

The Methodist Church and secularisation.

1. The root of the problem

The Methodist church has not been short of analyses to explain its catastrophic and apparently inexorable decline in the years since at least 1900. Both biblical teaching and more contemporary church growth models all offer informative critiques, but neither exhaustive analysis nor a wide array of initiatives have stemmed the decline. An empirical eye would suspect that we are overlooking something fundamental, and the evidence points to that 'something' being secularisation. Secularism is not an unwillingness to listen to what God says. It is the belief that God is not there to say anything; the belief that the gospel is not good news, not because it doesn't sound good but because it isn't real news.

Western society has become increasingly secularised. This has been driven both by the rise of science and its apparent ability to explain the world as a self-regulating mechanism, and by the humanist philosophy of the Enlightenment which managed to wed empirical science with secular materialism. In the public mind 'mankind has come of age' and Christianity is a supernatural myth suitable only to a pre-scientific society. The whole reality of the spiritual domain (God as Trinity, angels, heaven, etc) and its bearing on the material world (creating, sustaining, and saving) is being abandoned. God is now judged to have no substance and no function, leaving theology as the esoteric preserve of the Christian 'Faith Group'. Increasing multiculturalism has produced a multi-faith marketplace, in which Christianity is seen to lose its uniqueness and with it any claim to 'public truth'. The perception that religion has caused division and sectarian violence throughout history does not help.

Even in the C18th, the church had recognised the threat posed by secularisation but the way it has responded has turned what was always going to be a difficult challenge into a disaster. The mainstream denominations of the West had insulated their theology against the predations of Newton and Darwin by adopting Cartesian metaphysics, separating entirely the material realm from the spiritual realm, two realities with two fields of study. This rendered the church 'safe' but 'vulnerable' because severing the classical link between the spiritual domain and the material world left the supernatural with no empirical evidence for its existence nor a coherent explanation of how God can act in the material world. Theology was in danger of being marginalised as mystical and obscurantist, and hence the foundations of Christianity judged to be vacuous.

Liberal theology developed in the C19th as an apologetic aimed initially at ensuring that theology retained intellectual credibility. At its heart is the demythologising of the Biblical record. Academic rationalism subtly removed the perceived embarrassment of supernatural metaphysics from Christianity. All the pre-scientific, mythical baggage of antiquity was stripped out by a church 'come of age'. Gone were spiritual beings, angels, miracles, the virgin birth, resurrection, and divine intervention. The doctrinal shell remained, the liturgy and the hymns sounded the same, but their literal substance had been removed. Religious language became metaphor and analogy for the Christian world-view and belief system. Orthodox metaphysical dogma has continued to motivate and direct the church activity, but God has become an increasingly totemic figurehead, the *raison d'être* for all forms of Christian social action, community building, life-improvement and self understanding. For the churches which are now led and taught by the clergy trained in liberal

theology, faith in supernatural reality has receded. Individual piety has increasingly become existential; 'God has no hands but my hands'. Personal assurance and spiritual experience has withered on the vine. Angels are a mere rumour.

Essentially this response to the secularising pressures from society has been an accommodation in which the church has itself become religiously secular, ceasing to be a truly supernatural organisation dependent on the efficacy of the Spirit. Herein lies the heart of the matter for Methodism, which from the C19th into the C20th has been led both in the Conference and its theological colleges by ministers schooled in Liberal theology. Although the church has continued to include numerous members with a clear belief in the supernatural domain of God, and although Cliff College, outstanding individuals such as Donald English, and movements such as Easter People have maintained the evangelical voice, it has been a minority view.

Worship has remained at the centre of Methodist life, but it has lost much of its fervour and expectation. Secularisation is at its most subtle in worship. There has been emphasis on liturgy and lectionary, teaching about discipleship, about changing the world. Community fellowship has emphasised participation and interpersonal relationships in services, but supernatural vitality has been suppressed by intellectual rationalism. Sermons have become informational and motivational. Minds have been stimulated but hearts not warmed; worship has been bereft of supernatural encounter. Latterly faced with aging congregations, attempts have been made to modernise worship. Some contemporary music has been introduced. All-Age Worship has been promoted enthusiastically. The OHP came and went. Data projection is taking time. Congregations find the worship more jolly and user friendly, but the fundamental issue remains that worship has become a secular meeting of a faith community rather than a meeting with a supernatural God. The result has been that worshipping congregations have become tired. They are continually encouraged to work harder for God and His church, and to be better disciples, but they lack the spiritual resourcing that encountering Him in worship brings. They do not see 'a new earth' because they have lost touch with heaven.

Not only does Methodist worship struggle to sustain faith, it fails to initiate it. (Indeed the Liberal churches are a tertiary phenomenon, populated largely by Christians who came to faith in more evangelical circumstances.) Our worship has ceased to be missional. The general public simply do not join Methodist worship in any significant numbers. Modernisation in itself will not suffice. With a good worship band, bright data projection, lively, entertaining speakers and congregational participation, it still amounts to a teach-in about Christianity with some jolly songs and a warm community welcoming you to join them. Because it lacks supernatural substance, it does not answer the fundamental question as to whether God is real, present and accessible to experience.

Radiating outwards from this rather emaciated worship core, church activities have diversified in the C20th and become predominantly secular. Methodist churches have been very busy with community building, charity work, common causes, coffee mornings, youth clubs, choirs, play groups, amateur dramatics, food banks, Brownies. Their buildings have become filled with activity. Churches have wanted to be useful and to be loved, to be the heart of their communities. Much has been achieved, but so much of this activity done 'in the name of God' by spiritually inspired church members could be done by other good people without God. For some this was all seen as 'the church in the world', but it looks more like the world in the church, and many activities have been fully secularised as church members have become too few and old to carry on. There has

been an enduring hope that faith would spread through osmosis, that people would see Jesus as the motivation for all this church activity, and believe; or that people doing social activity in the church hall would migrate into the church. An enormous amount of good work has been done in serving the community, there have been innovative ideas and some good-news stories, but few people have migrated into faith and the church. Lacking the clear evidence of supernatural reality in all this worthy Methodist activity, activity stemming from a God Who is kept in the background, Who is not overtly proclaimed nor made accessible, means all the good activity is ambiguous, it does not compel belief. People may like the chapel, but they do not believe in Jesus.

Thus, both Methodist worship and Methodist activities have failed in their fundamental aims. Perhaps because worship has lacked vigour and proved so unpopular with the public, the church has tended to shift the balance of its missional effort away from worship towards 'outreach' activity. Remarkably little developmental effort has been put into worship. Indeed, there is the nagging feeling that Methodism shows the characteristics of public houses, which despairing of their unpopular beer, cover their buildings with the enticements of food, quizzes, live football, karaoke and children's play areas! Once the core activity declines there is always a temptation to diversify.

Although decline occurs primarily at a chapel and circuit level, this has not gone unnoticed by the national leadership, which has tried very hard to turn decline around. Although effective mission has been emasculated by a Liberal explication and apologetic which gives its churches no spiritual dynamic for making new Christians, Methodism has continuously expended effort on mission strategies. There has been a Division of Home Mission. There have been redefinitions of what mission could mean. There have been many slogans to little effect. The church has continued to be 'reshaped' for mission which has not materialised. The strategy of ecumenism has been embraced with enthusiasm. Once the undoubtedly sinful aspects of denominational division had been dealt with, ecumenism proved unproductive to church growth. Links have been made with other churches which are also declining and thus bring no effective growth schemes of their own. Ecumenism has frequently become a way of managing retrenchment and rationalising buildings.

Recently, a lot of resources and hopes have been invested in Fresh Expressions. This is significant and inspiring but it is also very resource-intensive and may be a specialist development. Other denominations have found that renewing conventional churches yields more result. In any case the question remains as to what is the substance of the church to which we want to give fresh expression? Is it supernaturally based, or is it repackaged radicalism: endless religious discussions in edgy environments?

So, over the years many good people have done many good things. There have been serious if often belated attempts to solve problems and come up with new ideas, but metaphysics has not been addressed and everything has laboured around a profound void in personal and corporate experience of a supernatural, tangible and accessible God. It is not a criticism to admit that in the big scheme of things, the tide has not been turned. Scriptural holiness is not being spread throughout the nation. On the contrary, things have got worse. During the first half of the C20th the church survived institutionally because of its monumental standing in society and in education, and its huge range of religious activities integrated into people's lifestyles. However, since the 1960's secularisation has spread from academia into popular society in the 1960's, authority structures have become suspect, truth has become individual and relative, materialism has grown

with prosperity, entertainment has proliferated, the fear of war has receded, and the whole religious edifice has fallen apart. Today the church's demographic profile is dire, chapels are closing and circuits disintegrating. The void in supernatural foundations has been exposed.

Apart from the aggressive secularism of the politically correct ruling elites, the general public just can't be bothered with a possible spiritual realm which has no tangible bearing on the reality of their everyday lives. Those who do venture into the church find a tenuous belief in a God who is insubstantial, practically inactive and experientially inaccessible. They find nice people with a strange world-view who sing hymns, and do good things in their community. They find nothing compelling.

If the core issue is one of metaphysics, the existence of God and the whole spiritual domain, then a solution is not going to lie in more preaching and better presentation of what God says, nor doing more effectively what God commands (all in innovative ways). It is going to lie in the area of recapturing supernatural reality, in engendering encounter with God. To achieve this, Methodism would do well to learn from churches which are clearly doing better, rather than devising its own schemes. There is plenty of evidence out there as to how churches can grow, and it is not rocket science. Not all denominations have demythologised their theology. The Anglo-Catholic/Orthodox 'high churches', the evangelical churches and the Pentecostal/charismatic/new churches have held to the substance of supernatural metaphysics and in very different ways have retained a culture of encountering God: an expectation of religious experience. They have not been secularised and they have all done far better in surviving and even growing than the mainstream Liberal denominations. This is in itself significant empirical evidence that secularism is in fact the central challenge for today's church. It also indicates how the problem might be tackled successfully. All these churches overtly base their activities on supernatural realities with which they openly confront the secular world-view of society. To achieve this, they put their main effort and investment into their worship. Everything else is secondary. To them, worship is paramount because it is their principal milieu for encountering God. It is an event where people can 'Feel something'. Whether it is in the experience of 'Real Presence' in the Mass, or a deep moving by the Word evangelically preached, or from strong contemporary music and charismatic activity, these churches address the issue of secularisation head on. Congregations are sustained and newcomers are confronted with the experienced reality of God. This is the 'gain line' where the Kingdom prevails over the secular world. This answers the basic question that the public rightly sees as huge, 'Is God here or is He not?' All Christianity follows from 'the God who is there' and from 'The God who comes'. For mission, these churches all use 'attraction' models based on their worship, indeed 'Worship Evangelism', (which does not mean evangelical rallies) is now the primary source of virtually all British church growth. Rather than going out to get busy in the world, these churches grow from their worship base. They encounter God before encountering the world. Their growing congregations are then deployed into service and outreach where they spread a contagious world-view. They reflect the pattern that we see in the life of Moses who led Israel out of Egypt not because he had a social conscience about slavery but because he met God at the burning bush.

For Methodism, the present strategies have had plenty of time to deliver church growth and they have underperformed. It is time to do something else. It is time to stop looking for innovative, community based projects and develop straightforward God-encountering worship, to return to the spiritual dynamics and realities of Wesley's day. Now is a time to set aside our historic suspicions of other churches. So varied are their styles of worship that it must be the underlying principles that

can be of significance to us. The future is going to lie with worship, and it will centre on Divine encounter. The evidence from churches that grow, and indeed from Methodist churches that have made a start is that to develop worship which engenders Divine encounter requires attention in three areas. First and most important there needs to be a change of preached and practised theology, so that the worship is rebuilt around the reality of supernatural metaphysics. As in Acts, miracles of a wide variety need to be readmitted. Secondly the planning and patterns of worship services need to be overhauled so that Divine encounter is facilitated and encouraged. We shall need distinctly Methodist contemporary worship designs to replace the modernised or unmodernised hymn sandwich. Thirdly the delivery of such new worship will require the introduction of new technology, the pursuit of practical excellence, and the redesign of our buildings so that they present a managed environment contributing to Divine encounter.