

Kington Baptist Church

MESSAGE BOARD – 84

The great thing that makes the Church unique is, that Christ is its Saviour, and that all believers are his friends and followers. Its members reject any other status; they are known only as his friends. They are not known as Jews and Gentiles; as of this nation or that; as slaves or freemen; they are known as Christians.

(Albert Barnes, 1798-1870)

It's difficult to avoid hearing of problems connected with one 'ism' or another. The terms crop up in sport, politics, theatre, cinema, business – even the Church. I'm reluctant to comment on these problems. Not because I feel they don't matter. But because I think they matter greatly – but it's not possible to comment on such a problem without touching some sensitive points – and, for the Christian, our unity in Christ and our need to maintain that unity makes it painful when we differ from our fellow believers.

What I have in mind will be clearer if I say these thoughts were sparked off by recent reports on 'racism' in the Church of England. The C of E is said to have too few black and minority ethnic people in 'senior positions': too few black or minority ethnic Bishops and Archbishops.

I'd suggest the problem goes much deeper. The New Testament includes guidance on a subject that goes to the heart of this problem. It directs us as to the 'shape' of the Church. Not of buildings – but organisation, what's called *Church government*. That might seem very remote, but it's a vital part of Christian living, of following Jesus and allowing his ways to shape our ways – rather than adopting the ways of the world. It goes to the very heart of the problem. The New Testament makes clear the problem isn't that this or that Church doesn't have enough of this or that type of person in this or that position. The problem is the Church having any so-called 'senior positions' in the first place! Hierarchies of leadership are foreign to the New Testament, the Kingdom of God and the life, example and teaching of Jesus.

The New Testament is clear on the subject of 'hierarchy' in the Church of Christ: there is *one* head, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; *all* other members of the Church are *equal* 'members of the body', with *equal* value, mission, ministry and dignity. Paul emphasises this. He stresses *all* in Christ are *equal* (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12); 'all one in Christ Jesus': *there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3.28) *There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!* (Colossians 3.11) The Apostle Peter writes to his 'fellow elders' (1 Peter 5.1: to stress this equality he uses a word that is unique in the New Testament: *sunpresbuteros*.) Similarly, the Apostle Paul repeatedly refers to himself as the least of saints and the chief of sinners (Ephesians 3.8; 1 Corinthians 15.9). In an unfortunate instance in the

Authorised Version of the Bible the translators allowed their bias in favour of a hierarchical Church to influence their translation: Hebrews 13.7, 17: 'those who rule over you', ought to read: 'those who teach and lead you'. There's nothing here about 'rulers' or 'governors' but *teaches* and *guides*. A formal and ordered *ministry* is essential, and is to be given its due respect and, where it puts to us the will and mind of God, is to be obeyed. But that obedience and respect is not at all on account of that individual being in some way a 'superior' Christian or holding a higher class status in the ranks of the followers of Jesus. It simply reflects a particular calling and type of service – one on a par with every other service and calling in the body of Christ. The diversity of ministries of service in the Church is concerned with varied *gifts*, not 'ministry-status'. A formal and ordered ministry is not at odds with the New Testament – but hierarchies are! Cultures, customs and systems of hierarchy form no part of the Church in the New Testament.

If I ask myself – as I do at times! – 'Why am I a Baptist?' I find it difficult to answer. What right have I to stand apart from so many of my brothers and sisters in Christ? It's a serious question, because for rock-bottom beliefs – the Holy Trinity, the deity of Christ, the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible, the place of the great Creeds – I seem to have more in common with my Roman Catholic fellow Christians than many Baptists.

So why am I a Baptist? It is, of course, because I believe in 'believer's baptism'. But that's not my main reason. My main reason for remaining a Baptist is my belief that *all* who are baptised are *equal* members of the body of Christ – *one* in Christ Jesus, with *equal* dignity, value and ministry. Relationships in the Church echo those in God himself: in the Trinity there is no 'greater' or 'lesser', no hierarchy of status, but perfect equality, without any controlling superiority. In heaven Christ is enthroned – while *all* others are bowed in worship before him. In the Church, Christ is the head and *all* others are *equal* members of his body. The New Testament pattern for the relationship of individual Churches, forming the 'body of Christ,' is *not* of hierarchies – but *fellowships of autonomous, self-governing local Churches.*

Maybe this seems far from everyday life. But in reality it's all about everyday life. So Philemon (the 'master') and Onesimus (the 'slave') become *brothers* in the Lord: '*receive him back, no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother*'. (Philemon 16) Paul then delivers the coup de grace: *receive him [the slave] as you would receive me [the Apostle]*. (verse 17) The same Holy Spirit lives in each and redefines their relationship. The problem isn't who fills 'senior positions' – the problem is *senior positions!* The problem is 'high' office! If it's thought equality doesn't matter, well and good – keep hierarchies. If it's thought the New Testament is irrelevant, well and good – keep hierarchies. But inequality can't be eradicated in a system based on inequality!¹

In the Kingdom of God all is to be done under the cloak of humility, servanthood: here the 'master' is 'the servant of all', the first last, the greatest the

¹ Anglican hierarchies include Archbishops, Primates, Metropolitans, Diocesan Bishops, Suffragans, Assistant Bishops, Archdeacons, Deans, Rural Deans, Provosts, Canons, Lay Canons, Prebendaries, Parish Priests, Parsons, Rectors, Vicars, Priests-in-Charge, Provosts, Incumbents, Chaplains, Curates, Postulants, Deacons, Lay ministers, Deaconesses, Readers, etc.

least, the highest the lowest – all one! Every notion of self-importance, of self-assertiveness must be cut down; pruned and refused again and again! Our aim is to imitate Christ; to conform to his self-denying love, a crucified life. No ‘inferiors’ and no ‘superiors’, no ‘super-ordination’, no hierarchy.

Full ministry in the life of the Church isn't *promotion* to a privileged status, to a ‘senior position’, previously occupied and enjoyed by the ‘elite’. The Lord's purpose in pouring out his Spirit on *all* his people is to equip *all* to *serve*, *all* to shoulder, with Christ, the yoke of the Father's will. This is the Lord's example: he *‘emptied himself, taking the form of a servant’*.

Reaction to these ‘isms’ in the Church is expressed in demands for ‘promotion’, and looks for all the world like a secular protest. While the person most highly blessed, most greatly used, most privileged, most holy was a woman without office, without public position or formal ministry; having no place in society, no religious or clerical position; not a ‘priest’, or ‘Bishop’, or ‘Archbishop’ – nor did she express any desire for any such role. She was virtually unknown; almost a child. She shows the ‘lowest place’ is no barrier to supreme honour, privilege or mission but its essential qualification. Such was the mother of our Lord.

“Whan maistrie [mastery] comth, the God of Love anon,
Beteth his wynges, and farewell, he is gon.”

Geoffrey Chaucer, 1343-1400

The arrogant person is like a black hole. In order to acquire some energy and thus to be able to ‘shine’, he sucks up all light into himself, not knowing that precisely because of this he no longer reflects a single ray and so is wholly darkness. The humble person is already bright: whatever he receives he passes on, and he ‘shines’ precisely because he doesn't clutch at things. Because he readily transmits the borrowed light that falls on him, he himself becomes light. Love and mission are one.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Give me the lowest place: not that I dare
Ask for that lowest place, but Thou hast died
That I might live and share
Thy glory by Thy side.

Give me the lowest place: or if for me
That lowest place too high, make one more low
Where I may sit and see
My God and love Thee so.

Christina Rossetti

You my Lord could not stoop lower to teach me humility, and I, to respond to Your love, desire to put myself in the lowest place and share Your humiliations ...

St Thérèse of Lisieux