

# Kington Baptist Church

## MESSAGE BOARD – 89

We don't need the skills of a statistician, nor of graphs and 'pie-charts' to come to the conclusion that church attendance in our country over the last few decades has declined more dramatically than sales of Cadbury's Bournvita!

Whereas a hundred years ago was a period of church and chapel building, now it is the era of conversions. Not of conversions that mark a new beginning on the path to salvation but of those that bring good fees for an architect who can convert a chapel into a stylish little dwelling for the aesthetically discerning.

One reason congregations decline is that as a nation we have rejected a sixteen hundred year-old Christianity heritage. But congregations may also shrink because of 'social mobility' – people move homes.

These reasons can leave small congregations smaller still – struggling to survive. Nationally this crisis takes on other forms. I mean that a good number of large congregations seem to prosper not because they have adhered faithfully to the *'form of sounds words'* we are commissioned by Christ to hold to, but because they've replaced that gospel with 'another gospel', which the Apostle Paul says is no gospel. Services of worship, shaped by the New Testament, have been abandoned for a ninety minute 'event' more like a pop concert than a service of Christian worship.

The temptation, and it is a temptation, is to follow the strategy of political parties. And what, we ask, is that? It is to adjust and modify the policies, message and presentation of those policies by what voters want to hear. It's not, *'preach the Word with persistence, when its easy and when it's hard'*, (2 Timothy 4.2) but ask them what they'd like to hear, the promises that'll please them – regardless of whether those promises will be kept! That's the way to win elections. But it's not the way the Kingdom of Heaven comes: *'For the time is coming when people won't put up with sound teaching, their ears will itch to hear something else and they'll choose for themselves people who'll tell them what suits their fancy.'* (2 Timothy 4.3)

They were times when our Lord was followed by great crowds. In most cases this left him feeling uneasy. He knew *'what was in the heart of men'*. He knew that the large crowds often were made up of large numbers who followed him for all the wrong reasons. *'Jesus answered them, "I tell you the truth, you're looking for me, not because you understood the signs I gave you, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Don't strive for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."*' (John

6.26-27) It's never enough to 'follow' Jesus; it's only enough when Jesus *leads* – those two things are very different.

That occasion, (in John 6) when crowds followed him had a sequel, the sequel is that many turned away and left off from following him. They found his message offensive and harsh. They didn't like what they heard. Our Lord's response is highly significant and includes a powerful warning for us. He turned to his disciples and he said (in words I find among the most moving he ever spoke): *'You won't also go away, will you?'* (John 6.67)

What is vital is to see that Jesus was fully prepared even for his disciples to leave him. *But was absolutely not prepared to change, alter, adjust, modify, soften or 'trim' his message by one syllable!* Better he be left alone than he leave-off from proclaiming the word of truth.

Nowhere is the Christian Church required to be successful – it is required to be *faithful*. *'Consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. And what is required in servants and stewards is that they are faithful.'* (1 Corinthians 4.1-2) We are to be in no doubt that it's becoming harder and more demanding to be faithful at this time in this nation. And it'll be more difficult still.

We may be few, we are few, and that puts pressure on us and brings its own temptations. There's no virtue in being few for its own sake – just as there is no virtue in suffering for its own sake. But if faithfulness means suffering then that is what we are called to endure. If faithfulness means we're few then that also is what we are called to endure – while committing ourselves to be used by the Lord to gather the *'other sheep that he must bring in'*.

At the end of his days on earth our Lord was left alone; so too were the Apostles Peter and Paul. Was that 'failure'; had their message shrivelled away like leaves on a fallen branch? It had not! To cut a long story short – an appropriate remark to introduce a story of depletion!

*The Lord said to Gideon, 'You've got far too many soldiers, if I give them victory they'll become proud, as if they have saved themselves. So let anyone who's afraid to go home.'* So 22,000 went back, but still there were 10,000. *The Lord said to Gideon, 'They are still too many, reduce you numbers further still'. [Then, after a sort of test], the Lord said to Gideon, 'By just the 300 left I will deliver you and give you victory over your enemies'.* (Judges 7.2ff)

*Write this letter to the angel of the church in Philadelphia. 'This is the message from the one who is holy and true. He is the one who has the key of David. He opens doors, and no one can shut them; he shuts doors, and no one can open them. I know all the things you do, and I have opened a door for you that no one can shut. You have little influence in the world, yet you obeyed my word and did not deny me.'* (Revelation 3.7-8)