

## THEOLOGY EVERYWHERE

### ***SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND***

#### **Babylon**

The whole world is passing through a huge paradigm shift the likes of which have not been seen for generations. What is the Spirit saying to the Churches in Britain and to the Methodist Church in particular? In my new book I contend that Britain is a modern Babylon where mammon reigns. The Church has unconsciously absorbed the values of Babylon into its structures and strategies with the result that it has ceased to be prophetic and become a public utility offering cheap grace to a consumer public looking for peace and security in troubled times.

Today we serve the god of consumerism and worship him in our cathedral-like shopping malls. Babylon had its ziggurats. In London we demonstrate our delight in the money god in the profusion of the towering of skyscrapers monstrosly designed to shock and awe. Babylon is both a city and a Whore, a term used to signify luxury, sensuality, sexuality, seduction and allure. Although her appearance in the book of Revelation is magnificent (Rev 17), she is not to be trusted for she rides upon a beast of corruption. She is a celebrity who loves to be looked at yet takes even greater delight in gazing at herself.<sup>2</sup> She is the mythological origin of the 'selfie'. The message of Revelation is clear. Beware lest you are beguiled by her charms and drawn into the nihilism which she personifies.

Many in the West rejoice at the passing of religion yet the current fantasy that secularism can replace religion has led to a return of religion in its most belligerent form. The philosophy of Babylon is 'God is money, happiness is consumption and image is all'. The soul of Babylon is emptiness. This nihilism can, for a few individuals, acquire such potency that their hatred of the system and of themselves drives them to suicide. Babylon provides the soil for the production of the suicide bomber while ISIS provides an ideology giving credence for a crusade of death. Is it surprising that many teenagers are anxious and bored, that increasing numbers of people feel unsafe or that others want to put up the barricades. A twittering

Trump is but a symptom of our entry into an ostrich age of denial where people hide within fantasies our culture creates.

### **THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH**

Martin Luther wrote a pamphlet with this title in October 1520. In it he attacked 'indulgences'. These were bits of paper telling you that your sins were forgiven. They were sold to enhance the glory of the papacy by raising money for the building of St Peter's. They were expressions of 'cheap grace'. They gave people a 'feel good' experience without requiring discipleship. Over an against a theology of glory he set brought the critique of the cross.

John Hull gave us a devastating critique of the Church in Britain. 'We looked for a mission-shaped church but what we found was a church-shaped mission.' The seeking of justice for people and the environment is at the bottom of the agenda of most churches. This is because the culture of Babylon has so permeated and compromised the Church that we cannot confront the sins of Babylon without confronting ourselves and this we consistently fail to do.

Words and noise are the background music of a consumer society. Have we forgotten that only in stillness can the human spirit expand and flower? Babylon has invaded the worship of some of our churches. It is argued that people today have a short attention span so we need to adapt worship to retain people's interest. Boredom has become the enemy so fill the time with image, song, visuals, clips, chat and a short snappy address. The temptation to entertain and pacify is powerful. The worshippers have become a consumer audience. James Laney in a sermon about Christian identity in a comfortable Babylon says 'When we look back at the history of the Church, every time we see that the Church has become captive to the dominant identity of its society, every time it has become comfortable with its role in culture, it has lost its universality. With the loss of universality, it has lost the power to create, not merely to evangelize, but also the power to become renewed.'

## **METHODISM**

Most Church in Britain are no longer prophetic as they have gradually turned themselves into public utilities for the 'religious and social consumer'. Methodism has singularly failed to theologically address this deluding Babylonian culture which has almost totally infiltrated our church. Without the corrective of prophetic theology we have embraced the managerial and mechanical solutions of Babylon. Over the past couple of decades we have been shifting the furniture of worship; chairs not pews, power-point for hymn books, a music group rather than an organ. Inordinate amounts of time and money plus thousand of meetings have been required to effect these changes. This is Babylon at work amongst us. Martin Percy looking in at British Methodism is puzzled by our heavy organizational baggage and ecclesiastical civil service. He comments that 'our bureaucracy is stifling our democracy and democracy has triumphed over theocracy'.

The Babylonian captivity is robbing the Church of 'holiness'. 'Know your disease! Know your cure!' was the dictum John Wesley employed. His diagnosis of humanity's problem was that the image of God within had become distorted. Although reason and practical activity were important for him he believed that only the transcendent power of God's grace could work the cure.

My new book entitled '*Singing the Lord's song in a Strange Land*' will be launched at Conference. It will bring a theological critique to the present reality of the Church in Britain, with a particular reference to Methodism. Does Methodism have a vibrant future? Not if we continue as we are within the old corrupted paradigm.