4:10f.), and modern examples of financial difficulty.

Thus there are implications of the Gospel which meet the needs felt by those who adopt such

teachings as the prosperity message or that of the African Independent Churches. However they may not be met in the way that is desired; felt needs will not always be satisfied. The approach of the Bible is clear; obedience and reconciliation to God is a demand, and we do not follow because of what we can get, but for what we give. Nevertheless the positive beneficial results of that obedience may, and should, legitimately be pointed out.

The appeal of Jesus and the early Church

All the gospels record the feeding of the five thousand. John however adds that this resulted in a move to make Jesus king (Jn. 6:15). The political aspect of Jesus' ministry is also seen in the accounts of the entry to Jerusalem and, of course, was the ostensible reason for Pilate's condemnation of him. What is seen here is the attractiveness of Jesus as a political leader who spoke with authority, such that when he repudiated this, the crowds turned dramatically against him.

Also in the same incident we note the natural attractiveness of Jesus as a provider of the material necessities of life. Thus, the crowds followed Jesus, but were met by an extensive rebuttal of that reason for following him (Jn. 6:25f). So whereas miracles are legitimate features of Jesus' ministry and so might be legitimate in Church life, their use as an appeal to join the Church must be questioned.

It would seem that when Jesus did meet basic human needs, he immediately drew a large crowd to himself but this was *not* the basis on which he himself appealed to men; and the response to the latter was much less dramatic!!

In contrast to the method of today's churches, it is striking that Jesus was rarely recorded as offering anything when he made his appeal. Rather he was concerned to show that following him would involve problems. The disciple must 'take up his cross' (Matt. 10:38, 16:34). His appeal is rather a direct command to obedience (eg. Matt. 28:19, the commission to his disciples) seen particularly in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). This is often expressed in the direct commands to repent (Matt. 3:2, 8 (of John the Baptist but echoed in Jesus (Matt 4:17, 18:2)), and particularly to follow him (Matt. 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 19:21), a significant emphasis in the light of McGavran's basic method. (McGavran's premise (e.g. 1959:24) is of getting converts (i.e. 'followers') into the Church and *then* teaching them. In this he is rather distorting the appeal of Jesus where following and obedience are really aspects of the same thing. He wants, rightly, to encourage movements of peoples to Christ, but in fact says very little on the basic point, which is *why* they come (cf. 1959:50f)).

The last example (Matt. 19:21) is one of the few where Jesus makes a promise; here it is of 'treasure in heaven' to the rich man who was urged to sell all. Likewise 'he who endures' is promised salvation after this life's troubles (Matt. 10:22). Even more rarely does Jesus offer anything in this life. An exception is Matthew 6:33 where the promise is however simply of the basic necessities. Even the promise of rest is

naturally in the context of the obedience of taking Jesus' yoke (Matt. 11:28).

What is so often apparent is the authority with which Jesus spoke (Lk. 4:31f.), although this is recorded as causing surprise rather than being appealing.

The examples so far quoted have come from the first gospel. Little can be added to this from Mark. Luke likewise adds little to the concept that Jesus simply commanded obedience, with the likelihood of suffering in this life (Luke 14:26ff.), but with the promise of a final salvation (Luke 6:35, 10:28, 12:8). It is unlikely that these promises can be seen as applicable to this life.

It is well known that the fourth gospel rather emphasizes the present reality of salvation. Thus the one who believes in Jesus *has* eternal life (Jn. 3:36, 6:47, 56), but often this life is seen as in the future (Jn. 8:51, 11:25). John also presents Jesus as commanding belief in himself, not in order to receive life at the present or in the future, but on the evidence of the facts (e.g. John 8:45, 14:11). For this reason, therefore, the miracles recorded in this gospel are referred to as 'signs'.

Like Jesus, the early Church is recorded as being markedly successful on a number of occasions. Example of such are the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37-41) or the second sermon of Peter (Acts 4:4). Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the response was often in the context of healing (Acts 3:1f; Acts 4:15-6), and at Pentecost, there was the emotional attraction of the unusual, and of course the political interest in the death of Jesus (Acts 2:22-3). It was such circumstances that presented fertile ground for the presentation of the gospel. Again however, there is no real suggestion that their appeal rested permanently on such things.

In the Pentecost sermon, Peter outlines the facts of Jesus, with no promise to the hearers. This convicted them, and Peter instructed them to repent (Acts 2:38), only then adding the matter of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit. The appeal is similar in the next sermon, being based on the offer of forgiveness, but adding the complimentary promise of destruction for those who refuse to listen and obey (Acts 3:19f). Similar motivation is expressed elsewhere (Acts 10:43, 13:38, 16:31). Where the basis of appeal is touched on elsewhere in the New Testament the message is the same. God commands repentance and obedience, simply on the basis that the message is true. Miracles may serve to substantiate the claim (Rom. 15:19, 1 Cor. 12:12, Gal. 3:5 etc.). (Incidentally this is also the case in the Old Testament. Guder (1985:10), 'When the called ones lose sight of the purpose of their calling, they begin to think that the calling was given so that they might be saved'.)

The New Testament picture is therefore consistently of a command to follow, with no this-worldly incentives offered. If anything, incentives are negative. Appeals, where they exist, are on the basis of an eschatological salvation. At the same time, the long-term appeal of the early church also likely resided in a real sense of belonging to a caring community, something seen in both prosperity churches and African independent churches, but which is often sadly lacking in the more traditional churches.

Nevertheless, the lesson to be learnt from today's successful churches is that this appeal cannot simply be transferred into different situations with different felt needs. Just as we cannot simply look at the social context, which will indeed have particular needs, probably not felt at a different time, so we cannot unthinkingly parrot the Biblical appeal, as it belongs to a different situation. What we must rather do is to look at what Christianity commands and offers as a total package, elements of which will be most relevant to particular individuals and particular situations, but all of which must be offered at all times if the Church is to adequately reflect what God has done for us in Christ.

Thus, the situation is not of a rejection of material benefit from belief, which may well be the felt need that will attract to Christ, nor a de-emphasis on the spiritual and eschatological in favour of the material, but both, and, moreover, both seen in the context of the demand that the Gospel makes.

The Office of Christ

A theological basis for this can be seen in the often neglected teaching on the office of Christ, which combines the roles of prophet, priest and king, which are the usual means through which God deals with humanity. What is evident is that prosperity churches, the African independent churches, and even the traditional churches have emphasized aspects of the appeal pertaining to only part of the office and neglected others, an approach which always leads to imbalance and error.

Firstly, Jesus and the Church have a prophetic function. Just as the Old Testament prophets, they demand a response from both individuals and society, a demand that comes with the full authority of God behind it. There is a call to repentance from sin and to a lifestyle acceptable to God.

Secondly, Jesus clearly had a priestly function. This is often centred on by traditional evangelical churches, which quite rightly stress the forgiveness that was achieved by the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross, and which can then be a powerful appeal once there is an awareness of sin. The Church likewise has a priestly function in society (1 Pet. 2:9), ministering both the message and compassion of God to a needy society. In particular, it shows that salvation is not simply a spiritual release from sin, but involves feeding the hungry, and other social functions, the exercise of which can be a powerful attraction into the Church. It is here that an appreciation of the felt needs of particular individuals and communities is so valuable as part of the appeal of the Church. At the same time, the neglect of this aspect has often resulted in the message of the Church being rejected as 'pie in the sky', and irrelevant in the face of pressing human needs.

Thirdly, Jesus is a king. I see the essence of this in the victory that he achieved in the resurrection and in which we participate by means of union with Christ (Rom. 6:5). This has two aspects relevant to the appeal to follow Christ. On the one hand, if we receive eternal life by union with Christ, this immediately means a real fellowship with each other. This is a real

basis for unity, giving a stronger bond than a oneness in emotional experience. Such leads naturally to a sharing, a 'koinonia', within the Church, evidenced for example in the Acts church. Such a care can be a real attraction into a community so different especially in comparison to the competitive individualism of the modern free market system.

On the other hand, the kingship of Jesus is only fully experienced eschatologically, when he comes to reign a second time. Until then, only aspects are experienced; salvation is partial in anticipation of fullness later. This means that although such things as healing may well be experienced today, the claims made by both prosperity churches and African independent churches are only fully legitimate in the future. At present, God may well respond to prayer, but in his sovereign will there can be no assurance of success. It cannot be legitimate to base a Christian appeal on the present receipt of such blessing as of right.

What is vital is that just as the role of Christ are to be seen as aspects of a united office, so the facets of the appeal of the Church are likewise aspects, the neglect of any of which leads to an imbalanced, even wrong appeal, leading to either lack of response or to response under misconception, either of which is a disaster. This is exactly what is being seen throughout the Church, whether prosperity cult, African independent church, traditional evangelical or liberal. Far better for a body which bears the name of 'Christian' to perceive the nature of her Lord, and to formulate her appeal accordingly, including all the relevant aspects.

Conclusion

It is inadequate to simply present the gospel as an offer of salvation. It is that, but it goes with the demand of the gospel, which is a demand to repent, to follow and to obey Christ. In this regard, it is not helpful to present the gospel simply as one alternative among many, as is fashionable in a pluralistic society. The preacher is not only asking but demanding, and can do that with the authority that comes from his position as a minister of God.

It is particularly inadequate to present the gospel as an offer of salvation to those who do not feel the need of salvation because they have little awareness of sin. Rather it is necessary to present the implications of the gospel which are relevant to the particular target group. (Of course, as in the early Church, with its Jewish background, or in the sixteenth century, salvation may in fact be the need that is most felt.) It must however be made clear that these are in fact implications (as Guder (1985:200) stresses); and that the full message includes both the offer of salvation and the need of obedience to God. In this way the danger of 'rice' Christians should be avoided.

A full appeal will not only benefit individuals, who are then, humanly speaking, more likely to respond; it will not only benefit the Church by stimulating growth. The Church has a responsibility to benefit the world, and it will do all these best when it reflects the nature of its Lord as prophet, priest and King.

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BIBLICAL PRIORITIES: THE CRY OF THE OPPRESSED

Bill Cotton

When rich and poor stand opposed to each other, [Jesus] never takes his place with the wealthier, but always stands with the poorer. He is born in a stable; and while foxes have holes and birds have nests, the son of Man has nowhere to lay His head . . . both the Christ, and also just as much the apostles after Him as the prophets before Him, invariably took sides against those who were powerful and living in luxury, and for the suffering and oppressed.

Abraham Kuyper

When the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah had reached its apogee, 'the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah' was heard by the Lord and moved him to destroy those cities. From then on 'Sodom and Gomorrah' become part of the biblical language for the destruction of evil. The casual reader will probably conclude that this outcry, which was 'so great and their sin so grievous', must be connected with the gross moral decadence which marked that people. The Christian reader may well feel it stands behind the demand for law and order, and for the divine wrath against immorality.

However, we must look beyond the immediate context for the meaning of the 'outcry' against Sodom. Za' aq, ze' aqa signifies 'to cry for help in time of distress'.¹ Most often the 'cry' is directed to God. One need no more than quote the following verses to illustrate this:

'Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground (Gen. 4:10 of Abel).

'When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry' (Gen. 27:34).

'The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help . . . came up to God . . . The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers." . . . There will be loud wailing (ze' aqa) throughout Egypt . . . and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead' (Ex. 2:23; 3:7, 9; 11:6; 12:30).

The word has about it the sense of bitterness, of deep personal distress, of crying for help. From this it will be seen that in the Sodom story the cause of the cry is