

The Church of the Future

In the Introduction, we suggested that the church of today could be compared to a transistor radio which had drifted off frequency, and which needed to be retuned. We have proposed how this retuning might take place, by looking at Jesus' closing instructions to his disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel. We have paid particular attention to his commands to his disciples in the gospels, since he said that the next generation of disciples was to observe those commands. Our argument has been that this instruction also applies to Christian believers today.

There is one further application of this retuning to be addressed. Recently I borrowed a car which had an old push button radio. I soon located the station number I wanted, but I found that the sound quality was poor, so I rotated the dial as delicately as I could, but failed to get it any better. The sound kept coming and going as I drove along. In addition to general hiss and crackle, at times a marked fluttering effect would take over, starting slowly and speeding up until the peaks and troughs of volume finally merged into a steady signal for perhaps half a minute. Then the process would begin again. Alternatively, we might pass under a bridge, which would obliterate all sound. Changing gear also seemed to affect the music. I soon came to the conclusion that it wasn't the tuning but the radio that was at fault. It had looked very unpromising from the start.

This experience of poor quality sound from a radio can be applied to our analogy with the church. It brings us to a plea for Hi-fidelity to Jesus' commands. As well as majoring on the instructions he gave, which we have tried to address in this book, it seems good to propose that in addition, the church should lay aside activities that Jesus never called for, at any rate for the foreseeable future. They may be good things in themselves, but the church of Jesus Christ should concentrate on doing God's things, not good things, it seems to me. In my view, anything less than God's plan of things serves as distortion.

If acted on, this proposal would have a radical effect. We can see this from looking at what actually happens in church life at present. I can only speak with authority about the dozen churches that I have been a member of during my life. Judging from them, an observer would conclude that while there are all kinds of activities which may take place in and around churches, the central activity of the church is to meet together on Sunday morning, and spend around an hour worshipping God in word and song, hearing two readings from the Bible and listening to a sermon, and frequently taking bread and wine in Jesus' memory.

My experience seems to be broadly in line with thinking as well as practice. A Bishop in the Church of England has written, "Ask people why they go to a particular church, or why they stay away. Part of the answer, if not all of it, will have to do with worship... People are right in thinking that the quality and manner of worship are central... Worship is in fact central to the corporate life of the church." (Mark Santer, "The Praise of God", Liturgy for a New Century, SPCK\Alcuin Club, 1991).

Our view of what is central has been influenced, we hope, by the gospels. Taking bread and wine is mentioned, although if Paul had not thought to mention this to the Corinthians, we would not know about it, so it can hardly be considered central. However, the other activities are harder to justify as being central to the Christian calling. It can come as something of a shock to realise that during the gospels, Jesus only spoke about the church on two occasions (Matt 16:18, 18:17). He gave no instruction at all as to what form the church might take, whether it should meet, or what its activity might be.

In view of the emphasis laid on corporate church worship in the churches

I have belonged to, it seems astonishing that Jesus never once spoke to his disciples on the subject of worship, let alone gave any hint of how it might be conducted.

We could take up much space comparing the activities of today's churches with Jesus' teaching, and achieve little more than being controversial. This seems unhelpful. It is better, to my mind, that we discuss the principles than that we get bogged down in debate on details. However, since worship has had such a key place in Christian tradition, we will spend a moment discussing Jesus'

apparent attitude to it in the gospels. Can it really be that he had little interest in worship? Have we understood him rightly?

There are several points to be made. Firstly, he did once discuss worship. But this was with the Samaritan woman at the well, not with his disciples. He told her that true worship should be undertaken "in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24)." However, on close inspection, it turns out that he only talked about worship because the woman had changed the subject to get away from her own personal life, when she found Jesus' questions uncomfortable (v16-20). In other words, she was using a discussion about worship to divert attention from the real issue. So while this passage does have something to say about how worship should be conducted, if such an activity were to take place, it cannot be taken as evidence that it was important to Jesus that his followers worship God.

Secondly, Jesus' habit of attending synagogue might be cited (Matt 9:35, Luke 4:16). Surely, it might be said, this indicates that his followers were to worship God, as this is what happened in the synagogues. We need to copy his example, not just his teaching.

But this argument too has its weaknesses. Are we to copy everything that Jesus did? He ate and drank, for example; does this mean that eating and drinking are important for Christians? Not according to Paul, who wrote that the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

Before his ministry began, Jesus attended the Synagogue out of habit (Luke 4:16). Later on, however, he went there to teach (Matt 9:35). On close study, it turns out that this teaching generally ended up by disrupting the meeting. Either a noisy demon would be cast out (Mark 1:21-28), or someone would be healed, causing anger and division (Mark 3:1-6), or the congregation would rise up in uproar (Luke 4:28-30).

It could be said that Jesus ruined the only wedding he went to, by stealing the limelight from the bride and groom (John 2:1-11), and that he wrecked all three funerals he attended, by raising the dead person (Luke 7:11-17, 8:51-56, John 10:8).

Can we make sense of this? Perhaps we might understand it this way. In his earlier years, Jesus had not yet been filled with the Holy Spirit; this took place at his baptism. Once he was filled with the Spirit, the vehicle of weekly Sabbath worship was insufficient for what God wanted to do. This explains why the services were taken over in the way we have described. So it really cannot be said that according to the gospels, Jesus affirmed a tradition of weekly worship of God in a building set aside for the purpose by his attendance at synagogue.

In fact, it is hard to find grounds for the orderly acts of worship that I have observed through my life, if we restrict our survey to the teaching and example of Jesus in the gospels. The impression we have from Jesus' life is that the old forms were split apart by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit of God.

It seems, then, that our received tradition of orderly, corporate, weekly acts of worship is not so much the essential substance of Christianity as we might have thought. What are we to make of this? Do we need to adjust our criteria? Or are we going to stick to our attitude, which has been to take Jesus seriously when he says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (John 20:21)." Are we to conclude from Jesus' silence on the subject that the Father does not want a worshipping church?

It seems helpful to look rather more closely at what worship really is. Maybe a useful clue lies in what Jesus said to the Devil. Unlike the disciples, Satan was instructed to worship God, in these words: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only (Matt 4:10)." This quotation from Deuteronomy alerts us to the link between worship and service.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word 'abad means both 'worship' and 'serve'. In Exodus, it is used both for the service that the Israelites rendered to Pharaoh, namely the hard work of brick-making and building cities, and for the ceremony of the Passover, a pattern for worship given on their departure from Egypt (Exod 1:14, 12:31, 13:5). In other words, one could say that to begin with, Israel 'worshipped' Pharaoh and the Gods of Egypt by his hard labour for them, and later 'served' God by his celebration of the Passover.

Grasping this point alerts us to the double meaning of the English word 'service'. When a clergyman said to me recently, "Tell me about your services", I took it that he was referring to our Sunday acts of worship, so I told him about our weekly pattern. It would have been truer to the Gospels to have addressed both meanings of the word service, and so told him about our activities on behalf of the poor, of healing the sick and casting out evil spirits, of our giving and so forth, as well as saying what liturgy and hymn-books we used.

So the church should carry out services. But as we have seen, service to God means obedience to his commands. The chief of these is to love God with all our heart, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. A church which ignores the commands of Jesus that we have studied runs the risk of failing to love her neighbours. It is failing to offer the services Jesus called for.

Such a church also opens itself to Jesus' reproach. He once complained of the lip service offered by the Pharisees; the trouble was that the heart was not involved (Mark 7:5-13). "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions," he said (v9).

On another occasion, he said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say (Luke 6:46)?" We can see on reflection that the attempt to worship God in word and song, while ignoring his commands to his followers, is futile. Such worship is no more than lip service. Indeed, as Jesus once said, this attitude indicates a heart out of tune with God; "He who does not love me will not obey my teaching (John 14:24)."

In this book, we have aimed to outline the agenda for the church of the future by focussing on the programme of action that Jesus came to bring. This discussion of the nature of worship alerts us that, in our attempt to be more faithful to the commands of Jesus, we need to be thorough. Today's church needs to bring all its activity under the close scrutiny of the Gospels, even its most prized and valued traditions.

Once again, it would be tempting at this point to try and provide a blueprint for a church that wanted to adopt the approach we have outlined. I believe this would be a mistake. It would fail to take into account that different churches have varying communities in which they are set, that the membership of each is unique, and that leadership styles are many and varied. It seems more helpful to propose that we all work out how the principles we have studied might apply in our own contexts (Phil 2:12-13). The results may vary considerably.

What we will do, however, is to assume that such a reordering process will take place, and ask what might emerge as a result. It seems to me that such a church would move closer to the centre of the will of God. This would tend to attract persecution, since Satan would not want such a church to thrive. We will therefore consider a possible scenario from the book of Daniel, which presents several stories of believers under pressure.

We will reflect on the story of the three men with difficult names in chapter three. Because of their belief in the true God, they refused to worship the image of gold. As a result, they were thrown into the blazing furnace. The thought of such things happening in our times may seem far-fetched. It may be tempting to read this account as an isolated story from the past. But the day of persecution against believers has not ended; the Bible warns us to expect more of it, and of greater intensity, in times to come (2 Tim 3:12; Rev 13:10, 14:12). Further, perhaps believers in the West have not had much persecution precisely because we have not stuck as closely to Jesus' instructions as we might have done. This situation could easily change, it seems to me.

We note that the episode of the blazing furnace revolves around worship. If we expand our horizons beyond the gospels to include the rest of Scripture, we see how important worship is. True worship became a matter of life and death, in this and in other stories in Daniel.

This may seem reassuring after our discussion above, but we should observe that the phrase on the lips of the three is "worship and serve" (v18, cf v28). Theirs was not isolated lip service, but was backed by a life of dedicated obedience. It seems, then, that the church should make sure that its worship is heart service, by carrying out the requirements of the kingdom of God in addition to offering lip service.

When the golden image was set up, and the order issued, the outlook for true believers became bleak. There was a strong temptation for them to recant. However, the story had an unexpected ending. It looked as if the fate of the three would be death, but once they were in the furnace, the three men were not burned up. Rather, a fourth figure was seen walking in the fire with them, and he looked like a god (v23-25).

The men were then called out of the fire, and emerged alive. As a result, worship was given to the true god instead, and the men were promoted.

Believers can take comfort from Jesus' promise in Matthew 28 that he will be with them to the end. This is so whether circumstances are easy or difficult. It seems likely that the more the church adheres closely to Jesus' commands, the harder her life will become. But for those who do not flinch, the end may prove to be glorious, whether in this life or the next.

The account in Daniel 3 is longer in the Septuagint, an early Greek translation made, it is thought, round about 250 BC. Here, a song of the three men is added, which they sang while inside the furnace. Down the years, the Church of England has sung this in the period known as Lent, under the title 'The Benedicite'. Every one of its verses calls on creation to bless the Lord, praise him, and magnify him for ever. The text in question can be found in the Apocrypha.

This song gives an inspiring picture of the church under persecution. Even in the midst of great troubles, when the natural reaction would be to be weighed down with self-pity, depression, anger and the like, the believers hold their heads high, praising God (Luke 21:28). This is to copy Paul and Silas, bruised and bleeding in jail, who nevertheless sang hymns and psalms to God (Acts 16:25). In fact, it might be fair to say that the best worship comes from believers who are going through hard times, who despite this give praise to God. Praise offered to God when skies are blue, and everything in the garden is rosy, is most appropriate (James 5:13). But praise in the hard times has an added dimension; it conveys an added depth of love and trust in God.

It is also good to cite this story from Daniel for another reason. Although it has not been the intention, much of our discussion in this book could be taken as being critical of the way the church has operated in the past. Therefore, it is good to cite an example of church practice that seems in tune with how the church of the future might behave. In the dark and gloomy season of Lent, when the focus is on suffering, the church has recognised that the appropriate thing is for believers to praise God from their hearts. We are not to let opposition get us down.

So the church of the future may be characterised by opposition and persecution. However, believers are human, and it has to be admitted that torture by fire does not have wide appeal. There will be a tendency to shrink from it, as Peter shrank from possible persecution if he admitted to being a follower of Jesus when his Lord was on trial.

So to be realistic, we will ask what might happen if the church chooses the easier course of laying aside God's call, and adapting to the ways of the world instead. This would avoid the fire of persecution; indeed, it would tend to damp it down, and perhaps hope to extinguish it altogether.

We have another story in the prophets that can help us here. Jesus was once asked for a sign. He refused to do any more than mention Jonah (Matt 12:38-41). This prophet so disapproved of what God told him to do that he ran away to sea. However, God caught up with him by sending a violent storm. Jonah was thrown overboard by the superstitious sailors, and sank. Surely he was finished. But in the event, he repented, and God supplied a large fish who swallowed him up, only to vomit him out on dry land after three days. Then Jonah carried out the mission God had given him, and to his great disgust, there was a widespread turning to God. As a result, God then saved the city of Niniveh from destruction, which was what Jonah had feared he would do all along.

As Jesus pointed out, some elements of this story can be seen as being fulfilled in his death, followed by three days in the tomb, before his rising from the dead. However, it seems permissible to see a possible further application of the story of Jonah to our own times. We need not feel that biblical prophecy is exhausted by a single fulfilment; rather, the word of God goes on being proved true, generation after generation.

Let us speculate a little on what the story of Jonah might have to tell us today. Jonah can be seen as representing sections of today's church. Rather than standing up for what we were told to

do, we have found Jesus' commands unpalatable, and if we are honest, have tended to run a mile. I believe that much of today's church has wanted to leave the mainland, and run away to sea.

In Scripture, the roaring sea seems to represent human society which fails to recognise God (Ps 65:7). "The wicked are like a tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud (Isa 57:21)."

Jesus warned us that in the last times, nations would be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea (Luke 21:25). This could be understood as society out of control. We read that a manifestation of evil will arise from the sea (Rev 13:1); this suggests some awful uprising from the midst of a society in turmoil. Believers are not to fear such things, as God has everything under control.

Indeed, far from a heaving rebellious society being an unexpected disaster, God apparently designed the world so that there should be a basic instability in life (Ps 24:1, 29:10). This makes the mastery of Jesus over wind and waves all the more impressive; he walks on the waves in the night (Matt 14:24-25). On another occasion, a storm on the lake died away to a dead calm at a word from him (Matt 8:26).

Just as Jonah took to the sea, the temptation for the church has been to ignore God's commands, and to seek a home in the changing values of the world. But this approach appears doomed to failure. When things go from bad to worse, and the storm reaches its height, the world's response will be to throw such a church overboard, in an attempt to destroy it, just as the sailors did to Jonah.

A church of this kind, which has turned its back on God, and been rejected by the world it tried to join, will be in dire straits. However, it is never too late to turn back to God, even if the situation seems hopeless. Jonah managed it. When he finally obeyed God's call, the result was the greatest turning to God that had been seen in the world up to that time.

If the church shies away from following Jesus to the ultimate, for fear of opposition and persecution, then this is the route it is likely to take, it seems to me. Such a church will vanish into oblivion, an abject failure. However, even then, all is not lost. In recent years, there has been talk of a world-wide turning to God. Such an event, it seems to me, could have its origins in a failed church that had appeared to have been thrown overboard and sunk without trace, where there is a turning back to God.

After a period of great darkness, as seen in the three days in the belly of the great fish, there could be a second chance. A major advance of God's kingdom on earth could follow (Jer 33:1).

The people of Nineveh turned to God in unprecedented numbers (Jon 3:5-9). Such an event has not yet been seen in the world. If it is to come, then it is highly appropriate that it should arise out of a church which has apparently lost all life. Then, all the glory would belong to God, and none to man, since all pride would have been killed off in such a church. No person could say it was their doing.

This scenario sounds like victory in the end. However, the story might not end there. The book of Jonah has a sad close. Jonah thoroughly disapproved of what God chose to do with the people of Niniveh. It made him very angry. This reaction seems surprising after all that Jonah had been through. I believe the same could happen in the church of the future. God may raise up Christian work of a style and content that disgusts those who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day (Matt 20:12). How sad to think that after all that, rather than holding their heads high, the original Christians might have their heads bowed, with shame and anger against their God, because he chose to do it his way, not theirs.

Our suggestions about the future may seem fanciful. Neither of the pictures we have presented may carry conviction. However, in their favour, they both present a church that goes through death and resurrection before the great and glorious day of the Lord. This seems right. It is to copy the prophetic death of Jesus, and the exile of Israel.

Throughout Scripture, the impression given is that the mountain top cannot be gained without going through the valley first (Gen 37:23-24, Exod chs 1-20, 2 Sam 22:28, Ps 71:20, Isa 6:5, Heb 11:32-40 etc.).

We have often noted the need for humility in our study. As Isaiah put it, "After all his pains, he will be bathed in light (Isa 53:11, NEB)."

So once again, the Benedicite seems appropriate for believers going through hard times.

"O let Israel bless the Lord..., O ye holy and humble men of heart, bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever."

This brings us back to worship. Personally, I love the lip-service.

I very much enjoy playing and singing worship songs at the piano. I find the heart and hand service much harder. Perhaps it would be good if we could create a church which majors in all three (Heb 13:15-16); however, my hunch is that lip service will continue to dominate everything if we are not careful. It will be the only activity left to us in heaven, where sorrow and pain have ended (Rev. 21:4), so couldn't we hold back for now and spend the few years we have on earth doing everything that Jesus commanded, and only that?

Let the church of today become the church of tomorrow by taking Jesus at his word, and carrying out its task in his way, and so seeing to it that none of his words fall to the ground (1 Sam 3:19). If this requires a re-writing of the agenda, so be it. This may be hard; no one enjoys changing their ways. But if John the Baptist could manage to say of Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less," then so can we (John 3:30). This is the task, it seems to me, that confronts believers today.