

Manifesto

Introduction

A little while ago, I was having a coffee with a young chap I know. He had been a Christian for a few years, went to a good church, got involved in various ways, attended services, belonged to small groups; he believed all the right things and generally did all the right things. But it just wasn't working for him.

He loved Jesus and wanted to follow and serve Him, but struggled to see how; the church taught him a lot of Biblical truth and encouraged expressing that love in worship; there was plenty of opportunity to engage in a wide variety of good, Christian activities; but when it came to Monday morning, all he had was an understanding he should be a good person and seek to convert the people around him. Being a good person seemed to achieve very little, and converting the people around him wasn't working out too well, either.

He believed that God had an eternal purpose for his life, but couldn't see how the things he had been taught had any relevance to life outside the Christian activities. Like many Christians I have met, he feared most of his life and work was pointless, filling his time with good works until he got to Heaven and started to really live.

Over the next hour or two, we covered a great deal of ground – some theological and some practical – helping him to pull together what he believed and how he lived. He started to see how eternal life begins here and now, how the Kingdom of Heaven is not just a destination to be sought but also a reality to be created, how he has been called to act as the representative of a God Who rules, not with power, but with sacrificial love.

This document contains something of that conversation, and many other similar conversations with many other people over the years. Very little of it should be a surprise to anyone who has been a part of these conversations, and most of it is mainstream orthodox teaching – just aspects of mainstream teaching we don't articulate very often.

Summary

In brief: ***we are being called to integrate faith and life into a coherent whole; to combine prophetic teaching from a Biblical perspective with prophetic action arising from a place of Spirit-filled rest.***

Prophetic teaching: the Bible says we have to get the big things right; but in practice we often teach people to strain out gnats and swallow camels. The mainstream Church is essentially right about most of the things it teaches, but is significantly mistaken in aspects of what it communicates (sometimes through what it fails to say) about Heaven, Hell, the gospel, salvation and evangelism.

Perspective: the Bible is a helpful and reliable account of God's dealings with many people over the centuries; at the heart of this story is Jesus of Nazareth, Who fully and finally reveals God to us as the Father, Son and Spirit in perfect unity, and Who opens the way to eternal life in relationship with this God and His family.

Prophetic action: the Bible says we have to put our faith into practice; but much of our attention is directed at telling people to attend church, pray and lead moral lives. This is a good starting point, but wholly inadequate for building a community of disciples which is seeking first the Kingdom of God. We have to love our neighbour both individually (personally) and corporately; the challenge is to start with what we have, then to receive the training and support we need, not only to do it well but also to build the structures required to enable the life to grow.

Place: the Bible says that though Jesus' death and the Spirit's indwelling presence, we already have everything we need for life and godliness; we inhabit a Spirit-filled place of rest and peace even when we are engaged in intense struggle; our activity is a joyful expression of the life we have received; we are motivated by gratitude, not guilt, freely offering what we have freely received.

Prophetic teaching

Heaven: the Bible says the Kingdom of Heaven is the place of love and peace where God's will is done, we are to inhabit it and work and pray to make it a reality for others here and now; but we teach people that Heaven is the place we go to when we die. We turn the Kingdom of Heaven from a vital instrument for social change into a final destination which is totally disconnected from how we live here and now.

Hell: the Bible says that the ultimate fate of those who choose to reject God is destruction; but we teach people that God will torment them for all eternity, and we have to be happy about this, which has the effect of turning the loving Heavenly Father of the Bible into a sadistic monster, and making us seem insensitive.

Gospel: the Bible tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is coming, so we must turn our back on the ways of this world and follow Jesus in building the Kingdom; but we tell people the gospel is about believing that I am a sinner and that Jesus died for me.

Salvation: the Bible says that salvation is about loving God with everything I have and loving my neighbour as I love myself, it is about growing in wholeness and relationship with God and neighbour; but we teach that salvation is about me, about believing the right doctrines, trying to be good and going to Heaven when I die.

Evangelism: the Bible says that evangelism is about communicating the good news of the Kingdom with love and power and calling people to a life of sacrificial love in the community of God's family; but our evangelism training teaches people to explain a few selected doctrines, telling people about a God of love in a carefully prepackaged way and offering them an individual ticket to Heaven which enables them to live almost exactly they way they did before – apart from attending some extra meetings.

Perspective

The Bible is mostly written for believers and includes many issues important in discipleship and practical living; but the way we approach it often assumes that it is mostly about salvation. We have too small an understanding of salvation, focussing mainly on how to get to Heaven and the doctrines we need to believe in order to get there; so what we teach is mostly true, but incomplete, often unbalanced and without the necessary context for a clear understanding.

The Bible also tells us that we meet God in and through Jesus, and that He shows us perfectly what God is like; but we teach people that the whole Bible is inspired by God (which is true) and therefore all of equal importance, relevance and significance (which is false), or we focus more on the early Church than we do on the Jesus they were (imperfectly) seeking to follow.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all vital in our work and worship: the loving Heavenly Father we are called to love and worship, the Son Who reveals Him and invites us to know Him (in experience as well as head knowledge) and the Spirit Who guards, guides and transforms us, giving us the power to make all this real; but we reduce the Trinity to a test of doctrinal orthodoxy.

Jesus is the full and final revelation of God, which means that nobody and nothing else is: we interpret Moses and Paul in the light of Jesus; all that goes before Him and all that follows after Him must be understood through His words and His deeds.

Jesus calls us to follow Him, which means ongoing and continual fellowship with Him, in community with our fellow followers; it means acknowledging that Jesus is both our master (our Lord Who we must obey) and our model (Who we must emulate, in both His mission and His methods).

Jesus fulfilled the law, so the things the law was given for are still important, but a slavish obedience to the letter of the law while ignoring its purpose is not acceptable. We are called to a growing, loving relationship, and we cannot achieve this through following a set of rules, no matter how well crafted they might be.

Prophetic action

Faith has to be put into practice by loving and serving both God and neighbour. We have to love our fellow believers because we are called to love everyone, because this visible love is a witness to the people currently outside God's family, and because the nature of the love they see being expressed by us will reveal the character of the God we are telling them about and make Him real for them.

Action must be both motivated and shaped by our faith. We must therefore support Christian social action projects in Bristol; as Christians, we must communicate that our faith not only motivates our work, but also shapes the way we do that work, and counter the view that expressing our faith can only be done through evangelism. We must encourage Christians to be active in all forms of social action (loving our neighbour), whether they are explicitly Christian or not. We must practice the traditional Christian disciplines because they enable us to love and serve our God and our neighbour.

Love your neighbour is the bottom line activity of the Church: we are not followers of Jesus if we don't do this. Yet many churches struggle to really connect with people in their local community – partly because they are struggling to put the love into practice, and partly because they have been taught that evangelism should be the occasion of their contact with people, instead of being a natural outworking of the relationship which they are building with these people. We love our neighbour because the God we worship is love, so any attempt to use 'love' as a tool – for evangelism or for anything else – is fundamentally wrong.

Making disciples is the primary function of our church life, training the followers of Jesus, equipping them for increasingly effective service and preparing them to speak and act for Jesus in a society which is increasingly hostile to the public expression of faith, partly as a consequence of a misguided ‘secular’ totalitarian movement which masquerades as liberalism; but our discipleship courses mainly focus on teaching people to believe the right doctrines, with little guidance on how they can be put into practice.

Power: all human action has a political and an economic dimension; even our theology is a human activity and cannot be understood without reference to politics and economics, without addressing the basic questions – who has the power, how do they use it, and what is their agenda? We cannot avoid politics and economics, but we can be aware of our own involvement and lack of objectivity.

Place

Blessing: the world tells us we must be good if we want to receive God’s blessing, but the Bible says that though Jesus’ death and the Spirit’s indwelling presence, we already have everything we need for life and godliness.

Peace: we do not need to be anxious about anything because God loves us and is able to deliver on His promises, so our peace does not depend on external circumstances.

Gratitude: our activity is a joyful expression of the life we have received; we are motivated by gratitude, not guilt, freely offering what we have freely received; our lives have meaning because of our God-given relationships, work and purpose.

Rest: the children of Israel entered God’s rest, the promised land, and immediately engaged in long term, intense warfare; we experience peace, God’s rest, through our relationship with Jesus and His family, even when we are in the middle of conflict.

Power: the Bible says that our salvation and effectiveness depend on God’s character and power, not on our own strength, intellect or goodness; the power comes from Him, so we do not have to pretend to be strong and have all the answers.

Further details

If this speaks to you, *please let me know*. What part of this is important to you? What is unimportant? What do you feel has been missed, or glossed over? What would you like to change, or to know more about? What do *you* want to say? If this matters to you, can you help us to explore these issues and how we might live them? On our own, we can do very little; together, who knows?

If you have any questions or would like more details, please visit the *Strong Foundations* web site (<http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>), where we are exploring how to build a community of people who think these ideas matter, and how they might be put into practice.