

Aspects of Evangelism: 6

A Key Theological Issue

In my previous articles I have dealt with aspects of our church culture which tend to inhibit effective evangelism. In this final article I turn to a theological issue which I think is very pertinent to our Diocese and which bears on the very core of the good news we are called to share.

Over the last 100 years or so influences have emerged within Anglicanism which, in my view, threaten the centrality of the cross and which will, if not challenged, tend to inhibit the work of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the gospel.

Firstly, there is the continuing, though declining, influence of 'Liberal Protestantism'. Liberal Protestantism sought to accommodate the Christian faith to the sceptical intellectual climate of post-enlightenment Europe and America. The focus of the New Testament was shifted from the cross and resurrection to the teachings of Jesus. The cross became simply the demonstration of the self denial and sacrifice which Jesus taught. The resurrection was seen not as an event in history but as a 'spiritual' event or in terms of the survival of the memory of Jesus. The Kingdom of God was understood in purely ethical terms and separated from 'crude' ideas of atonement. The message of the Cross on the Hill was replaced by the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. The work of the liberal scholars has been extensively criticised from theological and epistemological perspectives but its influence lives on in the secular world and in some theological circles. Perhaps the best comment ever made on the work of these scholars is contained in Tyrrell's epigram 'The liberal German scholars of the late nineteenth century looked into the well of history to find the historical Jesus and found there reflected the pale image of themselves.'

A second influence which may have contributed to the situation we now experience is a distorted emphasis on the doctrine of the incarnation. Since the publication of the *Lux Mundi* essays (1889) incarnational theology has had a significant influence. To be sure the doctrine of the incarnation preserves vital insights - primarily, of course, that in Christ God dwelt with us and identified with us - and these insights hold a number of important implications for our understanding of the work of Christ and the life and mission of the church. However, it must never be forgotten that the early church came to its confession that Jesus Christ is both God and man in the light of the cross and resurrection. In the New Testament the incarnation is never put forward as an 'event in itself' - it is always seen in relation to the cross. In the light of the emphasis which the New Testament puts on the atonement (note the very early statement of the Gospel in I Corinthians 15), theologies which focus on the incarnation (and thus make it the *basis* for mission) must be questioned.¹

A third, and more recent influence amongst some liberal clergy is the shift to a creation centred spirituality² fostered by the emergence of what is known as theological monism. Theological monism challenges the traditional Christian confession of the transcendence of God and the distinction between God and creation. While the historical roots of this movement go back

¹ An example of this tendency may be found in Janet Hodgson's essay 'Decade of Transformation'. While this essay has some very useful insights, in the end her view of evangelism is deficient because it is based on a theology which is focussed on the incarnation and which virtually disregards both the atonement and the precedent of the apostolic preaching of the cross. Janet Hodgson, 'Decade of Transformation - Proclaiming, Celebrating and Following Christ as the Paradigm of Change in People, Church and Society', in *By Word and Deed - Sharing the Good News through Mission*, London: Church House Publishing, 1992.14 - 32.

²See Matthew Fox, 'Creation-Centred Spirituality', in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield, 99.

further, its entry into Anglican consciousness can be traced to Bishop J.A.T. Robinson's book, Honest to God.³ Robinson's book was an attempt to re-construct Christian faith for sceptical Western minds in the 1960's. Stephen M. Smith comments:

*What was (and is) striking about the bishop's book was his use of the term 'projection' for the orthodox (that is, Christian) worldview. He claimed that belief in a transcendent God the Father was 'a projection, an idol' (p. 41) that it was no longer persuasive or even believable and needed to be replaced.*⁴

To get behind this "projection" (which was, of course, the traditional scriptural view!) Robinson suggested we need to see beyond what he called the Bible's 'prescientific mythology' (for example, the resurrection) to 'existential truths of self understanding'.⁵ This also allowed a revision of the traditional conception of God. God is no longer to be thought of as a transcendent and personal Trinity but as the '... ecstatic character of *this world*' (whatever that means!) (p. 56). At the time Archbishop Michael Ramsay challenged Robinson with the comment that he appeared 'to reject the concept of a personal God as expressed in the Bible and the Creed.'⁶ However, this kind of thinking continues to be promulgated in some theological colleges and through the writings of Professors John Macquarrie and Sallie McFague and, at a more popular level, by the writings of Bishop John Spong and Matthew Fox.

Each of these influences have, in my view, resulted in a retreat from the historical reality (and the preaching) of the cross and resurrection - a retreat into the realm of ideas and principles - which do not have the power to transform our worldview in the way that the New Testament demands. I am suggesting that for lay people the consequence of this has been confusion about the faith, a lack of power and direction in life and that there has been a consequent inhibiting of the work of the Holy Spirit in their own lives and in the sharing of the gospel.

The gospel does not present us with an illustration of timeless principles - in the gospel we are confronted by the love and power of the living God in the crucified and risen Christ. This is the 'offence of the gospel' but also the power of the gospel. If we lose this focus - as perhaps some parts of the Anglican Church have - then we should not be surprised to find a church in decline. Colin Craston, Chair of the Anglican Consultative Council, has suggested that in this Decade of Evangelism, '... the time is ripe to redress an imbalance in Anglican theology' and give new attention to the centrality and meaning of the atonement.⁷ Alister McGrath puts forward this challenge:

*The cross is deeply embedded at every level of the Christian tradition, both as the primal event of faith and the symbolic expression of that faith . . . It is time for Christianity to break free from the social and cultural prison in which it has been for so long a secret prisoner, and return to that primal event of faith, to discover in it a liberating, critical faith, charged with a vitality far exceeding the insipid endorsement of liberal cultural values which passes as 'Christianity' in much of the western world.*⁸

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³ Stephen Smith in Alvin Kimel, ed., Speaking the Christian God. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 261.

⁴ Ibid, 262. The parenthetical references are to J. A. T. Robinson, Honest to God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

⁵ The hermeneutical strategy offered by Rudolph Bultmann

⁶ Ibid., 263 - 264.

⁷ Colin Craston, By Word and Deed - Sharing the Good News through Mission, xiv.

⁸ A.E. McGrath, The Enigma of the Cross, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 22.

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