

A Clear Witness

We are facing, within this present season of our society, huge challenges. These challenges are not simply due to Brexit and geopolitical fractures and fissures across the world, let alone an increasing secularisation of society at large. I refer, rather, to challenges within the church in dealing with issues for which I feel she is poorly prepared, especially in dealing with issues of sexual and gender identity and practice, but also bearing wider implications.

In this paper I seek to highlight considerations which I have looked for yet found to be absent in current debate, as convictions and practices, integrally part of historic Christianity, confront the fast changing social mores and expectations around us. Convictions and practices which had been held as precious for two millennia are now being challenged and questioned with a rigour that is hard to deal with when Christians are not always clear of the bases on which they might find, form and articulate a response that is both righteous and just.

While I personally come with a perspective that is firmly rooted in these historic, biblical convictions and practices, I would want to disassociate myself from both aggressive and acrimonious polemics. Rather, I seek to make a contribution that invites a conversation among biblical, baptistic disciples that fosters responsible evaluation of and engagement with moral and ethical challenges that are hugely important to people, precious and loved and cared for both by ourselves and, more intensely, by God.

I am concerned with an absence, in both debate and literature, of certain theological and ethical considerations that are deeply embedded in my own understanding of Christian life and discipleship. These, profoundly biblical and integral to an inherited Christian tradition, seem to me as necessary and essential components to any mature and genuine debate. I would like to see these introduced into discussions. I believe this would be helpful to all concerned and therefore I offer them to you now.

These considerations are sixfold:

- Faith is allegiance
- Grace is costly
- Discipleship is cruciform
- Church needs to be real community
- Christians are countercultural (resident aliens)
- We contend against powers and principalities, not flesh and blood

1. Faith is Allegiance

Today, we are all deeply implicated in a culture and tradition of intellectual faith. Not just from one or other side of ethical and moral debate. We all are part of it. To read, reflect on, deliberate and come to a deeper appreciation of the Scriptures, let alone other literature, is writ large in our history; and society has benefitted from it, right back to when the 'three R's' were first taught to children in our schools.

But it's a problem when 'belief' and 'faith' come to be treated as synonyms. When a response to the explosive revelation of light, life and love, injected into the heart of the Cosmos in and through Jesus Christ, comes to reside in mind more fully than in heart, body and soul. When the viability of faith is reduced to the stage of sterile apologetics and detached dogma.

An over-emphasis on intellectual reflection and validation crosses into even more dangerous territory when it is married to an autonomous individualism: when the preferences, propensities and passions of self become the centre of an intellectual process which is unaccountable to the scrutiny of society, constituted as people who are interdependent persons. Where the gods of individualism and self-determination takes centre stage.

Take these two together, the tyranny of a sterile intellectualism and a strident individualism, and we concoct a curious cocktail, one that is often sipped prior to engagement in ethical reflection. This is far from the baptist way, where communal discussion and discernment is called for, to combat the madness of the megalomaniac genius or the deranged, false prophet. The baptist way is one where there is real debate and the opportunity to listen and sense the heart, body and soul of Christ's humanity expressed among us, resonating in and through the collective attention and consciousness of God's integral mission, expressed through an integrated, Christ centred discourse as church together.

For such a process to work, we have to grasp the nature of faith as allegiance. Belief and faith are not, in the language of expression found the Holy Bible, synonyms. Faith is something that belongs to far more than to a mind separated from heart, soul and body. Faith is the expression of the life of Jesus Christ found within and among us: it is the desire to participate in His presence, purposes and power. It is an integral belonging that leads us into owning ethical imperatives, inseparable from the pleasure and preferences of our God. Faith arises as the character of the community God in Christ calls to be His own, a window into His goodness and glory. Faith is displayed in the humanity of Jesus Christ's disciples gathered together.

Faith is allegiance to this God. This is no new idea. It is the essence, in the Old Testament, of Israel's relationship to the Covenant Redeemer who calls Abram and his descendants on a path of obedience, marked by conformity to His ways. It is the relationship, in the New Testament, that Jesus builds with His disciples and that they learn to cultivate among one another. It was such an appreciation of faith, as allegiance to Jesus Christ, that led to the martyrdom of the first Christians who refused to express a higher allegiance to Caesar.

My sexuality and the way I employ it, as a baptist Christian, demands that I seek to express such an integral part of my being as an expression of this allegiance to Jesus Christ, in his aspirations, attitudes and actions. In a way that is consonant with the narrative of God's commands to His people, patent in both Old and New Testament Scriptures. To act otherwise is to act outwith faith. What does such an understanding of faith require of us?

This perspective is the first that I would ask to be woven into conversation, as people explore ethical and moral issues. What is the pleasure of God, shown to and expected of the community of Israel and the early church? What was the attitude to a person's sex and

sexuality expected among the people of God, in Old and New Testament and in the early history of the church? Such questions are essential ones for those who follow the baptist way.

2. Grace is costly

Christmas and Easter, in their different seasons and styles, can seem far apart. Yet, in essence, they celebrate and declare the same reality: the costly grace of God. Both show the depths that true love will plunge, in order to invest in and give to the 'other'. Where God is the giver, in sending the light of life and key of Creation, His own Son, diving into the morass of mankind's demonised confusion, darkness and death.

Great passages of Scripture demand mention here: the declaration of our Father's love for us, in **John 3.16-17**; and our Saviour's manifestation of this love, in **Philippians 2.6-11**. This is how Grace is costly. It is the outpouring of pure love by God, birthed in the heart of God. It comes at such great cost. The self-emptying of the Son of God, entering and taking to Himself our flesh and blood (**John 1.14**). The offering up of Jesus Christ's flesh and blood as sacrifice, in our place, at the Cross of Calvary.

The costliness of grace, for the disciple of Jesus Christ, must be more, however, than a cause for composing a doxology. Here is a deep root for resourcing a truly Christian ethic. To show grace and to be a means of manifesting God's grace to others will be costly to the giver. The Apostle Paul understood this, in speaking of his mission of love, when he embraces the need to, 'fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church' (**Colossians 1.24**).

That grace is costly is a bedrock for Christian ethics and a deep source for acts of holy love. Both constrained and commissioned by God's costly grace, the man or woman who has died with Christ and now lives for Him, in His faith, is caught up in the swell of God's intentional and irresistible love. Is it possible to live a life that conducts the flow of such love, as a conduit, without knowing great, personal cost? I think not. The sacrifices to be made by the man or woman, who seeks to see life with the mind of Christ, will be many. There may be mistakes, but there will also be a course chartered through the tempestuous seas of life that will demand a putting to death of self – the acts of mortification – in order to allow love and its practical expression to abound. In this regard, there is no more meaningfully missional passage in Scripture than **2 Corinthians 5**.

There is a such a gulf between ethics and morality issuing out of Christian grace, costly grace and the perception of loving grace; and perception of costless grace as free grace, easy grace, surrounding us in much contemporary, church culture. When did it start? I suspect it became endemic after late-nineteenth century revivalism became divorced, in the twentieth century, from a call to holiness and repentance as the essential partner of faith. When faith became commodified and salvation became the biggest free offer of all time! When confession of Jesus as Lord became replaced by a mere acceptance of him as a personal Saviour.

When costly grace is replaced by cheap grace, there is no demand. It is easy surrender and capitulation to the elixir of religion. Cheap grace is an invitation to a life of religious delusion

that costs nothing and gives nothing. Church dies as church when this is the message, a man-made fabrication and poor imitation of the real thing.

When facing the deep desires of our own being, including our personal sexuality, we all would do well to remember that God's grace is costly. Costly grace brings and conveys authentic love. All true expression and pursuit of a Christian ethic, whether by a single person or a congregated community, will have a personal cost to pay if it is to authentically convey and live out an ethic that reflects the glory and goodness of God.

3. Discipleship is cruciform

*"For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."
I Corinthians 2:2 (NKJV)*

For Christians everywhere, as for the Apostle Paul, the Cross of Christ stands at the centre of understanding God's call to faith and His gracious invitation to us, that we might know the forgiveness and restoration that God summons us into, out of His holy love. An invitation into knowing, not simply about the Cross, but an intimacy of sharing with Jesus Christ in His crucifixion. Discipleship is cruciform.

The Cross draws us into the intensity of God's love, for us and for all His creation. It is the place where costly grace comes to be fully expressed. The Cross is a place of substitutionary sacrifice, where Jesus willingly bears the consequence of human sin and failing in our place (**Romans 3.25**): yet the Scriptures do not stop there, in what they want us to see of costly grace worked out and implemented in our lives. We are to celebrate and know the power of the Cross, as Jesus entered into and experienced what it brought to Him. In and through what Jesus entered and endured, there is the outflow of God's healing for the nations – the touch of wholeness ministered into our lives (**Matthew 8.16-17**). There is a maturing and a perfecting of His humanity – and therefore of ours – in and through his pursuit along the path of obedience (**Hebrews 2.10-11; 5.7-9**). Such is that desire for a deeper knowing of this, that the Apostle Paul can declare, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (**Galatians 2:20 NKJV**). Discipleship is cruciform.

Jesus taught this before Paul longed for it. He taught his disciples to disown their own lives in order to discover life, through the way of the Cross. This echoes throughout the first three Gospels (**Matthew 16.24; Mark 8.34; Luke 9.23**), with the 4th Gospel emphasising that this way is the path of true fruitfulness and effectiveness, to be found and expressed, in our lives (**John 12.24**). Discipleship is cruciform.

But why the Cross? Why such a need for entry into and identification with His death in this way, that we are summoned to through baptism (**Romans 6.3**)? The answer is found again with Paul, who longs, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." (**Philippians 3:10-11 NKJV**). Because discipleship that is cruciform is discipleship that is infused and empowered with the Spirit who demonstrates

authenticity, enabling resurrection reality to be expressed now, in and through our lives (**Romans 6.4**).

Ethical challenges and moral dilemma will be overwhelming issues whenever wrestled with by a church that has not grasped the significance and necessity of cruciform discipleship. It is simply not enough to debate and to be clear over doctrine: theories change nothing and empower no one.

But for those who set out to know Jesus Christ, and Him crucified? To those who embrace the beatitudes of **Matthew 5** as a way of living, not just believing? For those who see Christ's way of dying not simply something to gawk at but a reality to be entered into? For such people, there will be a discovery of a power that comes through the Holy Spirit that will, indeed, lift them to new levels of intentional, sacrificial and effective holy living, as the Apostle celebrates in prayer and expects of disciples (**Ephesians 1.18-21**).

Are you possibly wearied with 'spectator orthodoxy' and the extremes of harsh or impotent ethics that issue from it? Are you a little disillusioned with 'Holy Spirit lite' living? Look in a new way to discipleship as cruciform.

So far

In the first three sections, I have sought to lay out some features of a biblical, Christ-centred theology - 'Faith is allegiance', 'Grace is costly' and 'Discipleship is cruciform' - that appear to me to be largely detached from and absent in much present, ethical discussion and debate over critical issues. This is problematic, for where discussion does not start by affirming the passion and preferences of God and the nature of discipleship fashioned by the heart of God, such is likely to lead to conclusions that predicate neither faithful discipleship nor a just and righteous witness to the Gospel. Discussion needs to be well grounded in a revelation of God in Christ, convictions and practices brought together in justice and righteousness, proving the healing and saving action of God's holy love.

The relationship between church doctrine and ethical practices, in countries that hold to a legacy of 'Christendom' culture, is not necessarily a happy one or helpful one, as we try and rectify this problem. Here, I am thinking primarily of ecclesial traditions shaped out of Western Europe, in both their Roman Catholic and Protestant expressions. Traditionally, Systematic Theology and its three sub-disciplines of Comparative Religion, Philosophy of Religion and Christian dogmatics, have been separated from the sphere of 'Practical Theology', with ethics as a sub-set of this appended, poor cousin. Such a separation of ethics from substantive theology has not encourage the development of a robust ethic, rooted in radical allegiance to the God of costly grace, who calls His children into cruciform discipleship, in the way of Jesus Christ.

This inherited deficiency has, certainly, been challenged and countered in many theological writings over the last half-century; but it seems to me that there has been far less change and progress at a popular level, worked out in local church. How has this detachment of the declared revelation of God's character and purposefulness from practiced, ethical and moral behaviour happened? I would suggest at least two reasons that featuring in my own

context. On the one hand, in the constructing of classic, Christian theology within Christendom churches from the time of the Emperor Constantine, we find an collusion and covenant of non-interference between church and State in matters of politics and social practice. Religious affiliation and social practices are, consequently, for many people, held apart. On the other hand, because of a popular form of evangelicalism that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, when dispensationalist theories stressed that we live in a 'dispensation of grace' and not a 'dispensation of works', a message was projected that was strong on believing the right things and weak on everything else. Dispensational teaching could justify ignoring or, worse, repudiating both Jesus' and also Pauline ethical injunctions - and thereby ignoring, of course, most Old Testament teaching as well. All of this fosters extremes of either legalism or antinomian cultures in contemporary church.

I am persuaded that the ethical practices of Christians need to be better rooted in Christian doctrine that is both biblical and Christ-centred. Only then will we be properly equipped to face, in Christ's name, the moral and ethical challenges of our time. Faith lived out as allegiance to the Christ met with in the Biblical text; an appreciation that God's grace at work in our lives will inevitably be costly to us, in personal terms, as people; an understanding that cruciform living is the default state of Christian being. Such a rigorous re-appraisal of what it means to bear the name, 'Christian', is a necessary starting point that combats and stands over against a consumerist, costless, romanticised version of Christian living, morality and ethics.

4. Church needs to be real community

Perhaps one of the most used and least defined words that occur today is, 'community'. The contemporary quest of building, nurturing and rescuing the practice of community in 1st world societies does suggest that not all is well with it. Community, across our wider society, is recognisably under threat. Cultures of individualism and consumerism, together with patterns of social and economic migration and marginalisation, seem allied to the breakdown of the extended family and local interdependence to conspire against community.

This, inevitably, translates into Christian culture. The development of vocabulary used to describe church as community, in itself, tells its own tale in plotting a course: Believers', Sacramental, Missional, Seeker Sensitive, Without walls, Fresh Expressions, Inclusive.

In the early years of church, in the Apostolic era, the church was a self-identifying community of Christian disciples. Their together life was catalysed by their shared allegiance to the resurrected Christ as their Lord: they were a community of disciples, of believers and followers of Jesus Christ and His teachings. Church as Believers' church is an emphasis owned among both anabaptists and baptistic Christians today.

As church became socially acceptable, following the conversion of the Roman emperor, it became functional for wider society: a sacramental presence. An understanding of church as sacramental, mediating grace into the wider world, through the recognised sacraments (and

an unofficial one: preaching). This understanding is still central to Christendom model churches, such as Orthodox, Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian.

In the 2nd half of the 20th century, where church attendance in the UK has plummeted, we have seen a new vocabulary emerge: Missional, Seeker Sensitive, Without walls, Fresh Expressions, Inclusive. These adjectives, in themselves, show a progression in what has been a creative and sometimes desperate attempt to engage and attract people into Christian faith. However, all this leaves us with a fundamental question: 'what do we mean, when we speak of community'?

Let me suggest a working hypothesis: that Christian community is characterised as a group of people, holding together convictions and practices that demonstrate allegiance to Jesus as Lord, owning an understanding of costly grace and committed to cruciform discipleship. This is the measure of our distinctiveness, of what we have to offer to the world. It particularises all that we mean when we seek to articulate good news of love, righteousness and justice brought to mankind from God, in and through Jesus Christ.

Our affirmation, in the title of this section, goes further. Church needs to be a real community. What do we mean by that? Simply this: developing people of convictions and practices requires more than an occasional meeting once a week, where attendance is predominantly passive and non-participative. Before we begin to reach out to people, we have to look at the quality of what we are reaching out from. Do we intentionally strategise how we might practice what is preached? Do we pursue practices that show the character of God, revealed in Scripture and met with in Jesus Christ? Are these what we are know for? If, we are not part of a real, Christian community, our attempts at witness are problematic, for the proof of the pudding can only be in the eating. It was, after all, Jesus who said, 'by their fruit you shall know them'.

5. Christians are countercultural (resident aliens)

Or are we?

- a. We are shaped by real community and our experiences of it. How we self-identify as well as how we behave will be, in large measure, the product of effective community nurture. The challenge for us is whether, in our local setting, we are pursuing a church culture that recognises the holy love of God. The God whom, according to the Holy Scriptures, is fully revealed, in His glory and goodness, in Jesus Christ?
- b. We are all informed and influence by a wider community, as well as any Christian community we are part of. The question is, 'which influence will be more formative?' Are we intentionally seeking to build local, relational communities of Christians, offering people a distinctive community, separate from the world around us?
- c. To have an effective and fruitful Christian community, our practice of community needs to be intentionally countercultural. Our allegiance is to the invasive, penetrating and transforming God of the Gospel, revealed through Old and New Testaments.

There has to be a conscious disavowal of false gods, who are the governing powers and principalities, in the cultures and contexts of our societies where we live. What is to be distinctive, in terms of convictions and practices, of the church we belong to, over against the world we live in?

- d. There has to be a rethinking of what it means to be 'relevant' to our surrounding society: a relevance that is not syncretistic, adopting and embracing values and practices that are imperatives within the wider society to which we belong but contrary to the imperatives of holy love. The convictions and practices of Godless, contemporary living need to be strangely foreign to those people who follow and are constrained by the presence, attitude, purpose, actions and powerful intervention of the God of Israel, present among us.
- e. Christian witness and evangelism, manifesting both costly grace and cruciform discipleship, will cause a community to shine with light to those who live in darkness. It will always seem alien to those who serve the gods of this age: Christians are called to be resident aliens in a foreign land. Do others around us see that we live and act as strangers and aliens in a foreign land? For therein lies a large part of our credibility, living with faith in Jesus.

6. We contend against powers and principalities, not flesh and blood

I am a Christian today because I was confronted with the merciful presence, purity and power of the holy love of God, through his Son, Jesus Christ. Since discovering the present reality of Jesus Christ, it has been my experience that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an invasive and destructive power: Jesus Christ invades Godless philosophies and ways of living, overcoming the power and destroying the works of the devil.

I observe that there is, around us, a spiritual dimension – powers and principalities – in and through which a very real personal, power of evil – the devil – seeks to govern and dominate the lives of men and women. Jesus Christ sets people free from this. Jesus' ministry, during his time on Earth, was punctuated by casting out demons from people, healing the sick and teaching with authority. His follower, Paul, would declare, "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." (**Romans 15:18-19**).

Working and witnessing in today's secular environment, it is all too easy to lose sight of this dimension of Gospel reality. When it is lost sight of, however, church becomes sick and ineffective. It has to be emphasised, therefore, that it is by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, bursting into and working in the lives of Christian, that a bedrock to meaningful Christian witness is established. Healthy Christian living and effective discipleship formation involves discovering the purifying power of God at work in our lives, challenging, changing and transforming us.

Challenged and changed by God: this is the kind of people that Christians are called to be. We constantly need to develop ethics that demonstrate love, show mercy and do justice, on the basis of lives that are experiencing the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit, enabled for life and ministry in the way of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean, for you, to experience the power of God at work in your life, enabling you to overcome the devil: to contend against powers and principalities, not flesh and blood? What does it mean, for you, to seek purity and holiness manifested in and through your own life and that of the church? We live in a world where people are crying out in need of this help: who will help them and stand with them, that they may know the power of the Gospel released into their lives, to overcome the principalities and powers that would destroy them?

This dimension has to be part of any conversation we have, among Bible believing Christians, when discussing how we live and deal with our sexuality and gender. Unless we can address the Bible's call to know the transforming power of God's holy love in these aspects of our life, as well as in others, leading us into the pursuit of purity and consecrated living, we will fail to be either helpful to people or faithful to our Lord, Jesus Christ.

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