

**Singing the Lord's Song
in a Strange Land**

The Future of the Church
in Britain:
A Methodist Perspective

TOM STUCKEY

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DEDICATION

to

Michael Townsend and Angela
Shier-Jones

who encouraged my faith in
Methodism

and

Christine

who keeps my love and faith in God
alive

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Preface

I laughed when someone at church said ‘the Methodist Church is facing meltdown’. Meltdown implies overheating, fire, passion. There’s not much of that in our local church unless you count the arguments we have over removing the pews. When I think about a church overheating I have this picture of 18th-century Methodists in Scunthorpe and Skegness falling down in ecstasy during worship and frothing at the mouth. Today if such overheating took place the minister in charge would halt the proceedings in the interest of health and safety.¹

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.² Has the Spirit abandoned us? Is the Church in Britain finished? I think not.

On 29th June 2004, I had a powerful dream. It occurred on the night before I knew of my nomination as Methodist President.³ It was so vivid that it left me tossing and turning for the rest of the

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night. Was it simply an anxiety dream or did it have prophetic significance?

I was looking in terror across a ravaged landscape. In all directions I saw the littered remains of bodies, consumed, picked clean by birds, scattered by wild animals, scorched by the sun. A terrible battle had taken place. Now it was a desecrated graveyard. In the dream I had actually heard a voice repeating, 'Can these bones live? Can these bones live?'

This dream lay behind my Presidential Address, delivered in 2005 to our Representative Session of Conference meeting in Torquay.⁴ Twelve years on, the question 'Can these bones live?' still haunts me. I am now retired. I continue to preach, teach, visit, give an occasional lecture, contribute to the *Methodist Recorder* and keep my own web site alive.⁵ I have time to read, think, assess and pray.

Was my dream with its promise of Pentecost a delusion or was it really a prophetic vision? Did my Conference Address of 2005 (which I have included in the Appendix) fall on deaf ears? Was it all empty rhetoric? As churches

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continue to crumble I have come to see that Pentecost is about judgement as well as renewal. I spoke of repentance then. I speak of it now.⁶

The world situation has changed dramatically over the past ten years. The failure of the Arab spring, the advent of ISIS, the banking crisis, the hubris of powerful elites, civil wars in Syria, the Yemen and Somalia, the flood of migrants, the ever growing gap between rich and poor, the rise of ‘populism’ demonstrated in Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. On top of this the recent ravings coming from North Korea are ratcheting up levels of global volatility.

It has been suggested that the world is passing through a huge paradigm shift, the likes of which have not been seen for several generations.⁷ According to Duncan Forester, writing in 2001, we no longer stand optimistically at the end of history but had entered a new age of terror where apocalyptic theology becomes an essential tool for the understanding and the stating of truth behind events.⁸ This book is my response to Forester’s challenge. The title gives the game away. The Church, I

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contend, exists in a Babylon which snaps, snarls and beguiles the people of God. I intend to describe this context, set out how it affects the Church before suggesting what the Church in Britain will look like in the future.

As a Methodist I realize that our church is a small player in the global mission of God. Churches rise and fall as Christians in a multiplicity of contexts respond or fail to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It should therefore be clear that I cannot comment on the future of Methodism without considering what is happening to the other churches in Britain. Furthermore, church life here, as in Europe and America, has to be seen within the context of world Christianity.

I have recently been reading some of Tony Benn's writings. He was a person who infuriated many. Some regarded him as a prophet. He did spend time in the wilderness before becoming a 'national treasure' in his old age. The old, he said, usually become pessimistic, but then adds that 'pessimism is a prison into which you incarcerate yourself'.⁹ At the age of 85, Benn wrote of his surprise and delight in

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‘rediscovering idealism’. As I get older I too find myself becoming surprisingly optimistic. This optimism of hope does not spring from idealism. It springs from the Bible. Any particular part of the Bible? The letter to the Ephesians! As you read on you will find the Ephesian vision and hope transfiguring the message of this book.

About footnotes

Don’t ignore them. Some are included to explain Methodist terms to the non-Methodist reader. Others are important glosses on the text. For Methodists worried about whether we shall still be here in twenty years time and who may be tempted to go immediately to the three chapters dealing with our church, I assure you that we do have a future though it will be very different from what you might expect. Dear readers, I encourage you to press on chapter by chapter to discover what God might have in store for us all.

NOTES

1. I found this in an old church magazine.

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Source unknown.

2. John Pritchard, *Something More*, SPCK, 2016
3. The Conference is an annual gathering of representatives, ministerial and lay, of Methodists across Britain and from some of our sister Churches in other parts of the world. Each year they appoint a President who is to represent, and give leadership and inspiration, to the Church.
4. The Conference, meeting for about a week, travels to different locations in England. In its opening session the appointed President delivers an address of his or her choosing. It usually sets out the theme for the year.
5. Google: Tom Stuckey (home)
www.tomstuckey.me.uk
6. 'In our talk of a God of love we have forgotten, that like the raging sea, God is dangerous. We have not only put God in a box but we have become so used to transporting God around in buckets that God has ceased to be God. We have tamed the terror. We have managed the mystery. One thing is required, "we must repent!"'.
(Appendix 2:4)
7. Professor Martin Conway of Oxford has suggested that 2016 may well prove to be a liminal year of significance like 1914 and 1945 when familiar ways of doing things

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came to an end.

8. Duncan Forester, *Apocalypse Now?* Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2005, pp.50f.
9. Tony Benn, *The Last Diaries: A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine*, Ruth Winstone (ed.), Arrow Books, 2014.

Part 1

VISION

THE RICHES OF HIS GRACE

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance amongst the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power to us who believe. (Eph. 1.17–19)

Paul had only ten years of active ministry and spent two of them in Ephesus. I have had nearly 50 years. My first appointment was a pastorate in Armadale, Scotland. Having to preach twice in the same church most Sundays forced me to hone my preaching skills. Fortunately I was also studying part-time at New College, Edinburgh, and this gave me the necessary theological equipment to feed the preaching.

My second appointment was on a council housing estate in Bristol where under the influence of the charismatic movement I

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discovered the experiential power of the Holy Spirit. Since then the context and scope of my ministry has widened, first in a city-centre church in Exeter with University Chaplaincy, then to inner city Manchester with a teaching post in the Northern Federation for Training in Ministry. The latter opened up opportunities to lecture overseas. Then I was sent to Reading as superintendent of a very large circuit with about 20 staff. The Reading circuit was my equivalent to Paul's Ephesus though the challenges were as nothing compared to difficulties Paul had to cope with.

Paul's circuit was huge. The six other churches apart from Smyrna were all inland. To visit them you would have to journey hundreds of miles across the Western end of Asia Minor. It would take days. Ephesus, with its population of 250,000, was the provincial capital of Asia Minor and possibly the third largest city in the Empire after Rome and Alexandria.¹ The capital with its Empire was viewed by some as a re-incarnation of Babylon (1 Pet. 5.13). Paul, as a Roman citizen, appreciated many of its benefits and viewed it in a more kindly light. He was not however blind to the ungodliness, idolatry and wickedness (Rom. 1.18) found in its major cities. Strategically

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placed, Ephesus was a prosperous magical melting pot of religious cultures. Over fifty gods and goddesses were worshipped but Artemis reigned supreme. Her influence permeated the economics of the city.

Ephesus, probably more so than Rome, reflected an Asian culture in which people looked to the stars and shuddered. They felt that their lives were being determined by mysterious malign powers. To escape the tyranny of these unseen forces, they took to religion and superstition just as many today take to drink and drugs. Magic formulae and charms were like forged passports to an imaginary freedom. People escaped reality by embracing fantasy; again a growing feature of today. The 'principalities and powers' were cosmic forces rather than personal demons.² They impregnated the 'spiritual matrix' of Paul's world.

Every age has its own 'spiritual matrix'. Just as Ephesus had its Artemis, we in Britain have the omnipotent 'market god'. Artemis had her awesome temple. We have 'the City' and Canary Wharf. We should not delude ourselves into thinking that false gods disappear in an educated and scientific age like ours. They keep transmuting themselves to reappear in a new guise. Human beings keep creating false gods.

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These external spiritual powers have invaded our political and economic structures. They feed popularism and delusion. Their malign influence pollutes, distorts and corrupts.

Over and against these negativities, the letter to the Ephesians proclaims the wisdom, the wonder and the power of God. It holds up the vision of a world-wide transforming mission.³ It presents us with the vision of a Trinitarian God of limitless resources who wants to shower immeasurable blessing upon us. 'I want you', says the writer,

to have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God. (Eph. 3.14–19)

To obtain the book email mail1@tomstuckey.me.uk.

The author will request a cheque for £12.(which includes postage & packing) made out to Tom Stuckey together with your address and telephone number. If you wish to send the money through PayPal please indicate. On receipt of your cheque he will post off the book.