

## SECOND RESPONSE TO THE LAING LECTURE 1994

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Thank you for the privilege of being able to offer a response to the Laing Lecture 1994. I see my role less in terms of historical comment—I'm not a church historian—and more in terms of contemporary application. I would like to underline one or two comments that I feel are the most significant for us today.

I firstly welcome Dr Kreider's link between worship and evangelism. I do believe that worship can give the inspiration and motivation to witness. Bishop John V. Taylor once said that 'witness is praise that is overheard'. I think that's a healthy approach to witness. But I think we do need to recognise that not every form of worship will so motivate; it has to be worship that is both transcendent and world-related. Also, we need to distinguish worship as motivation, and worship as the primary context of evangelism, which it is too often for most of us. By and large our evangelism tends to be too ecclesiastical, a form of in-drag rather than outreach. And I welcome the emphasis on friendship as the key, coming from the early church.

Secondly, I welcome the stress on orthopraxis rather than primarily on orthodoxy. Those churches considered worthy of registering for Reinhard Bonnke's 'Minus to Plus' programme in Holy Week 1994 are not those who are living out the Sermon on the Mount or demonstrating reconciliation through the kiss of peace, but those able to give intellectual assent to the Evangelical Alliance basis of faith. I hasten to add that I am able to do that myself. Yet it is a *living* orthodoxy that is important, and literally speaking, of course, orthodoxy means 'right worship'.

Thirdly, I also welcome the emphasis on the catechumenate. This is being emphasised more and more today, certainly in the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican churches; and the Methodist Church is reemphasising the class movement of Wesley's day. Research has shown that conversion is more often a process than a crisis, and that the average person may take four years to come to faith. Canon Robert Warren has said that in Christian nurture we too often give people a 'bolt-on spirituality' rather than one that transforms the whole of life. Or in Dr Kreider's words, 'we need to deconstruct the old world and construct a new one'.

Fourthly, Dr Kreider paints a glowing picture of how the pre-Constantine church was able to witness effectively because, under

pressure of persecution, it had to be a gathered church, and, as a result, had a pure lifestyle. In passing, I wonder if the picture he has painted is not a little too glowing. But my main point is that both past and recent history suggest that to seek to be a gathered church on its own can be inadequate, can lead to a narrow world-denying ghetto existence, rather than a warm lifestyle that attracts. I used to have a Strict Baptist secretary who, in her childhood, wasn't allowed to listen to the radio, and it wasn't until two or three days afterwards that she heard that the Second World War had broken out. There are problems and limitations with being too inward-looking. Somehow the church, I believe, needs to be saintly, without falling into either the extreme of being secularised or separatist. It's good that Dr Kreider emphasised that the communities he was describing were not introverted.

I think he might have dealt a little with cultural and sociological factors in the church growth of the pre-Constantine period. They are important, as well as lifestyle, and can be evidenced in the church growth pattern in Singapore and Korea today, for example.

Lastly, I am grateful that Dr Kreider recognises that we live in a post-Christian era, and can't go back to an idyllic (at least in some ways) pre-Christendom context. I believe that where there are vestiges of Christendom such as folk religion, we should not lightly reject what could be positive bridges to the Gospel. In rural areas, for example, there is often a relationship between church and community that is certainly not pre-Constantine, but nevertheless can be beneficial.

He mentioned cathedrals—perhaps a little negatively—but they are visited by millions of tourists, and as part of the Decade of Evangelism, we're producing evangelistic literature which will, for a significant number of people, help to turn them from tourists to pilgrims. So I would want to plead in the words of Robert Runcie, that where there are positive benefits remaining from the Christendom era, we aim to have a church 'without hard edges'.