

Bringing the unchanging word of God

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Starving Britain



*Is the church suffering a
famine of hearing*

the words of the Lord, asks JON GARVEY

THERE HAS BEEN a growing concern recently within the British evangelical community, and particularly amongst thoughtful Charismatics, about the place of the Bible in today's churches. *Prophecy Today* drew particular attention to this matter by two articles in the September/October edition.

Clifford Hill's editorial endorsed the North American Convocation on Revival in calling for a return to a more biblical and theological gospel. They have resolved to 'become more theologically serious, and to preach and teach more accurately and courageously the whole counsel of God, especially those great doctrines which our Father has chosen to bless in past seasons of lasting revival'.

His words were echoed in a letter from Charles de Lacy: 'It was through the preaching of doctrinal truths and, in the process, making demands upon the congregation, that revival came to the church...'

I am sure many readers would agree with the desire to see a more prominent place for God's written word, but the 'spurning of our biblical heritage', to use Dr Hill's phrase, is so widespread that I fear some readers may simply be unaware of what all the fuss is about.

There is a danger that the appeal to go 'back to the Bible' may just be seen as the latest in a long line of ways to give the Church an instant 'fix'. Recently we

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have had the 'Toronto blessing'. Prior to that were the 'Kansas City prophets' and 'signs and wonders', and even before that 'spiritual warfare', 'deliverance ministry', 'the power of praise' and various other phenomena spawned within the Charismatic movement. It is only when one groups all these together that one realises these 'movements of the Spirit' bear a remarkable resemblance to the fashions and fads found in the world of music or clothes. The phrase 'God is doing a new thing' (Isaiah 43.19 - look it up!) seems to be used to mean 'God has a great new idea', which trivialises the 'God who never changes' in a way almost blasphemous.

The common feature of these trends is that they all require very little effort on the part of believers, apart from an openness to the particular phenomenon in question. If we are only receptive to what God is doing, we are repeatedly told, then revival will come, souls will be saved, lives will be changed and, in some views at least, Christ will return forthwith.

In one sense that is very true. The glory of the Gospel is that God, through the work of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, is the sole author of everything that salvation brings. We can add nothing to it by our efforts. But that is a far cry from saying that the fruits of the Gospel can come instantly and automatically, which has been the thrust of so much teaching in the last thirty years.

I fear that the churches have become so entrenched in such thinking that 'reformation of doctrine' will be seen by many as no more than a move towards teaching based on a verse from the Bible, rather than on somebody's 'picture' of a hot-air balloon, or looking at a meditation-stone, or whatever. But that, unfortunately, is not what such reformation is about, and very few churches are in any position even to make a start on what is actually required.

If we look at what lay behind the work of the reformers of old, at whatever period, we find a very different spirituality from what is seen today. Whether we look at the very earliest like John Wycliffe or John Huss, or at the sixteenth century reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin and the rest, or at the seventeenth century saints like Richard Baxter, John Owen and Blaise Pascal, or at the eighteenth century revivalists like George Whitefield, the Wesleys and Jonathan Edwards, or even at preachers like Charles Spurgeon in the last century, then one characteristic is common to all.

That characteristic is an unquenchable zeal for the arduous labour of understanding and applying the deep truths of the word of God. All these men, filled with God's Spirit and deeply in love with Christ, spent their lives in rigorous study of theological doctrine before they would dare teach it to others.

They read the Scriptures in their original languages, so as to be able to refute the traditional interpretations given by the Roman church. They were totally familiar with the writings of the Church Fathers, the Medieval Scholastic theologians, and their own contemporaries, so that they could both benefit from what the Spirit had taught others and avoid repeating old errors. They recognised the importance of difficult doctrines like original sin, atonement and election and made sure that their own teaching did not ignore or contradict them.

How many of our teachers today have begun to consider these truths, on which the Reformation was built? How many have even read the works of the reformers themselves? Martin Luther is apparently only remembered as an anti-semitic bigot. John Calvin is dismissed as the man who invented predestination. The Puritans, who did more to bring Spirit-filled Christianity to England than we can imagine, are held up by Christians as an example to avoid. As for the Church Fathers, their works are no more familiar, even to those with theological training, than those of Father Christmas.

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As Clifford Hill says, 'the key to revival lies in our own repentance'. But even repentance, dare I say it, is seen by our superficial age as a single key to unlock the door to every kind of blessing. And yet when Luther nailed his famous 95 theses to the door at Wittenburg, thus lighting the fuse of the Reformation, the very first words read: 'When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says repent, he means that the whole life of believers upon earth should be a constant and perpetual repentance'.

And in the same way, when Christ tells us to read the Scriptures, he means that our whole lives should be spent in grappling with them as the very words of God; and especially so if we presume to call ourselves leaders in the Church.

Paradoxically, it has never been easier to study Scripture seriously. Virtually every Christian is educated to GCSE level - that has not been so in any other age. And yet most of us today would hesitate even to open books that were studied carefully by semi-illiterates in the past; we would rather listen to cassettes containing 'teaching' with little or no reference to biblical truths.

Study guides and commentaries on the Bible are easily available for believers of every intellectual level. And yet many of us never do more than read daily devotional notes.

There are more Bible Schools open than ever before - though admittedly not all of the same quality - and even for those leaders who have missed the opportunity for full-time study, there are many correspondence courses available. But sadly, there are too many church-leaders who stopped studying when they left college, apparently believing that the Spirit is somehow quenched by the drinking in of his word!

God is calling on his church to repent, is he not? But repentance means a change of mind and a change of direction. A turning away from something and towards something else. Are we prepared, then, to make our repentance more than just a confession of sin? Are we prepared to turn away from faith without theology and teaching which pays only lip-service to the Bible? Are we prepared for the continuing commitment of getting to grips with the Scriptural truths for which our spiritual forbears laboured and died?

For the sake of God's kingdom in Britain, I pray that we are.



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