

# **STRONG FOUNDATIONS**

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

## **What We Already Know**

### **Introduction**

There was a meeting in June 2016 about the Church community working together for the good of the city. The people who contributed made the point that we need to hear God speak, we need to hear what God is saying to us. And that, of course, was and is true.

But I believe we already know quite a lot about what God is saying to us. I believe that He expects us to act on the revelation we have been given, and as we follow in obedience we will receive greater clarity and further revelation as we need it. He guides us as we walk with Him; we don't get the whole roadmap of the journey right at the start.

So what do we already know God is saying?

### **Unity**

“I pray that they may be one”

Unity is a spiritual reality: there is only one Body of Christ. Unity requires relationships: we have to love and trust each other if this spiritual truth is to be lived out, made real in our experience and made real in a way that the world can see.

Social action is not only the way we obey Jesus' command to love our neighbour, it is also the key means by which we build healthy relationships across the social, theological and denominational barriers. Building relationships of love and trust as we work together requires commitment (there will be a cost) and new structures (or, at least, modified) structures: the old wineskins are not flexible enough, they cannot do the job which needs to be done right now. (If we already had the commitment and structures we need, we would be doing it already!)

### **Opportunity**

“For such as time as this”

We have been given an opportunity to play a part in reshaping our city. We will either grasp that opportunity or allow it to pass by and let others shape the future as they see fit. Grasping this opportunity will mean change: we cannot do what is needed by continuing with business as usual, or even by working harder at the things we are already doing. Change is risky, change is uncomfortable, but it is coming. The only question is whether we choose to participate in a new way, or opt out.

## The Poor

“When I was hungry”

We rightly focus on the poor, weak, vulnerable and dispossessed while remembering that God loves and wants the best for everyone, even the rich. The initial stages of caring for the poor are easy: if someone is hungry, you feed them. Beyond that, it gets much harder: the command is to love, not ‘do things for’. Love means relationship and vulnerability. It means we come alongside to serve instead of dispensing goods and advice from above.

There are inevitable structural issues. Every organisation seeking to help others faces two key challenges: firstly, helping puts us in a position of power; and secondly, in order for us to be successful, other people have to need us. It is hard to avoid any system of helping which does not, to an extent, use and manipulate the people being helped; and while we may want to empower people rather than leave them continuing to depend upon us, achieving this in reality is always incredibly difficult and messy. We have to remember that those of us who are seeking to love and help others are still broken and fallible people ourselves, needing love, support and correction from others.

All of which is to say that helping the poor is incredibly difficult to do in a Godly way, and would be even if we had all the money and resources we need. We need to do our best with what we have while seeking to learn how to love and serve people better, which means (on top of any organisational and structural lessons we learn) that we need to grow and become better people ourselves, closer to Jesus, receiving guidance and strength from His Spirit, understanding His word more clearly and drawing on all the resources of His Body to sustain us.

## Servant Leadership

“As I washed your feet”

As we engage with the city authorities, we must avoid the twin errors: on the one hand, we cannot simply offer to provide resources to enable the authorities to implement their plans; on the other hand, we cannot use our strength and resources to impose our ideas and vision on the city. We must work to build and live an understanding of servant leadership which enables us to engage in the public realm on the basis of our faith without seeking to impose our values and faith on others.

Servant leadership in this context means, I think, two things: firstly, we must find ways in which we can help the city authorities achieve some of their objectives while remaining true to our Lord; secondly, through our love, life and teaching, we must discover and communicate better ways to make the city work for the people who live here, and persuade the authorities using legitimate public channels of the rightness of our ideas, just as any other group in the city is able to do. We must build relationships of trust with the authorities, but we must not use those relationships to make backroom deals - not even to achieve good aims.

We have understood (to some extent, at least) the complicity of the church in the slave trade, and have symbolically repented and received God’s cleansing. But the

church needs to repent of much more than simple complicity in the slave trade: through our weaknesses, failures and sins the church has handed power to the secular humanists who worship power, profit and greed and who seek to deny any expression of faith in the public realm (other than their own). Along with repenting, we need to seek to establish a proper place for faith in the modern world, allowing people to embrace and express the faith of their choice, without allowing them to abuse or harm others in the name of that faith.

### ***Next steps***

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
- Strong Foundations: <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>

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