

The last of a series of articles on Tom Stuckey's latest book *Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land*

Know your disease! Know your cure!

TOM STUCKEY

I wish to thank Ermal Kirby, Gillian Kingston, Jennifer Smith, John Walker, Ruth Gee, Clive Marsh, Ruth Fry and finally Moira Sleight, the editor of the Methodist Recorder who has made this series possible. These and other articles will be published in June as a study document entitled **Methodism Unfinished**.

Will these articles initiate a public dialogue about the future of Methodism? I hope so! I realise for a start that my presentation of Babylon was too negative. Ermal Kirby was right to remind me that exile for the Jews was a period of creative possibility; a time of "recognising, repenting, remembering, recording, reordering and rebirth".

Certainly the "money god" reigns in Britain but within such a Babylon we should not think of ourselves negatively as oppressed exiles but positively as creative settlers (Ruth Gee). We have a larger and better story of dreams and hopes which can be set over and against the materialist delusions of Babylon. Our surrounding culture may indeed be violent and consumerist but "it can be tamed", though as Clive Marsh also remarks, we must be realistic and not underestimate the "ways of the world".

One of the contentions of my book is that the malign culture of Babylon is suffocating our Methodist Church. Many people have contacted me affirming Martin Percy's comment that "our bureaucracy is stifling our democracy and democracy has triumphed over theocracy". My diagnosis of such "managerialism" is, according to Clive Marsh, too simplistic! I do not disagree, but I rather warm to Gillian Kingston's diagnosis, that British Methodism "has meandered off the path somewhat and it is time to get back before we do get lost... for we are in danger of becoming nothing much to anyone". I also affirm her comment that solutions are not to be found in mechanics but in refocusing on the holiness, truth, beauty and love of God.

I very much appreciate Ruth Gee's reminder that "liberating action on behalf of the weak and poor is part of our DNA" though I do wonder if "centralization" is distorting our creaking "connexionalism". Clive Marsh is surely correct to say "When the Church is pre-occupied with its own life, we may as well give up".

I have written elsewhere about the mission and mystery of God as revealed in the Trinity suggesting that there is much to be said for beginning where Paul began in Athens (Acts 17.22-31) - with a dialogue about the 'unknown God' and a conversation about the way in which the Spirit uses symbols and search to

illuminate our lives. (see my book **Into the Far Country** – now available on Kindle). John Walker reminds us that the world around us has “persistent rumours of God” while there remains in each person a deep longing “for identity, meaning, security and happiness”. John exhorts us to humbly listen to people, reflect, go deep and be ready to address the issues which come.

Jennifer Smith also affirms this by inviting us to explore the positives and negatives of the liturgies of the mall and market place which she contends promise much but deliver little. She wants us to be “far more light-footed, multi-lingual and cross culturally aware”.

As far as church growth is concerned Jennifer quite properly says that numerical growth is not as significant as we think. “Real growth is slow, durable, supple...humble and risk taking”. It happens “where we have pastoral continuity and excellence in worship; worship which grapples intelligently with scripture and relaxes into the best of our traditions with confidence. Growing churches do not despise the world but develop a critical liberating relationship with it.”

I wish that the leaders of the churches in Britain would stop panicking about falling numbers and read the sifting story of Gideon (Judges 7.1-8). Gillian Kingston is surely pointing British Methodism in the right direction when from her global perspective she tells us to “look to the smaller churches of World Methodism for inspirational witness and activity. Theirs is not the luxury of shifting church furnishing and changing ecclesial structures”. Ruth Gee also points in this direction. “As we develop our relationship with Methodists from Europe and the rest of the world we can model a different way.”

Ruth Fry, who is just starting out as a recently ordained presbyter, tells us to drag ourselves away from our computers and get out among the people for she confesses that “too much time spent within the church bubble and I start to feel as though I’m losing touch with reality and with God”. John Walker, looking back on more than 40 years of presbyteral ministry, says much the same. “Relationship building, knowing each person and personal touch is essential (this is counter cultural in an age where “the personal touch” is in retreat). Pastoral relationships are necessary to tune our mission and make preaching relevant. Real people, real meeting with a real minister.”

Now to theology! Ermal Kirby rightly re-balances my emphasis with his words “We need to focus much more on ‘singing the Lord’s song’ rather than on “the strange land”. This warms my theological heart as he continues “because the concepts on which our song is based are not longer commonly understood” or readily accepted we need to discover new ways and new words “with the singers engaged in transformative action.” John Walker adds a further dimension. “This is inter-generational work so that the dreams and memories of the elderly can help inform and shape the longings of the young.”

Clive Marsh pushes this on with his advocacy of “local theologians” who discern and celebrate God’s work in church and world. Within local churches “we must attempt to share-faith, live from a bigger story and ‘bring back stuff’ to reflect on within the workshop of the church. “There is hope”, says Jennifer Smith, “not in trying to be what we are not, but in remembering the best and simplest that we are.”

Let Ruth Fry have the final word. “Most importantly I have learnt to theologically reflect and I can see now that without the ability to do that, as Tom rightly points out, we as a church are in serious trouble”.

I am not personally anxious or depressed about falling numbers and aging congregations. My global theology recognises that the tides of the Spirit ebb and flow. Our church will continue to manifest itself within the dynamic spectrum of a visible city set on a hill and a hidden presence as salt in society (Matthew 5.13-14). I do suggest that here in Britain we should focus much more on the latter rather than on the former. Above all we need tell our story and maintain our theological integrity over and against spurious structural solutions. In Britain we may no longer be on the Edge of Pentecost but we can live faithfully and hopefully in the liminality of Holy Saturday.

A copy of the book ‘Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land’ can be obtained from me. Go to www.tomstuckey.me.uk . You will also find these articles plus information about ‘Methodism Unfinished’.

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1