

Methodism in a Strange Land?

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This time last year ‘Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land’ was published.¹ I wrote the book because, as President of the Conference in 2005, I had stated that Methodism had possibly only five years before its *kairos* opportunity was lost.² Twelve years have gone by and our membership has decreased by a third.

Although written as an easy read,³ I have been surprised both by popularity of the book and by its impact at local level. I have had to produce a study guide and order a second reprint. Comments range from ‘It’s the most exciting book I have read’ to ‘It’s such a depressing message. I thought we were on the edge of Pentecost.

The book has had a knock-on effect. I have addressed several synods; been invited to speak in the New Room Bristol, Sarum College, Salisbury and Queen’s College, Birmingham. It was introduced to the Nottingham and Derby synod, I have explored it in Oxford with personnel from the Northampton District and with the superintendents of the London District. In addition I have led church, circuit and district study days. There has also been further interaction through my web page.⁴ My presentations have triggered good responses – some quite explosive. I should have anticipated this given the polemical character of my writing.⁵ The ‘flaws’ in the book are now all too obvious to me. This essay is a reflection on some of the conversations that have surfaced on my travels.

The Changed Context.

The world situation has changed dramatically over the past twelve years. I describe some of these changes concluding with the rise of ‘populism’, Brexit, Donald Trump & North Korea. These illustrations of global volatility have unfortunately been ratcheted up still further by the recent events in Salisbury and by the chemical weapons attack in Syria. What I failed to mention in the book was the rise of ‘Post Truth’.⁶

Professor Martin Conway of Oxford has spoken of a huge paradigm shift taking place. ‘2016’, he said, ‘was a liminal year of equal significance to 1914 and 1945 when familiar

ways of doing things came to an end'.⁷ In my travels I kept asking 'Are we in the midst of a global paradigm shift?' In the Oxford gathering this question was addressed but without arriving at any conclusions. This question is **key** to everything that follows, since if such a paradigm shift is taking place (which I believe to be so) then many of the ways in which the Church presently does mission are no longer valid.

I devote two chapters of my book to 'Babylon' and to 'Exile?' The Babylon metaphor has been severely mauled on nearly every occasion. During the question and answer session in the South East synod it was pointed out that Babylon provided wonderful opportunities for new 'fresh expressions' projects. 'We in the traditional inherited church are the people 'singing the strange songs' . We should be exploring and singing the songs of Babylon because God is very present there.

At Queen's College a former Secretary of Conference declared 'I thank God for Babylon'.⁸ He explained that Babylon's demands for transparency and accountability have forced the Church to face the disturbing realities of its own hidden life.

At a very recent meeting at Wesley's Chapel, City Road, an Old Testament scholar, explained to us that Babylon was an incredibly creative place for the Jews.⁹

My interpretation is too negative. A re-writing of chapters is required but will it change my conclusions?

Methodism Now

'Every day fifty thousand people become Christians'.¹⁰ The world Church continues to grow numerically as does global Methodism in its various forms; but not here. The secular consumer values of Babylon penetrate our ecclesiastical systems. Mammon is God.¹¹ I argue that our connexional system is particularly susceptible to the malign influences of Babylon. This leads to ministers becoming managers. Mechanical solutions are readily embraced without recourse to theological reflection.

Saying that our connexional system has atrophied into a grinding bureaucratic machine was challenged,¹² as was my quoting of Martin Percy's statement that 'our bureaucracy is

stifling our democracy and democracy has triumphed over theocracy'.¹³

I realize I have overstated my case, though some of my critics agree that theology is not as influential in Methodism as it ought to be.

My comments about the 'spiritual emptiness' of much of our worship was almost universally taken up. It seems that we do have a real problem. I note, however, that there may be generational factors operating here. Supernumerary ministers applauded what I was saying while the younger ministers were often silent. Quite a number of lay people voiced their frustration at the shallowness of Methodist worship and preaching. What I was not expecting was a theological conversation about transcendence and immanence. This thrilled me. What do these terms signify in a context of Babylon?

My mention of Methodism's need to repent¹⁴ triggered lively discussions in a couple of places. I had insisted that Methodism has secularized 'repentance' and responds to this gospel imperative with mechanical activities. 'Let's do things differently and change things!' The list is endless: worship songs instead of hymns, a music group instead of the organ, chairs instead of pews, rationalizing or altering the structures of circuits and districts. This is not what I understand repentance to be. *Metanoia* is about our relationship with God and demands a total physical, mental and spiritual shift of hearts and minds.

'To tell the Methodist people that they must repent further demoralize them'. This was a comment at another synod. 'The Methodist people feel guilty enough without you adding to their guilt. In any case what have they to repent of?' It was fair point. I explained that Methodism has reduced and marginalized God. The apostle Peter attempted to walk on water but took his eyes away from Jesus and started to sink. We have done the same. We have put God in a box. We have tamed the terror. We have managed the mystery'. We have exchanged deep theology for superficial sound bytes.

I know what repentance can mean for me personally but how does a church repent corporately? It was suggested in the Bristol discussion that to understand 'repentance' we should explore the Old Testament idea of 'lament'. This idea of la-

ment surfaced again in Oxford. It was suggested that in grappling with the problem of sexual abuse within our Church we were attempting to enact repentance.

Future Focus

‘The Babylonian captivity of the Church’ is the title of one of my chapters. Because religion today has become ‘object of consumption rather than ‘a form of obligation’ there is a temptation is to offer ‘cheap grace’.¹⁵ Referring to Martin Luther, I think we must reject present day ‘theologies of glory’ and return to ‘theologies of the cross’ I have therefore gone back on my Conference message that the Methodist Church is ‘On the Edge of Pentecost’ and believe we are being called to live in the liminality of ‘Holy Saturday’.¹⁶ I mention this in my book but do not pursue it. Some people quite properly wanted to hear more. Here is another agenda item to work on!

The question of language was raised in the South-East synod, in Oxford and finally in London. Although words like ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’ may not be understood in a Babylonian context the reality of what they signify is present and pregnant. What do we understand as ‘secular transcendence’? Here is irony. My book’s title poses a question about language which I ignore and fail to address.

In spite of its shortcomings, the book has proved not only to be a theological ‘wake up call’ for a lot of people in Methodism but it has stirred up further questions for me. I am not sure how to proceed but proceed I must. Any suggestions?

NOTES

1. ‘Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: The Future of the Church in Britain. A Methodist Perspective.’ Church in the Market Place Publications. 2017 (StLS). I wrote a short essay on the book in ‘Theology Everywhere’ (June 2017).
2. StLS. p.109.
3. The book, written in three parts (vision, reality, prophecy) with appendix, is 138 only pages and produced in large print.
4. (www.tomstuckey.me.uk)
5. A typical example is ‘Something is very wrong with our church. Somehow we’ve managed to pour water on the burning bush and all we have left is wet ashes.’ (StLS p.vi).

6. Matthew D'Ancona, 'Post Truth: The New War on Truth and now the Fight Back', Ebury Press, London, 1017.
7. Professor Martin Conway is author of 'World Christianity in the 20th Century' (SCM, 2008). In a recent interview he made this declaration.
8. Revd Dr Brian Beck, one time Principal of Wesley House Cambridge and a former Secretary and President of the Methodist Conference had also been invited. Both of us have recently produced books about Methodism. Brian's 'Methodist Heritage and Identity' (Routledge, 2018, £105) is series of scholarly essays very different from mine (the price of the books also reflect this difference).
9. Revd Dr Michael Thompson drew insights from his book ('Isaiah's Open Book', Church in the Market Place, 2008).
10. StLS, p.45.
11. Justin Welby, 'Dethroning Mammon: Making Money Serve Grace', Bloomsbury 2017.
12. both Brian Beck and Helen Cameron gave a lot of clarification here.
13. StLS, p.83.
14. StLS p.145.
15. StLS, p.63.
16. StLS, p.135 where I wrongly labelled the occasion as 'Easter Saturday'.

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