

# THE FUTURE OF METHODISM

Lecture given by Tom Stuckey at Emmanuel Church, Reddish on 15/11/2015

At the 2004 Conference in Loughborough I did not expect to be nominated as President. I never believed myself capable or worthy of high office. I was in any case very fulfilled in my role as Chair of the Southampton District and was looking forward to retirement in 2006. For the first time ever my name went forward. The night before the vote was announced I had a dream.

I looked in terror across a dry burning desert. In all directions I saw the scattered bones of countless skeletons. I keep hearing this insistent voice 'Can these bones live?' The following morning I sat in Conference and my name was read out. I knew what my Presidential theme had to be. In my address at the Torquay Conference I said:

'The Holy Spirit is rattling our bones! What is the Spirit saying to the Churches? He is calling us to radical change. He is speaking to us about repentance and conversion! God is telling us to create fresh expressions of Church alongside and within the old since much of the old, in its resistance to change, will not survive. Life only comes to our dry bones through prophecy, that is speaking the Word of the Lord (theology) and through the power of the Spirit (Pentecost). Word and Spirit need each other. When the Word is without the Spirit the Church dries up. When the Spirit is without the Word the Church blows up. When Word and Spirit come together the Church grows up. If we are to have a future, attention must be given to theology (the speaking of the Word) and to Pentecost (the filling of the Holy Spirit).'

I believe that still. Without such a return to Word and Spirit we become, in the words of Wesley 'a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.' Have we really taken the implications of this into bloodstream or are we continually arranging dead bones in a mortuary?

## **Word and Spirit**

I argued during my Presidential year both for 'fresh expressions of church' and that Methodism should again think of itself as a movement. These features have been taken up as we have embraced the idea of a 'mission shaped church'. In my address I also spoke of the importance of theology (speaking about God) as I sought to promote the report '*Time to talk of God.*' In this our Church has singularly failed. Our 'Fruitful field' has hitherto yielded little and instead we became side-tracked into rationalizing our theological institutions and creating new structures.

Methodism is growing world wide. It has been estimated that the membership of the Methodist family beyond Europe is increasing at a rate of 1 million new members each year. I was privileged to witness some of that growth when I visited Cuba. Following the Cuban revolution in 1960, there were very few ministers left in the country. Membership had dwindled to less than a thousand. In 1987 membership had grown to 8000. In 2006 it was more than 30,000 people. Preaching to a congregation of over a thousand in Havana I said 'If a person wants to discover Methodism then Methodists in Britain must come to Cuba'. This was greeted with a big cheer!

'What is the secret?' I asked.

The bishop's answer was clear

- prayer and fasting
- preaching and experiencing the Holy Spirit.
- every member is required to speak of what they have seen and heard.
- every pastor must keep planting new Churches.

### **Speaking and Preaching the Word**

In 2007 I wrote a book *'On the Edge of Pentecost'*. Its purpose was to encourage every member of the church to realise their theological potential. We all have a story to tell. It is a story of how God touches our lives. But are we telling the story? We have hundreds of outsiders using our premises every week. There are huge opportunities for relationship building and witness yet we remain aloof and tongue-tied. Why?

There is a clear co-relation between the quality of a church's 'preaching and teaching' ministry and a person's ability to 'witness'. The Willow Creek Community Church has a world-wide influence. In a series of surveys rolled out across thousands of churches it has discovered that the 'Bible is the most powerful catalyst for spiritual growth.' The survey however revealed alarming news about preaching.

- Over half the people who desire life changing Bible teaching do not get it.
- Preaching is boring 54% of Christians.
- Of the 72% of people who want preaching with depth only 19% were getting it.

From the complaints I get about Methodist preaching I reckon their disturbing conclusions apply to us. If we are dishing out junk food instead of serving the nutritious and life giving food of the Word of God how can we expect people within our congregations to become vocal witnesses of the Word?

It has been argued that today in our Western world the very proliferation and cacophony of noise and words have not only drowned out the Word but that God himself has withdrawn into the Silence (Barbara Brown Taylor – *When God is Silent*). There is a famine 'not of bread or a thirst for water but of hearing the word of the Lord.' The prophet Isaiah passes judgement upon the temple worship in Jerusalem. 'God says when you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers I will not listen' (Isa.1.15).

Is God therefore passing judgement upon us? If so it is upon the whole Church in Britain since decline is a feature of most churches in this country. In a recent Anglican Report it was reported that average attendance of a rural congregation is 19. 'Rural churches', it says 'have become a milestone round our necks'. There are however places where congregations appear to be growing. This is often brought about by the advent of Christians from the growing churches of Asia and Africa. We are also seeing evidence of growth in the new younger churches. However we need to recognise that the growth of many of these is due to younger dissatisfied Christians from the traditional churches 'shopping around' for a more lively Church. Their growth is often at the expense of the traditional churches.

### **What of the future?**

I have argued that the Universal Church over the centuries has always ebbed and flowed, increasing and decreasing in numbers according to the judgement and grace of God and according to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Numbers do not have the significance we assign to them. The Quakers, for example, have never sought numerical strength yet have

had a social impact far in excess of their size.

John Vincent in his latest book '*Methodism Unbound*' does not see our smallness nor the age of our congregations as a fatal flaw. Their continued presence in suitable buildings in poor areas is a sign of hope. We should stop panicking and head-counting and be confident in being modest. Phil Potter, the Archbishop's Missioner in his latest book '*Pioneering a New Future*' also believes that the key to the future is to focus on the small. Unlike Vincent however he affirms the parable of the 'mustard seed' and argues that even though we start small there are no limits to the possibility of growth.

John Wesley operated with two models of Church. One was the traditional local Anglican Church served by ordained clergy like himself. The other was the 'society'; a 'fellowship of believers' led by appointed lay persons. I believe that Methodism must return to its roots. .

The *primary* model for the future will be the small fellowships of believers meeting mostly off church premises. Their focus is the community. These 'little churches' (as I think of them) are 'fresh expressions' shaped for outsiders seeking salvation. They are the product of 'pioneering ministries'.

Our *secondary* model is the traditional church based on buildings, re-shaped, opened up and user friendly with vibrant patterns of worship relevant for those attending.

### **Methodism: the ordained ministry and the future Church.**

Ian Cowley in his latest book '*The Contemplative Minister*' says 'there was a time when the Christian ministry offered the opportunity to spend a life time in prayer, study, preparing and delivering and exercising faithful care with the community. Not so now. The job now requires 'a heroic combination of stamina, multi-tasking and change management.' The number of Methodist ministers with stress and health problems continues to rise. It has been suggested that this may not be caused by vocational or personal weakness but rather by the organization's 'structural stressing'. There are three burdens which a modern Methodist minister has to manage.

The first is our Connexional system. Once suitable for a growing church it now resembles an unwieldy lumbering juggernaut which, by the time it reaches its destination the situation has so changed that what it seeks to deliver has become largely irrelevant. The Spirit keeps moving on while we trundle along behind never catching up.

Second. We have too many buildings, some of them in the wrong place. Their ongoing care and maintenance consume the energy, time, money and morale of dwindling congregations.

Third, there is the burden of the entrenched attitudes of some in our local churches. They long for the halcyon days of full churches. They prefer to travel, as some rail passengers do, with their backs to the future. Is God therefore calling fewer persons into the ordained ministry so as to break the dependency of such local churches on its minister?

I suggest that the ministers of the future need to be theologically and spiritually equipped to teach, feed and inspire congregations with the Word of life. Some of these, like the apostle Paul, will be called to operate cross-culturally. There are often more opportunities for spiritual dialogue outside rather than within the local church. As a chaplain in Asda remarked, 'I have more conversations here about God on a Friday evening than I ever do

in the local church on Sunday’.

What then of Methodism? We will certainly be smaller with fewer buildings, but with a multiplicity of styles of ministry and worship. Whatever our future shape the following characteristics are essential:

- Burning faith, conviction, passion for the Gospel and a desire to share it.
- A clear sense within a local congregation of how they are able to participate in the mission of God in their own particular place.
- A ‘community of embrace’ especially welcoming the poor, displaced and marginalized.
- Members will be expected and enabled to pray, study the Scriptures and disciple each other.
- Imagination, exploration and risk-taking will be encouraged. The times, days and locations of gatherings will not be set in stone.
- There will be minimal structure, and the churches will be largely ‘lay’ led.

### **God’s Word for Today**

The hopeful dreams which arose towards the close of the previous century because of the Pentecostal Spirit were shattered by 9/11. A Copernican shift has taken place in the Western World. It has been suggested that we are now living in the last days. I think that the British Church now resides in secular Babylon. Although the Spirit continues to be present we have to learn ‘how to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land’. That land, as recent events in Paris demonstrate, is a land under the threat of violence.

New Testament Christians living in port of Corinth, although attempting to live in the Spirit were facing difficulties not unlike our own; the challenge of relating to the surrounding pagan culture, questions about suitable ministers, worship, the use of gifts, status, theology, ethics, litigation, communion and money. How does Paul respond? Before addressing these he says he is determined to know nothing but ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (2 Cor.2.2).

In our Babylonian exile even though Pentecost is an ever present reality we have to learn to live under the shadow of the cross. In my latest book *‘The Wrath of God Satisfied’* I write:

Because our present context is one of violence, the metaphors of blood, punishment, satisfaction and divine wrath must become the key ingredients in our theological discussion. The atonement theories attempt to explain how deadly violence is absorbed into the life of God and transformed into life giving energy...On the cross God is revealed as the victor who chooses to be the victim, the judge who is judged, the eternal pain-bearer...Christ’s death on Calvary proclaimed that sacrificial love was active in the very heart of God before the foundation of the world and is now continually being propagated through space and time by the Holy Spirit... Calvary is the possibility of Pentecost and Pentecost is the personal realization of Calvary.

I believe Methodism has a future but it will be realized only when the message of the cross has sunk into our souls. Blessing and brokenness belong together but today within the Methodist Church ‘brokenness must come before blessing’.

### **Conclusion**

My 2005 conference address ended with these words:

‘It is hard for us to maintain a passion for God in a declining Church. Through our

struggle to follow Christ, we become bruised and wounded, ever aware of our own frailties and failures. Some of us carry an inner pain too deep for words. There can be a wilderness of the heart, a valley of dry bones. Yet this place of brokenness is the renewing centre of Spirit and Word.

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering.  
There is a crack in everything,  
That is how the light gets in.<sup>1</sup>

Come Holy Spirit. Drive away our fears. Remind us of the faith we have forgotten. Breathe your fluid life into us until the living waters of Spirit well up, washing, cleansing and renewing. Then carry us on the tides of your love into the very mystery of your being.

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*John Wesley wrote: 'Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and care not a straw whether they be clergy or lay, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven upon earth.'*