

# If This Were A Marriage

## The Parable of the Cocktail Party

Perhaps you have been there. Perhaps it wasn't a cocktail party: it could have been an evening in the pub, or round a friend's house. But, wherever it was, you met a couple for the first time. One of the new couple – it's usually the man – talks a lot, the other is mostly silent, and you rapidly pick up on the dynamics of the relationship.

The man talks about himself – his successes, his battles, his plans. “The boss was just saying how well I handled the clients during that difficult spot when they were unhappy last year. I'll do even better when I can get control of the external contracts away from that idiot in Planning. I'm looking to get a bigger house in a year or so, after that promotion comes through. I want a fairly small garden, just enough for a barbecue and a few friends, not too much work. I'm going to Tuscany this Summer – know people there. Did Venice last year – had a wonderful time, didn't we, darling?”

We hear nothing from the partner, other than the fact that she agrees with him whenever asked. But we do hear about her – he repeatedly and enthusiastically praises her: “She is a wonderful woman, couldn't manage without her. Everything I do is for her.”

Their marriage, he says, is the most important thing in his life. At the end of the evening you leave them, feeling sorry for the partner and worried about that marriage.

You may have met his cousin: not nearly so self-assured or successful, but still talks constantly about himself and how important his wife and marriage are to him.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not like that couple at the cocktail party.

## Full of Good Things

I go to many different church services. They are wonderfully varied – in style, in culture, in theology, in volume. Some churches are growing, some are holding on, and others are clearly declining. Some of the services are carefully planned, some much more spontaneous.

But all these services are full of good things: the congregation offer God their praise and worship, whatever the style and volume; people and issues are prayed for, often very sensitively; talks and sermons communicate aspects of God's truth and character.

It is a form of spiritual discipline: to receive what is on offer, to benefit from what is available, to receive what is true and helpful, even when there are details of the theology and practice which I personally disagree with. As a young Christian, I found

myself fixating on the details I disagreed with, on the things that ‘this church gets wrong’ as I saw it, but after a while I discovered that this is not a helpful attitude.

More recently, however, I have been wondering ... not worrying about what the church is getting wrong, but considering what it is getting right, and then wondering: what is missing?

Of course, you will not encounter every aspect of a church’s life in a single service: they may be deeply involved in mission support, or run a regular outreach service in a local Old Peoples’ Home, and just not mention it this time. But you can pick up a great deal about the personality and attitudes of a person or a church in quite a short time, and talking to people after the service gives another window into the life of the church, a degree of insight into the things that are important to the people here.

Almost every church I visit is full of good things: we thank God for the wonders of His creation and for sending Jesus, we thank Jesus for coming to die for us, we thank the Holy Spirit for guiding and protecting and empowering us. We pray for people to be blessed and comforted and healed, we pray for our leaders to be guided and our charities to be resourced. We teach people Christian truth and how to live in a complicated and confusing world.

And almost everything I hear is about us. When we talk about God, it is about the way God saves us and guides us and guards us and waits to receive us when we die. When we talk about creation, it is about our responsibility to care for the world He has given into our hands. When we talk about social action, it is about the difference we can make to the poor and the weak and the vulnerable people around us. And these are all good things – very good. But they are not the gospel Jesus taught.

Jesus came with a clear, simple and consistent message. His message was not, ‘you need to be saved’; His message was not even, ‘you must love one another’, although those were important aspects. His message was, ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is coming – so you need to change, to be part of this coming Kingdom.’

Jesus taught about His Father and His Father’s Kingdom: the character of His Father and the nature of His Father’s Kingdom. He wants us to live as children of His Father and citizens of the Kingdom – and this means we have to change our beliefs, our priorities and our lifestyle. He invites us to join Him in His mission to see the Kingdom established here and now.

Yes, all this has deep implications about what we believe and what we do. But it is not about us! Nor is it about identifying ‘the’ one thing that God is doing and then totally devoting ourselves to that project: the Kingdom is bigger than any single project or program we may want to work on, bigger than any principle we may want to defend.

God is in the business of creating a new world, and invites us to join Him. Jesus tells us to ‘seek first the Kingdom’ but we seek His blessing on our activities; we keep ourselves busy with our projects and programs, and assume that’s good enough; we hope that we have got it right and, if not, that God will restructure His Kingdom in order to make space for our plans and priorities.

I sometimes leave the church service, thinking: if this were a marriage, I would be worried.

## ***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/>
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