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Religious Results

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IN A RECENT DISCUSSION with a friend, our conversation turned to the state of Christianity in the country. Of particular interest was the state of the churches. During this discussion, a number of issues were identified.

Ignorant Clergy

First, the very poor quality of the clergy. This was an interesting comment by my friend, since he is a lecturer in a theological college. This perceived lack of quality in the clergy may or may not reflect on the quality of the theological colleges in the country. For example, many ministers do not maintain their skills in Hebrew and Greek that they learn in college. Within a year, most of them will have reverted to using an English language Bible, using Greek and Hebrew lexicons as an aid to study if they maintain any use of the biblical languages. This robs them, however, of mastering the original language, of understanding the nuances in words that only comes with familiarity with a language. In turn, this robs the people of the meaning of Scripture.

While it is true that books, videos and audio tapes can be an aid for lay people, the fact is a majority of Christians do not read serious Christian books. Ask the manager of any Christian bookstore to verify this. Many Christians are thus relying on the Sunday sermon (perhaps with the aid of a midweek Bible study) as their means of gaining understanding of the Scriptures. If the pastor is not committed to maintaining his Hebrew and Greek, he may not also be committed to further serious Bible study once he graduates.

The consequences are disastrous for the ordinary Christian.

Poor Preaching

Second, students are being graduated from college without the rhetorical skills to aid in their preaching. Public speaking, like other forms of human endeavour, is something that requires skill and ability. These skills can be learned. This does not mean that every preacher will be a great preacher, but it does mean that ordinary men can preach a passable sermon. For example, most preachers could learn the use of illustrations to make a point, the use of repetitions and expressive sentences that compel people remember what is said. They can also learn to have good eye contact with the congregation. Even if current pastors could only gain a small increase in their skills in these areas, it is not outrageous to suggest that such an improvement could have a major impact in the life of our churches.

Lack of Understanding

Third, a lack of understanding of what the Bible really teaches. I have made reference to this point in my article *Reformation or Decline: or Where are the Protestant Protestants?*¹ When truth is no longer considered important, when ideas are merely a matter of opinion, preaching becomes not a declaration of what God has revealed but a collection of the speaker's opinions about what he thinks the Bible *might* teach us. Too many preachers are willing to offer us a collection of other men's views while lacking the boldness to declare what they really believe the Bible teaches.

Irrationality

Fourth, it is clear that the worldly philosophies of our day have infected those within the church to a greater extent than many realise. Rushdoony, in analysing the flow of human thought in relation to the doctrine of the One and the Many², makes the observation that Immanuel Kant "sought a new foundation for knowledge, one neither dependent on spiritual or material substances, not dependent either on God or on sense impressions as representations of things-in-themselves. Kant was working towards cutting the umbilical cord which bound man to God and the universe."³ The result is the autonomy of the human mind. Whatever it thinks is real, and reality is completely isolated from the external world. Thus, "a Kantian interpretation of religion is thus inescapably and radically humanistic. . . . A new 'objectivity' was claimed by Kant; not what the mind of God has decreed, but what the mind of man reveals *a priori* is the objective truth." Consequently, "instead of being made complementaries, faith and knowledge are given separate domains, so that faith by definition is not grounded on nor a form of knowledge. Knowledge must be purged of God, and it must also be purged of any necessity of corresponding with objective reality, with things-in-themselves."⁴

It is this radical separation of religion from knowledge that is a major contributor to the dilemma that faces us in our churches. At the very least, it is a plausible explanation of why we find ourselves in the current situation. What other explanation is there to indicate why the ministers of today so poorly understand

1. F.A.C.S. REPORT, October, 1996, Vol. 15, No. 10.

2. Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy*, Craig Press, 1971.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

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what the Bible teaches? It must be because they do not think that understanding the Bible is critical to the Christian religion.

A low view of the Bible, therefore, produces disastrous results in preaching. If religion is separated from knowledge; if religion, in the long run, is no more than the opinion of the person speaking at the time; then it is dangerous to be too specific about anything. Thus, for example, sin is denounced in a general way, but little or no reference is made to specific sins — especially the specific sins of the present audience. Congregations are exhorted to "be more holy" but they are not told what it means to be more holy. Nor are they told where their present failings lie. And if their present failings are not exposed, then why should they "be more holy"? Perhaps they are already holy enough.

It is this underlying irrationality from the pulpit that indicates that worldly thought, Kantian in origin, rules the day. It is not just that we have poor theology in our churches that is the problem. We might well argue that dispensational theology with its disparagement of Old Testament teaching has left many Christians without specific teaching to address the issues of the day. This is true. But it does not explain the lack of *desire* in the people to find the biblical answers. Either people don't *want* to find the answers, or they don't believe that the biblical answers are relevant. Both are possibilities.

Schizophrenia

Fifth, this translates into a lack of action on the part of Christians. While it is

easy to criticise many of the activities at the local church level, doing something is usually better than doing nothing. In a church of over 200 people, a recent planned VBS was cancelled because they could not get enough volunteers to help. They could not raise the five or six people needed to run the program for the week.

Perhaps a part of the problem is that the people are tired of programs that produce little or no results. And it is the lack of results that my lecturing friend correctly identified. In the business world this lack of results would eventually result in dismissal, after the proper processes of training and work review had taken place. In the church scene, the minister placing himself on the "available for call" list, supported by words "God's calling me to other places" is often the equivalent to dismissal. Just as well, for the congregation in his present church, frustrated by the lack of results, was about to tell him to go.

In defense of the clergy, it should be said that the fault does not always lie with them. When church elders and deacons lack the will to deal with issues that are raised by the minister, there is little he can do. He can, of course, find another church to go to — maybe. But how does he know things will be any better elsewhere? In the present economic climate, where many churches cannot afford to maintain a minister, employment options are scarce. In ordinary men, this leads to a silent acquiescence to conditions that the minister may not necessarily agree with. In these times in which we find ourselves, however, we need clergy who will become extraordinary men. And people become extraordinary by producing results. Extraordinary people usually are not recognized by their talk, no matter how good they are at it. They are recognized for the things they achieve.

Results

IT IS THE LACK OF RESULTS orientation in the local church that further indicates the tenacity with which Kantian thought rules, even in the church. If religious life and practice are separated from knowledge and reality, then it is not possible to make religion a matter of results. Results occur in the real world. They are tangible. They are recognizable. They may be to a large degree, measurable. They have an impact somehow, that is why they are recognized.

The achieving of results, however, requires a discipline in the life of everyone committed to success. A violinist becomes good by practicing daily; a champion athlete does the same. A business that wants results will plan activities that can be measured and monitor the results closely. The local church cannot expect to have results if it continues to divorce itself from the very disciplines that will allow it to set and achieve predictable goals.

The church needs results-oriented clergymen. Unfortunately, the theological training colleges do not always train for results. Colleges are academically oriented. They are results oriented only insofar as having students write short papers on theological topics. Most are not geared to producing superior students. They could demand a 30,000-word essay, but they'll settle for 1,500, maybe 5,000 if its a serious subject; they could demand that students master an understanding of theology, but they often graduate students incapable of thinking clearly and who, eventually, undermine the faith of the laity.

If we are not careful, however, we could graduate results oriented students who can put bottoms on seats but cannot teach the people. In all things there should be balance. And if it is recognized that some graduates are good at one area but not another, this only increases the demand for team-work, allowing people to develop their particular gifts, working in conjunction with others.

The true success of the church cannot be measured in terms of congregational numbers or the amount of money raised in church offerings. It can be measured to the extent that the congregational members have a right understanding of God's Word, that they exhibit a maturity in biblical knowledge and understanding, and that their lives translate this understanding in practical outworking: helping neighbours, the poor and needy — and defending the truth.

Evangelical Disarray

WHERE DOES THAT leave us? With evangelicalism in disarray, according to one pastor. In the words of Monte Wilson:

The Institutional Evangelical Church is a Frankenstein's monster that devours the faith of the young, the life of the authentic and the brains of the serious believer. Its agenda is to be popular rather than prophetic, mystical rather than holy, successful

rather than obedient and to entertain rather than worship.

- When members who can't even tell you the names of the 12 Apostles are permitted to vote on the acceptance or rejection of a spiritual leader, the church is in trouble.
- When Christians evaluate their leaders by the standard of Mr. Rogers rather than that of the Apostle Paul, something is seriously wrong.
- When pastors who have never even heard of the Chalcedon or Athanasian creeds nor understand the importance of the doctrines these creeds confess, are permitted to hold office, something is out of whack.
- When people, leaders and lay people, are sacrificed for the sake of doing everything possible to pay for buildings and programs, the church has fallen into idolatry.
- When church members place more value on programs, nurseries and getting out of church by noon than on the quality of teaching, the frequency of the Lord's Supper and the church's commitment to its Lord, that church is in danger of having its candlestick removed (Revelation 2:5).
- When church leaders are not permitted to hold their members accountable to the Word and the church's covenant, we do not have a church, we have a religious club.
- When sentimentalism, melancholy and frenzy are thought to be the primary evidences of God's presence, the church has become mentally ill.⁵

Knowing what is wrong is only the first step. It is necessary to fix what is wrong in order to make things right. And this is where everyone gets stuck. There is no reform. And there is no reform because there is no program of reform.

We're back to results, in case you missed it. No plan = no action = no results. Here everyone sits, frustrated on the one hand because they'd like to see things improve, but on the hand somewhat content by the fact that because there is no plan they can sit on the side-

lines smugly doing nothing about the state of affairs.

Perhaps here lies the real problem: the fact that good men will continue to talk about it but not present a comprehensive plan of reform that will attract the keenest, the brightest, those who are serious about their faith and what it means. In other words, we lack leadership. And we have no leadership because we do not train leaders: we train people to preach.

In turn, the preachers, who are intellectually oriented, can feel threatened by leaders. As Gary North has said, there is only one qualification of a leader: he needs followers. Preachers don't often attract followers; leaders do.

Leaders, however, are results oriented. While they may talk a lot, their talk is generally slanted towards achieving some kind of outcome. It may be no more than having the congregation learn the basics of the Christian faith, something which could be objectively and informally tested to determine if the results were achieved. It could also be no more than reaching out into the community with the gospel, applying the faith in everyday life in a way that makes the faith attractive to a world that has lost its way. There are, of course, more radical programs, such as influencing parliaments on issues such as abortion, euthanasia, gambling, prostitution, and — dare we say it — sound money. We need to be faithful in the small things before we try the larger areas of concern.

Our difficulty is getting that first swing at the ball that connects in such a way that we get a chance to move to first base. Our batting average is poor. There are no home runs, and some of us strike out or are run out. For the greater majority, they don't even get to play on the team, simply because there is no team.

No team. No program. No goals. No objectives. No direction. No leadership. Nothing. Just emptiness. Not only inside the people, but increasingly inside the churches.

What Can Be Done?

HERE COMES the difficult part. We need results. We need something tangible that can be recognized by all as results. They may not be great results. They may be small, but they will, nevertheless, be results.

To get these results, we need a plan. Each one of us needs a plan. What is your plan? Can you tell others what it is? If you can't, you probably don't have a plan that is likely to produce results. Is your plan specific enough to be able to measure your *progress* toward those results? If not, you will probably give up because any worthwhile plan will be a long term plan. Without the ability to see progressive movement in the direction of achieving those plans, motivation can easily fall off. The plan will abort.

A plan does not need to be complex. This comes later, when smaller, easier plans have been achieved. Maybe the plan is no more than to invite one person to your church in the next year. If everyone in your church did that, you'd double the size of the church in a year. Isn't that what we want?

Perhaps our failure here is that while we like to talk about our faith, we really are insufficiently convinced about its truthfulness. So, we really are afraid to talk to others outside of the faith. Fear is a debilitating thing, since it creates inaction. Fear of losing a job, losing friends, prestige, power, promotion, money, can all contribute to an unwillingness in Christians to remain silent about their faith. This is, of course, exactly what the devil wants.

Perhaps we don't evangelize because we really are incapable of telling others what we believe. There is nothing shameful in this, by the way. To recognize our shortcomings is the first step to overcoming them. But if we maintain this inability year in and year out so that we end up going to our grave without ever learning to speak to others, then somehow we too may have failed in our walk with God. Perhaps our plan then might be to read just one book on how to tell others about the faith. Maybe our plan is to ask our pastor and others in our church how to talk about our beliefs. Without such a plan, it is unlikely to occur. That is the bottom line.

Underneath this, however, is our level of commitment to our plan. What will we do to see it through? Most people give up when the going gets tough. But giving up, if it is done too often, becomes a pattern of behaviour. This is the pattern we see in the Israelites after their deliverance from Egypt. They were enamoured with the idea of freedom. They hated slavery. They hated living under the yoke of Egyptian bondage. But that was preferable to the pain and suffering they might have to bear in order to inherit

5. From *Classical Christianity*, Vol. 1, No. 7, PO Box 22, Atlanta GA 30239 USA.

the promised land. "The giants are too big." "The food is monotonous." "Our leaders aren't the ones we selected." All these became excuses to return to Egypt and bondage. People blamed God for the circumstances in which they found themselves, and on more than one occasion Moses had to intercede with God on their behalf. Who will intercede on *our* behalf?

Conclusion

SO HERE'S THE CHALLENGE. What will we *do*? What are we *will- ing* to do? It does not have to be much. But it does have to be something. Complaining about our church elders and ministers, an easy trap to fall into, is not the solution. Criticising others who are doing something is not the answer ei-

ther, since their action is often a better example to follow than our criticism.

What *results* are we willing to commit to? That is the question we need to ask ourselves. And we must ask it until we devise an answer. Maybe it will take us a little while before we can answer it satisfactorily, but answer it we must. To continue to sit in no-man's land without producing results for the Kingdom of God is just as much an answer as any other. It is, unfortunately, not the answer we should provide. It is just such an attitude that has led Christendom to its demise, and the "Israelites" now find themselves back in bondage. It may be debatable whether or not we live under the same kind of bondage as the Israelites. But remember one thing: their bondage was measured by the amount of time and the amount of economic wealth they produced for their political

overlords. Dare we measure our bondage in any other way?

For some, economic bondage, a consistent supply of food in return for labour, is better than the promised land. But like the Israelites of old, they think the price is too high, the giants are too large, the food too monotonous, the criticism from friends and family too great, and they don't really believe that, in the long run, God will grant them the victory they desire.

Results. What are we seeking? What are *you* seeking? What price will we pay to achieve results for God's Kingdom? Are we really committed to giving our all to Christ? The results produced in life will bear testimony to the level of our convictions and commitment. Or, in biblical language, "by their fruits you will know them."