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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



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Christian Existence and the Mission of the Church



John Peter Lewis

Today's post-modernist culture has forced a new contextual reality upon the churches. The old modernist ways do not suffice anymore and new ways of doing local mission are needed. As these new changes occur the opportunity arises to reflect on the mistakes of the past and forge a new way grounded in a theology of the Word of God. As our environment is analyzed one can observe a Western culture that continues to excel in a growing obsession with itself and its consumer needs. Also important to it are its experiences, relationships, narratives and technology. There are important lessons to be learned from observing our new mission environment. In any place and time important cultural links need to be made between the gospel and culture. Problems arise, however, when older methods cease to be meaningful, when the science of evangelism amounts to shallow or poorly done theology, and a growing compliance to culture becomes pervasive. Donald Bloesch has wisely referred to this last phenomenon as the church's "capitulation to demoralizing forces within culture."¹

The time is right for change. Many churches now find that the results once dreamed of have not materialized. In any case, modernist approaches, with their rationalist structures, statistics, surveys and "God delivered" strategies, make little

sense to a post-modernist culture. Indeed, surrender to the needs of the world has only left a needs-oriented generation hungry for more and divinely justified in its quest for self-actualization. What is needed, in contrast, are churches that pride themselves on their faithfulness to Christ, and who seek to evangelize on the Bible's terms alone. The way forward can only be through a renewal based on the preaching of the Word and an accompanying theology of the Word. The church can only respond to the command of Scripture appropriately as it proclaims the message of the costly sacrifice of the Son of God, and the costly repentance and perseverance in faith required of all.

The foundation and center of this proposed renewal must be Jesus Christ. It is only in Christ that today's church can understand its true nature and the task that is before it. However, a return to the past is not recommended here. A church based on a quest for doctrinal elitism or stylistic superiority only robs the gospel of its heart, and is unlikely to survive in our post-modern world. What is needed is a theology of the Word of God that engages meaningfully with its mission environment. Therefore, today's church needs a relevant, thorough and passionate evangelical theology that is discerning of the culture it seeks to address.

It is for these reasons that I propose that Christians begin by considering their existence in the world as those who have been called to worship.

1. MISSION, ATONEMENT, AND THE CALL TO WORSHIP

The full realization of the human potential is not in having needs met, but is found entering into the presence of God to worship. In Hebrews chapter 10 we are told that through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the Christian has gained access into the heavenly places. There, drawing near to God, free of a guilty conscience and totally cleansed, there is a realization of what humanity has been created for. People were created to worship God. However, humanity is in a dilemma. There is an immense gap that exists between humanity and God that must first be bridged. The way across is found in the gospel

message, which must be the church's primary mission tool.

The Bible describes the human condition as being so corrupted by sin that no one is able to approach a holy God in worship, let alone exist in fellowship with him. However, a means to overcome this barrier is given. A sacrifice is needed to enable the participant to satisfy God's justice by making atonement for sin, which leads to forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation with God. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were temporary and non-permanent. For complete reconciliation with God a greater sacrifice is needed and this greater sacrifice has come in the form of Jesus Christ, God's own Son (Hebrews 9:1-15). Through Christ the Christian is qualified to approach God, enter into fellowship *with* him, and celebrate in worship *to* him. Christ's sacrifice was ultimately required because the penalty for sinning against a holy and infinite God is an infinite penalty. Christ, because of his divine nature, is infinite in capacity and therefore able to suffer an infinite penalty.² As F. L. Forlines has stated, he "had to be God to be able to redeem."³ He is the spotless and perfect offering who made the perfect and ultimate sacrifice. However, Christ offered himself for humanity as humanity's representative.

As fully human Christ was also able to fully represent humanity. As our representative he was able to perform "a work necessary to our approach to God."⁴ Christ's relationship to the human race, "and his consequent Incarnation, enabled him, and him alone, to *give complete expression*, under our penal conditions, to the submission of mankind to God, to make reparation to his law, and to put away sin from man."⁵ The early church Fathers were well aware of the importance of the Son's humanity to our salvation. They rightly saw the importance of the Son's humanity to the gospel since it speaks of a Lord who is fully present and engaged with his creation. This is why Origen stated that just as "death came through one man, so also the justification of life is through one man. Had he not assumed humanity, we would not have received such a benefit we have from the Logos."⁶ Methodius, bishop of Lycia, wrote: "As in Adam, all die, even so in Christ

all will be made alive.' For he bore flesh for no other reason than to set the flesh free and raise it up."⁷ Equipped with this message Christians today are called to go out into the world and engage with the world as disciples after God's own heart.

The motive for this act is not based on a concession from a generally wrathful God who is otherwise taken up with spiteful rage. The motive for God to act comes from his love, which best describes the true nature of his being. Walter Thomas Conner has observed that the "Cross of Christ is the pledge of God's love for a sinful and ruined race. As such, the cross represents an act of grace."⁸ The fellowship's motive for mission must also be love. A heartfelt desire for the lost is not the same as concern for the institution. A fellowship cannot witness effectively unless the hearts of the people reflect something of the heart of God and his love for the world that resulted in the sending of his one and only Son. The church must also be clear on what God requires of people.

What is required of humanity is repentance and faith. Indeed, John Calvin taught that faith and repentance are indissolubly connected.⁹ F. L. Forlines, has observed that in "repentance there is a change of mind. There is a change of opinion, viewpoint, or conviction."¹⁰ He has also, like Calvin, observed that repentance and faith are part of the same experience and event since repentance terminates in faith. "Repent stresses the fact that change is involved. Faith stresses the end to which change is directed."¹¹ Thomas Oden points to the paradox that exists between humble contrition and boldness in faith. However, Salvation only "draws near to those who, like Isaiah and Luther, most deeply experience the impossibility of standing in God's presence."¹²

Because of God's gracious and loving action, through the ultimate and representative sacrifice of Jesus Christ, people may approach a holy God. Having been forgiven of sin and cleansed of all unrighteousness, the repentant may approach their Lord in worship and enter into fellowship with him. Through Christ, in the community of faith, people find their true identity in an existence characterised by access to worship. Indeed, the primary task of evangelism is to call sinful

humanity to worship him alone. The way of a biblical faith should never be an attempt to lure people on the basis of their selfish desires. The costly sacrifice of Christ speaks of a grim reality that must be faced and responded to with a costly sacrifice of self in the form of repentance and faith (Matthew 10:35). This is well represented for God's people in the celebration of communion.

2. MISSION AND HOLY COMMUNION

Thomas Grantham, an early General Baptist, believed that it "was our Savior's design by this holy rite, to keep himself the better in the remembrance of his chosen disciples."¹³ He further believed that there were a number of benefits for the Christian community. Communion is a declaration of the gospel, which is the foundation of the church, the basis of its existence and its message of proclamation to the world. The Lord's Table is the place where Christians proclaim their faith and find strength to persevere in their faith. Communion leads the Christian to reflect on his or her new life in Christ, consider the need for confession, repentance and faith, the blessings of the New Covenant, and the hope of the age to come. Around the Lord's Table we become aware of our lives that have been called to fellowship and the task of mission before us. The celebration of communion, with its cup and bread, joins the believer with others in the community of faith in an act of togetherness that unites the Christian fellowship with Christ. It is a narrative re-enactment that unites believers with Christ both spatially and through time. At the Lord's Table the fellowship must physically join together and proclaim themselves together with Jesus around his table. At communion the fellowship identifies itself as disciples who gather with the Lord around his table to proclaim him as the sacrificial savior of the world. The communion narrative also joins Christians with Christ and his historical action of salvation. The narrative of communion is another means by which God graciously deals with his people. But it is also a bridge that has the potential to speak into the narrative of the world. The world lives out a narrative of sin, lostness and hopelessness. The Lord's Table

is a bold and effective challenge to the world that it must consider the lostness of its state, the message of communion, and the new way of life it so powerfully narrates.

However, Christ not only payed for sin but also overcame death so that all who enter into faith with him enter into a new life.

3. JUSTIFICATION, SANCTIFICATION AND MISSION

While proclamation is the church's primary tool for evangelism, holiness confirms that the words of the gospel are true. Jesus called upon his people to let their light shine before all, that they would see our good works and give praise to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

The Christian is justified by faith alone, but faith does not remain alone. As Donald Bloesch has so rightly stated: "We do not play a positive role in procuring our salvation, but we are made covenant partners by the Spirit of God in manifesting and celebrating this salvation."¹⁴ Bloesch also reminds us that Karl Barth rightly understood "satisfaction, justification and sanctification are aspects of the same event."¹⁵ Thomas Oden is also helpful when he describes justification and sanctification as comprising two aspects of one act of God's grace. "Justifying grace works *for* the sinner; sanctifying grace works *in* the penitent faithful. Whereas justifying grace erases guilt through forgiveness, sanctifying grace seeks to uproot the behavioral causes of guilt through the reshaping of human behavior."¹⁶ However, Christians will not be judged by God according to their works. We will be judged according to our new life in Jesus Christ and the salvation that he has won for us. As we have stated, faith and works cannot be separated. They both form part of the same existence of the regenerative Christian. Those who have been born again through Christ are both declared justified and empowered to grow and live as new creations in Christ. To separate works from faith is to assume that a branch can exist without the vine (John 15:5) or that fruit can be produced without the plant (Matthew 12:33), the plant without the roots (Romans 11:16) and the whole thing without first being planted (Matthew 15:13). The

gracious action of God provides the grounds for salvation, the means for salvation, and the subsequent life that results. Therefore Paul is able to state that Christians will give an account to God (Romans 14:12) and receive what is our due (2 Corinthians 5:10) because he had no conception of separating our works from God's initial gracious work in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:4-10). Indeed, harsh judgement will come upon every plant that the Father has not planted. (Matthew 15:13) What Paul's doctrine of accountability does state, however, is that the Christian, while declared righteous, is to live in righteousness and pursue holiness (1 Peter 1:16). Indeed, the early Christians were identified by the measure of their love for each other. Tertullian wrote that it "is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. They say, 'See how they love one another!' . . . And they are angry with us, too, because we call each other brothers."¹⁷

The Christian fellowship, therefore, is to be characterized by a narrative existence that is lived expressing its new birth in Jesus Christ. Its corporate love, in the form of grace, justice, service and sacrifice, should stand in contrast to the environment around it, but not to deter the world. The Christ narrative of the church must call the world to account for its sin as it exposes the world to its emptiness, selfishness and compulsion to self-harm. The Christian church is called to the discipline of proclaiming the living reality of Jesus Christ. Now more than ever, propositions and dictums will not suffice. The Christian today is compelled by the demands of an experiential world to consider his or herself as not only a proclaimer of the gospel, but also the salt and light of the gospel (Matthew 5:13-16). Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right when he wrote that "spiritual love proves itself in that everything it says commends Christ."¹⁸ For all of this we depend on the work of God in and through us.

4. THE HOLY SPIRIT, FELLOWSHIP AND MISSION

There can be no effective outreach without the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a gathered fellowship. It is only by the Spirit that saving faith can come about. John Calvin

taught that it is the Holy Spirit who moves sinners to faith, which is the acceptance of what has been done for them in Christ.¹⁹ Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism contends that the role of the Holy Spirit is to lead people to faith and repentance, enlighten and teach, unite the fellowship to Christ, comfort and strengthen, and "create in believer's hearts new feelings, desires and inclinations."²⁰ The church can only gather for worship and ministry because the Spirit draws people together. The Christians gathered in fellowship are to exist as witnesses to their new life in Jesus Christ, so that as people meet with them they are in contact with the regenerative work of the Spirit in a believer's heart.

The corporate witness of a fellowship alive to the Holy Spirit remains a powerful instrument of God in the spreading of the gospel, and in seeing people come to faith in Jesus Christ. John Wesley believed that it should be considered typical for the life of the believer to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Where the church is filled with the Spirit, taught Wesley, scriptural Christianity comes alive. "Where the mind of Christ is bearing the fruits of the Spirit and people are actually walking in the way of faith, there is scriptural Christianity."²¹ A fellowship filled with the Spirit will engage in exceptional acts of love, service and sacrifice. This will take place both in the fellowship and out in the community they seek to reach with the gospel. This fellowship of people will thirst for righteousness, while at the same time be conscious of its own sin and need for repentance. They will have a passion for the Word, a deep commitment to grow spiritually and long to enter into prayer. They will have a strong group awareness of their union with Christ, and seek to be fruitful in their corporate witness and ministry together. Consequently, there will be an awareness of gifts and their use for the building up of the body of Christ. The people who gather in this fellowship will not come seeking to receive as a customer, but spiritually dressed and ready to serve as priests in the Temple of the Holy Spirit. This is the church called for by the Word, and while the church often fails, the call continues. As God's people respond to this vision it engages in a Holy Spirit sanctioned and empowered

witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ that will not seek to merely "attract the unchurched" but lead those who have been condemned in their sin through the path of mortification, repentance, faith and regeneration; a complete baptism of the Holy Spirit. The living fellowship of the Holy Spirit is called to be a narrative of the people of God in living proclamation to the heavy-burdened stories of this world. The challenge of the church today is to find means to meaningfully connect these two narratives. This begins when God's people start moving out beyond their safe havens and meet with the people they seek to reach. Instead of learning to welcome we must go out and be welcomed by them, just as Paul ventured into Athens, sought to understand the people, and was invited to speak (Acts 17). Our motive is to be the love of God, our message is Jesus Christ and our means is the Holy Spirit working through a faithful people.

Author

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Notes

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