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# God's vision for the church

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## **What is God's vision for the church?**

**A**s we ask that question we are faced with many imponderables. One thing we do know, of course. The church is in safe hands: very safe hands. But beyond that we know little. We don't even know how much time is left to us. We're living in the Last Days, but then we've been living in them since Christ came 2000 years ago, and they will last till He comes again. No one knows when that will be. The church may be still in her infancy and may last, on earth, for a million years. We simply do not know; and even if we did we have not the remotest idea what such a future might hold. We can see only a few steps ahead of ourselves; and even then only dimly.

## **Keep our nerve**

First, surely, this is a time when we must keep our nerve. By every human criterion the church in Britain is in a bad way. Observers constantly tell us that attendances are on the decrease. The church itself is in confusion. It is increasingly marginalised and irrelevant.

In the face of these sombre analyses it is tempting to press the panic-button and to resort to policies which in the long term can be only destructive.

Part of the difficulty is that we live in a market economy where people instinctively turn to market solutions. The church, they insinuate, is merely a part of the entertainment industry which has lost its audience; or it is like a commercial company which is losing its customers and needs to diversify. It must do some consumer research and find out what people want. Let's abandon traditional styles of worship! Abandon old-style preaching! Bring in musicals, drama, dancing, the Internet. Take a soft line on Christian ethics. That's what consumers want. Go for the sound-bite: the 30-second advert.

All over the world there are signs of Christian capitulation to this kind of market-driven analysis. But these options are not open to the church. We have clear Rules of Engagement. The Lord, the Head of the church, has told us what our business is. We are here to preach the gospel. We are here to care for the poor. We are here to worship God. It may be that men don't find any of that attractive. They may want to worship a different kind of God or to do something other than worship; and we, of course, have to keep asking ourselves whether we are fulfilling our Rules of Engagement in the most effective way. But we have no right to tear up our Commission or to change our God-given product in favour of others which we think more marketable or to abandon the activities assigned to us and concentrate on others which we think more promising. Even though our churches emptied to the point of extinction we must remain true to our mandate. We have to contextualise, of course, and adapt to our own time and place. But we cannot change our core business: 'Go! Make disciples of all the nations and tell every human being, "I have good news for you!"'

## **A missionary footing**

Yet, keeping our nerve cannot mean simply remaining as we are. The church must be put on a missionary footing. In a way this should not need to be said. We have always known, in the words of Alexander Duff, that Mission is the chief end of the Christian church. Everything we do in discipling our own people, organising our structures and elaborating our theology bears directly on our missionary responsibility. Yet it is easy to forget it; and sometimes the priority of evangelism is masked from us by the social conditions in which we operate. For centuries after the Reformation we lived in what was officially a Christian society. Virtually every child was baptised. The whole nation accepted the Christian world-view. Schools taught the Bible and every child had some knowledge of its contents. Everyone received Christian burial. Public life, in Parliament and elsewhere, professed Christian values.

All this dulled our sense of missionary obligation. When we thought of pagans we thought of Darkest Africa or the great masses of India and China. These were our spheres of missionary obligation.

But in the last hundred-and-fifty years we have lost so much ground that we are now struggling in a sea of paganism. The tide of faith has ebbed and in its place there has come, sometimes silently, sometimes fiercely, but always relentlessly, the flood of unbelief. Even in the Western Isles, so long immune to these forces, the signs of the ebb-tide are all too evident. At no point since the 6th century has Scotland shown such disregard for Christianity as it does today.

And we are ill-placed to respond to it. In fact, we are no better organised for mission than Britain under Neville Chamberlain was organised for war. Here in Scotland, the church, since the days of John Knox, has been on a pastoral footing. Our primary concern has been to hold fast what we have. Evangelism has meant only fishing in the pool of unconverted adherents who came to our churches every Sunday. Now that pool has evaporated. Few attend church unless already driven by a marked degree of commitment. The uncommitted are no longer sitting in our pews. We cannot reach the people unless we go among them; and that means going outside our churches to where Britain really is.

That implies, first of all, that the unchurched must be our priority. One of the best descriptions of the church is that it is the only society on earth which exists for the benefit of non-members. That may be a cliché, but the great merit of clichés is that they are true. The Great Commission didn't say to the apostles, 'Go and comfort your brothers and sisters. Go and give them great expositions.' It said, 'Go! Make disciples of all the Gentiles.' We need to ponder that. We exist for the benefit of those who spend their lives in the public-houses, betting-shops and discos of our land; those whose lives are spirals into addiction, despair and moral chaos; those who mock religion and spit on Christ.

How can we make our meetings relevant to them? Too often our only anxiety is what some prominent elder or some 'mother in Israel' or some Christian bully will think of our proposals. If they're offended, we drop them. Is it not time to apply a different set of controls: to assess our activities on the basis of their relevance to those who never attend church and have never heard the gospel? That means letting the world set the agenda. In that sense we are reactive, not proactive. We are willing to be all

things to all men, adapting to changed circumstances in order to ensure that our message is heard by those who need it. Paul challenged the Corinthians as to what a stranger would think if he chanced into one of their meetings. Would he think they were mad? He didn't allow them to say, 'Oh! we can't be governed by the feelings of outsiders!' That, said the apostle, is exactly what you must be governed by. That stranger, that chance visitor, is the most important person in the whole building.

The problem faced by many churches is that the moment they take up some proposal to reach the unchurched they immediately find huge obstacles placed in their way. Where do these obstacles come from? From the world? From atheists and humanists? From those they're trying to convert? No! From fellow Christians! That is one of the saddest features of the church's history in the last hundred years. We have so often let ourselves be held to ransom by fellow believers who said, 'If you evangelise like that, I'm going to disapprove! If you bring in a modern version of the Bible, I'm going to disapprove! If you replace pews with chairs I'm going to disapprove! If you replace the sermon with Bible Study I'm going to disapprove! If you use *Mission Praise* I'm going to disapprove!'

It seems to me that DL Moody had the perfect answer to such intimidation: 'I prefer the way I evangelise badly to the way you don't evangelise at all!' The challenge we face, particularly if we are Christian leaders, is whether 'for the sake of peace' we are prepared to deprive the world of the gospel. The Christian evangelist will invariably find that the greatest danger he faces is friendly fire. The church is brilliant at turning its missionaries into Inoperative Combat Personnel, casualties to frustration, discouragement and spiritual intimidation.

Secondly, being on a missionary footing means that less and less of the church's work will be done within its own buildings. We will need to go where the people are; and we will need to think very carefully about what we actually mean by preaching. One of the great watchwords of the Reformed churches is *the primacy of preaching*. Unfortunately, it is easily confused with something completely different: *the primacy of the pulpit*. These are not the same. In the New Testament, preaching is whatever vehicle we can use to put our message across. Jesus never had a pulpit. Sometimes He preached on a hill, sometimes from a boat, sometimes round a table, once at a well. Preaching does not necessarily mean a large, passive, receptive audience. Nor does it necessarily mean an elaborate structured discourse. These things are, of course, preaching. But when Jesus spoke to the woman of Samaria, that, too was preaching. When he spoke to Nicodemus, that was preaching. When Philip spoke to the Ethiopian Chancellor or Paul to the Philippian jailer, that was preaching. Our four written gospels are preaching: perhaps the greatest preaching of all time. They were evangelism. They told the Good News.

Preaching is whatever gets the gospel across. That is really the only criterion. That's what we have to ask. Do our means of communication enable us to tell the story of God's Son, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day? Are we delivering *that* message? As far as the New Testament is concerned, it is *what* is conveyed that matters, not *how* it is conveyed. We can put it in a structured discourse or we can put it in a tract or a conversation or a video or a book. We have to

speaking it where the world can hear us and challenge us and even where it can heckle, blaspheme and contradict.

Thirdly, being on a missionary footing means being faithful to the gospel. We hear a great deal about faithless ministers and faithless churches. No doubt there are such, though it should be our own faithlessness that troubles us, not that of others. But what is this phenomenon, so much spoken of among the Reformed? What is a faithless ministry? Some say there are faithless ministers who never preach about hell, election, sin or false ecumenism. No doubt that is lamentable; even, possibly, deplorable. But it is quite possible to preach every Sunday on death, judgement and eternity, on hell, sin and damnation, on the mysteries of election and on the solemnities of reprobation, and still be a faithless minister. A ministry without Good News is a faithless ministry. A ministry that doesn't give hope to the wildest prodigal is a faithless ministry. A ministry that doesn't major on the most incredible fact in the moral universe, the fact that God is love, is a faithless ministry. A ministry that boasts that it's never preached on John 3:16 is a faithless ministry.

We are not faithful to Christ's Rules of Engagement unless we proclaim the promises of God; unless we tell every man and woman, and every boy and girl, 'You can go to God in your rags, because that's what the Prodigal Son did. Straight home! Just as he was, in the spiritual clothes he stood in! Only after he got home did he dress up, and then it was the Father who did it.'

I don't think for a moment that men and women find this easy to believe. Many preachers, unfortunately, do. Indeed, their starting-point appears to be that modern man finds it all too easy to presume on the love of God and to believe in the forgiveness of sins; and the preacher's task, conversely, is to contradict such dangerous teaching, knock such presumption out of men and confront them with the divine awesomeness, not with flabby notions of grace.

Such attitudes, in my view, are heresy. They betray the gospel. As if God had left His church in the world to be a purveyor of darkness, an extinguisher of hope and a messenger of doom! As if our mission were to make men and women feel even worse about themselves than they already do!

Is this what Jesus did? Is this the charge He gave us? Did He not tell us we are the light of the world: the only light it has? Did He not send us forth with the incredible message that God is love? Every tribal demon in the pantheons of Greece and Rome was an angry god, consuming sinners in hell and striking terror in the souls of all their devotees. None of these gods loved. None of them cared. None of them wiped away tears. None of them clothed prodigals or put shoes on their feet or rings on their fingers.

A faithful church is a gospel church; a good news church; a hope church; a love church. It is a Christ-church: one that majors on the fact that God has taken our nature, shared our experiences, borne our sins and conquered death. Let us be faithful to that gospel.

### **Going about doing good**

But we cannot be on a missionary footing unless we are also going about doing good. There is nothing new or radical in that. It goes back to Jesus Himself and every one of His disciples has to emulate Him in this respect. The responsibility is not confined to

individuals, however. It falls equally upon the church as an institution. The church as a church has to go about doing good. It's not simply a matter of providing pews and organising meetings, important though such things may be. Jesus went about and mingled, listening to people, meeting needs, practising compassion, showing sympathy and actively healing. The apostles healed. They cared. They remembered the poor. Their great modern successors did the same. John Knox cared deeply about the poor. Thomas Chalmers gave himself heart and soul to the problems of pauperism in his Glasgow parish. General Booth sought to provide work, food and shelter for the thousands of London's submerged poor. Spurgeon and Whitefield had their orphanages.

These men didn't simply preach. They were concerned for men's bodies as well as for their souls. They knew that there was no point in preaching to a drowning man. You had to throw him a life-belt. You had to meet men's desperate temporal needs. You couldn't simply be a church which listened to sermons. You had to be a community which went about doing good.

What might that mean? Well, whatever else it means it means that the church has to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. How often did Jesus defend the defenceless and speak up for those for whom no one else would speak! He spoke against the powerful and influential, not for them. He spoke for the publicans and sinners; for Samaritans and Syro-Phoenicians; for Roman centurions and fallen women.

That is one of the greatest tests we can apply to the church. For whom is it speaking? Is it saying what everyone else is saying? Is it obsessed with political correctness? Is it baying with the mob against asylum-seekers? Is it speaking only on behalf of those for whom the media and the politicians are speaking already?

Or can you hear it speaking for those for whom no one else is speaking? In Nazi Germany, when Hitler began to attack the Jews, the churches stood back and said nothing. They didn't want to be involved. They didn't want to meddle in politics. They couldn't come down. They had to attend to their high calling: their meditation, their prayer and their preaching. They may even have said that expository preaching would solve everything. No one spoke for the Jews or the gypsies or the psychotics: not until the tiny sparks of harassment had become the fireball of persecution and Europe found itself engulfed in Holocaust.

People tell us, of course, that there is no poverty in modern Britain. Something (the Welfare State, perhaps, but definitely something) has banished poverty. Certainly, if you organise your life properly and take a care where you walk (or drive) you need never see it. No one on your street is poor. But if you are the children of a single mother, an alcoholic who hasn't signed-on for three months and hasn't received a penny, that's poverty. In every city in Britain and every village in this island such problems are within helping distance; but never so pressing that we can't walk by on the other side, chanting a hundred pious reasons for doing nothing.

But desperate reactive measures are not enough. The church has to throw the weight of its influence behind every force for good in the community. It is part of our ecclesiastical heritage here in Scotland that the church has never been concerned only with spiritual things. John Knox wanted a school in every parish and a university in

every large town because he sought not only to save souls but to civilise and moralise a nation. One of the most intriguing things about Chalmers mission in Edinburgh's West Port in the 1840s is the bill for soap. They were teaching girls to take in washing and thus provide themselves with a living. It seems a long way from John Seventeen and the Upper Room, but that's where the needs were. The gospel has to descend to Lazarus' sores. Any activity that offers the hope of raising the tone of a nation deserves our support. And we must do it from the bottom up. In the upper and middle levels of our society there is affluence, education and security. In the basement there is ignorance, squalor and violence. Our task is to raise the level of the basement.

One of our biggest problems in the Scottish Highlands has been the church's coolness towards all cultural activities. As a result, it became all too plausible to argue that there was nothing for young people between the pub and the prayer meeting. You turned to either religion or drink. The whole Common Grace area was lost. It is part of the prophetic role of the church to persuade government and community to care for the young. I don't believe the church itself should be the provider of recreational and leisure facilities. But it should be an instigator and encourager of those responsible for making such provision. It should not be content merely to tell individual parents how to raise their families within their own homes. It should address the community of parents and urge them to take their collective responsibility seriously. We have to create not only child-friendly churches but child-friendly communities.

There is much in the realm of art and culture behind which the church should throw its weight; and there is much in all of these areas which deserves criticism. But where is the Evangelical criticism of literature and art? We have ignored it, when what it needed was Christian evaluation. We have been Protestant monks and nuns, making daily sallies into the world to earn our livings, but otherwise content to let it go to the dogs.

## **Fellowship**

I want to focus briefly on one final area: fellowship. The church must be a real fellowship. In the New Testament the whole idea of fellowship revolves around having things in common; and of course the one great thing we have in common is Christ. We believe in Him. We love Him. We live by Him. We are united to Him. He is our common Saviour and Lord. We are His subjects.

This Christ whom we have in common is the basis of all our fellowship; and that fellowship obviously cuts across all denominational barriers. There are many denominations (too many) in Stornoway, but there is only one church. There are many denominations in Scotland, and many more in England, but there is only one church. There is only one Body of Christ in the whole world; and we are one not on the basis of a common theology or a common polity or a common order, but on the basis of the miracle of the new birth and the wonder of adoption. God has made us all His own children. All those who call Him, 'Abba!' are one.

Out of this come other things. We love to get together, as people do who have common interests. The more we do it the better, but we shouldn't imagine that it carries no risks. All social interaction carries risks. You can probably avoid all the pain in the world by avoiding relationships. I once heard an old Christian lady say, 'The longer I live, the more I love the Lord's people and the less I trust them!' I now know

what she meant. But that shouldn't make us hermits. We need the support, encouragement, admonition and rebuke of other Christians. We need to come together; simply to be together. We need to be part of a critical mass in which faith stimulates faith and launches it into explosive activity. If you've been hurt by some Christian group don't say, 'I'm never again going to expose myself to being hurt by Christians.' We have to stick with the Lord's people. They're our people. They're inseparable from Himself.

But fellowship also involves caring for each other. One of the biggest changes in the Christian ministry in my life-time has been the emergence of a specialist domain of pastoral counselling. Such specialists have their place, as do professional psychiatrists. But let's remember that in the last analysis every Christian is his brother's keeper: not in some meddlesome way, interfering, prying and bossing; but really caring. Paul told the young church in Thessalonica that they had to take care for each other (1 Thess. 5:14). They themselves had to warn the unruly. They had to comfort the feeble-minded. They had to strengthen the weak. He didn't say, 'If you see someone feeble-minded or weak, find a counsellor for him. If you see someone backsliding, go and get someone to admonish him.' He said, 'You do it. He's your responsibility. Sort it out before it gets serious.'

## **Conclusion**

But what I yearn for above all is enthusiasm for the gospel. There is much talk of evangelistic methods. People want courses and debate techniques. But the greatest evangelist of all is a man or woman who loves the gospel: who so loves it and is so thrilled by it and so sure of it and so overwhelmed with gratitude for it that he simply cannot keep quiet about it. There is no course on any campus in the whole wide world that can give you that; or make up for it if you lack it.

One of the men to whom the Scottish Highlands owe most is the itinerant 19th century lay-evangelist, Finlay Munro. He wasn't far removed from being a simpleton and in his later years he suffered serious mental deterioration. But he knew the gospel, he loved the gospel and he couldn't keep quiet about it. He was fully aware that the learned ministers despised him and that many even of the godly frowned on his quaint ways and bad grammar. But he wasn't deterred. He trecked and trecked, sleeping in barns and preaching wherever he could gather an audience.

Of course the church couldn't survive if it had nothing but Finlay Munros. It also needs its Augustines and Calvins. But I'm not sure but that at this juncture in our history it's Finlay Munros we need: men of simple faith but strong conviction; men of indomitable courage; men the world thinks mad.

If I have one prayer above all it is that God would give us an overwhelming belief that this gospel is true; an irresistible urge to preach it; and courage to keep on propounding it at every possible opportunity.

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