

SALTY CHRISTIANS

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Salt in the Salt-Cellar

I would imagine that all of us have heard preachers preach sermons on our calling to be 'salt' in the world, the thrust being 'Get out there! Get stuck in!', with the encouragement that even only a few grains of salt can make a difference.

But how often we ministers have destroyed the sermon by the way in which we have conducted the rest of our ministry. Time and again we have effectively encouraged our people to remain in their religious ghettos. For example:

1. Our preaching on the gifts of the Spirit has given the impression that ministry is church-based. Paul's teaching on the gifts of the Spirit in Romans 12, I Corinthians 12 & 14, and Ephesians 4 may encourage preachers to look inward, for Paul links gifts with 'body ministry'. 'Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church' (1 Cor. 14:12). The 'ministry of the saints' in Eph 4:12 appears likewise to be in the context of 'building up the body of Christ'. I don't want to knock body-ministry. I thank God for the way in which charismatic renewal has helped us to rediscover the ministry of all God's people. But we do the Scriptures an injustice if we limit ministry to the church. The primary ministry of God 's people is in the world.

2. Our teaching on Christian stewardship - along with our stewardship campaigns in the past - has tended to encourage people to see their Christian service within a church context. You think back to those 'time, talent and treasure' response forms. Much, if not all, of the emphasis was on what people could do for the church - arranging flowers, giving out hymnbooks, helping on the fabric team. The clear implication of such stewardship drives was that the church is an institution in need of our support. And yet the primary role of the church is to support people in their ministry in the world!

3. The activities we have laid on for people have given people the impression that quality time for God is best spent on church premises - or, in these days of home groups, spent in church activities. Thank God afternoon Sunday School has disappeared! In the bad old days people could live on church premises morning, afternoon, and night. And yet things have not greatly improved. We still run activities galore. At times I think our churches act like cannibals: they consume people. And those who are not consumed are left with terrible feelings of guilt.

4. Our desire to see people won for Christ and his church has led our people to develop a narrow concept of mission. We talk of Matt 28:18-20 as if it is the only commission Christ left us -indeed, we term it 'The Great Commission'; whereas in fact we neglect 'the greater commission' of John 20:21. Now do not get me wrong: as a keen advocate -and hopefully practitioner -of church growth, I frequently talk about the importance of making disciples; but in the first place we are called to go the way of Christ. To quote two Canadian Baptists, 'the simplest and deepest statement of the mission of the church is found in the words of Jesus, in John 20:21 & 17:18: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you". Here Jesus defines the full incarnational style of the disciples' mission. They are to be in the world in all the ways he came to be with us: physically, aesthetically, culturally, politically, psychologically and spiritually'.¹⁸ In our mission statement at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford we have combined both the 'great' and 'greater' commissions, but significantly put the 'greater' commission first: 'Our mission is to go Christ's way and make disciples'.

5. The close identification of many a ministerial ego with many a church has created a psychological need to emphasise the church over against the kingdom. If ministers are honest, they recognise that busy churches make them feel good - and it is this largely unconscious 'feel good' factor which underlies many of their appeals from the pulpit for people to get involved in this or that church activity. The busier a church is, the better the pastor feels.

¹⁸ Paul Stevens and Phil Collins. *The Equipping Pastor* (Alban Institute. Washington 1993) 132.

The result is that our people get sucked into a whirlpool of the minister's own making-and the world loses out on their ministry.

In the light of such ministerial attitudes, it is not surprising that the ministry of God's people has been largely confined within the church - the salt has remained in the salt cellar. Thus in a survey of 29 urban congregations 70% of the members defined 'ministry of the laity' as 'doing things at church' only. Think what this means. It means that the ministry of God's people is largely confined to their spare time. But this is surely a travesty of what Jesus intended: our calling to be 'the salt of the earth' is a full-time calling. Ministry is not to be limited to '...the discretionary hours of the week... In a church open to the world, ministry is related to all of life, 168 hours a week'.¹⁹ The sad fact is that the clergy have exploited the people of God. They have for the most part failed to support their flock in their primary ministry -they have not affirmed, encouraged or resourced their ministry in the world.

Mobilising Salty Christians

Let's try to be more positive. How can we actively affirm, encourage and resource the people of God in their ministry?

1. First, as church leaders we need in our preaching and teaching to develop a more worldly concept of ministry, expressed through the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In the graphic words of Edward Patey: 'All orders are holy. Plumbers are as much in holy orders as the clergy, serving God and their fellows... Electricians, park-keepers, doctors and typists are all working as much with the things of God as the priest with the sacrament'.²⁰

Clearly such a concept of ministry is very much bound up with a theology of work. But how often do we hear sermons on work? How

¹⁹ Stevens & Collins, *The Equipping Pastor* 126. Also: "The average North American person spends some 88,000 hours on the job from the first day of full-time employment until retirement. Work occupies about 40% of one's waking life. In contrast, a dedicated Christian is estimated to spend as few as 4,000 hours in a lifetime in church meetings and church-related activities" (136).

²⁰ Cited by Mark Gibbs & T. Ralph Morton, *God's Frozen People* (Collins, London 1964) 15. Gibbs & Morton themselves state: "There is no fundamental difference in calling between an Archbishop and his chauffeur, between a prime minister and a parish minister -providing they are both in each case faithful and committed Christians" (14).

often does preaching relate to that which occupies most of the time of most of our people? Is work just a way of earning money, or is it a way in which we contribute to the needs of others? 'If you can't say a deep "Yes" to the work by which you earn your living', says Kenneth Adams, 'you cannot say a deep "Yes" to your life as a whole because work forms such an important part of life'.

²¹ Preachers have the task of enabling their people to come alive, and in the process discovering that their work can be a form of ministry.

A creative way of helping people discover that their work can be a form of Christian ministry is given by an American Baptist, Richard Broholm, who attempted to look at what people do in terms of the threefold office of Christ's ministry as 'priest', 'prophet' and 'king'. For example, in terms of the priestly or pastoral ministry of Christ's body, he writes: 'What we have often failed to see is that the contractor who builds houses, the lab technician who tests for cancer, and the postal worker who bridges the gap between other distant friends are all engaged in a caring ministry even though it is unlike/y they will ever intimately know the persons they serve'. ²² I confess to not being convinced by Broholm's theological analysis of work, but at least he deserves to be congratulated on putting his mind to this neglected area of practical theology.

2. Those of us leading public worship should ensure that our praying goes beyond the needs of the church, and that it has the world - and not least the worldly ministry of God's people in view. Kenneth Adams points out that in the Index of Prayers in the Anglican *Alternative Service Book* 'not one prayer, in that long list of things we should pray for, concerns our ordinary work'

²³ Needless to say, it is not only Anglicans who are at fault!

In *Dynamic Leadership* I suggested that from time to time we might interview within the context of public worship some of our members who are professionally involved in community service - social workers, teachers, policemen, prison officers, health visitors,

²¹ Kenneth Adams, 'The Workplace' in *Treasure in the Field* edited by David Gillett & Michael Scott-Joynt (Fount, London 1993) 218f.

²² Richard Broholm 'Towards Claiming and Identifying Our Ministry in the Work Place' in *The Laity in Ministry* edited by George Peck & John S. Hoffman (Judson, Valley Forge PA 1984) 151f.

²³ Kenneth Adams, 'The Workplace' 218.

doctors and nurses -and pray for them publicly. ²⁴ On reflection, I think that to interview only such people could signal to others that their work is of little consequence to the Kingdom. ²⁵ We should rather make an effort to include people from all walks of life.

A sample interview could include three questions:

- What do you do for a living?
- What are the issues that you face concerning your faith in the context of your daily work?
- How would you like us to pray for you as a church, in your ministry from Monday to Friday?

If this were done on a regular basis -whether weekly, fortnightly, or even monthly - such interviews could help a church make a substantial shift in its priorities in the course of one year. ²⁶

3. In our decision-making meetings we should ensure that our agendas are kingdom-centred rather than church-centred. If the focus of such a meeting is the kingdom of God, then there is no issue which lies outside its orbit. All the major issues of life are of relevance -including those which face us at work and in the local community. There are too many Baptist churches where the focus of the church meeting is on the nuts and bolts of church life. The church meeting is not a church 'business meeting' - or, if it is, then the business we are called to conduct is in the first place God's business, and not the trivia of church life. Issues of detail need to be delegated -and entrusted -to deacons. In decision-making meetings we need to be mindful of the injunction of Jesus: 'Be

²⁴ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Dynamic Leadership* (Monarch, Eastbourne 1990) 88f.

²⁵ See David Field & Elspeth Stephenson, *Just the Job* (IVP, Leicester 1978) 19: 'The tendency to catalogue jobs in some kind of spiritual football league is deeply ingrained in the Christian mind. Way out at the top of the list come those who have 'vocations' -including, no doubt, missionaries and clergy followed at a short distance by RE teachers, doctors and nurses. Halfway down, we meet those with 'ordinary jobs' (such as business men, electrical engineers and secretaries who do not work for Christian organisations). Then right at the bottom, and in serious danger of relegation, are those involved in much more dubious pursuits - pop musicians, perhaps... and barmaids.'

²⁶ See Stevens and Collins, *The Equipping Pastor* 137f.

concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you' (Matt 6:33 GNB).

4. Instead of doing Bible study in a vacuum, home groups should enable people to relate the world of work to their Christian faith. For example, next autumn we might decide to put aside our traditional pattern of Bible study, and instead of beginning with the text begin with where people are. As a means of supporting one another's ministries we could encourage individuals to talk about their work. To do this at any depth we would probably have to devote an evening to each person.

David Crabtree suggests that we might ask the following questions of one another:

- Describe how you spend your day.
- What is satisfying for you in your work? What is stressful?
- What is the impact of your work on your health, on your family, on your financial life?
- How does your workplace need to change? How can you help, or not? What are the ethical and justice or fairness issues you have to deal with at work?
- Does it make any difference that you are a Christian in your workplace? How does your faith connect to your work? ²⁷

We need home groups which are genuinely supportive. Here is a way of upholding and encouraging God's people in their individual ministries in the world.

5. An alternative course of action, closely related to the previous idea, is to set up support groups for particular occupational groups. It could, for instance, prove more helpful for a group of teachers in the church to get together and talk about their work from a Christian perspective, than for an individual teacher to share his or her problems in a home group made up of people coming from a variety of occupations. At Chelmsford, for instance, we hope to set up, what we are terming, a CASINO group - a monthly Saturday morning prayer breakfast for those working in the City. Such mutual support groups may be on-going; on the other hand, they may be short-term or simply one-offs.

²⁷ Davida Foy Crabtree, *The Empowering Church: how one congregation supports lay people's ministries in the world* (Alban, Washington 1992) 9.

6. Run a stewardship campaign with a difference. Instead of approaching the theme of Christian stewardship with the church's needs in view, we could centre on the possibilities inherent in the individual. On this approach our chief concern would be to help individuals develop and use their gifts, with a view to enabling them to fulfil their particular ministry, as distinct from enabling the church to fill whatever posts in church life might be vacant. Thus after appropriate teaching, we could pass out cards for members to write their names and the answer to a simple question such as:

If time, talent and training were not obstacles (these three can all be found!) what would you really like to do for God in the church or the world?

Stevens and Collins, who advocate this approach, comment: 'The answers will be a pleasant surprise.'²⁸

7. Run church membership classes which encourage new members to see their ministry as primarily ministry in the world. Here I have in mind membership classes not just for new Christians, but also for older Christians transferring in from other churches. Both young and old in the faith would benefit from an opportunity to reflect on their mission and ministry in the world. In this context one could talk about gifts, and the way in which gifts could best be used in the service of Christ, whether in the church or beyond the church. Clearly such membership classes would also include an introduction to the local church, the way it works, its ethos and understanding of itself. However, what a difference it would make if the instruction were not all church-centred.²⁹

8. Give your people time to live in the real world -as well as to live at home. I confess that this is something with which I am wrestling in my own church. There seem to be no natural breaks in our church year. I am sure that we need to take breaks, otherwise

²⁸ See Stevens and Collins, *The Equipping Pastor* 135.

²⁹ Crabtree, *The Empowering Church*, describes the content of a four-week long series of membership classes with the following sequence of content 1) The church's way of work: 'how we are organised, history, understanding of membership and its meaning'. 2) Gifts identification: 'When we do gifts identification now, it is done as a service to the person, not just as a self-serving talent hunt on the part of the church!' 3) Introduction to the Ministry of the Laity. 4) A frank talk about faith and money.

some of us will be consumed by the church. Indeed, I seriously wonder whether next Lent we should 'fast' from all church activity. Such a Lenten fasting might well benefit the Kingdom -indeed, it might even benefit the church in the long run. We do well to pay attention to Robin Greenwood, when he writes: 'I have known people who are at church when they should be facing up to tasks at work or at home... I fell into the trap of many clergy in small or precarious parishes, of working for the building up of the church, frequently at the expense of the development of the full life of its members... We need to find strong ways of affirming all church members in their particular paths of discipleship, especially where these paths take them very far from the church's life and experience.' ³⁰

In writing this paper I have become conscious that in many ways I have not always practised what I am now preaching. I hope that this article will promote thinking and discussion which will enable us all to find ways in which we can help and encourage our church members to be involved in meaningful ministry and mission in the world in which Christ has set them.

Let me end with a quotation from a book whose title I took for this paper: "In churches all over the world... the majority of those who have made the *sacramentum* [baptismal vows] do not actually join Christ's struggle for the world. After taking 'the military oath', many of them become deserters, conforming themselves to the world, and not being transformed by the renewal of their minds (Rom 12:2). Others go on permanent leave, only returning occasionally for a military inspection. They lead a double life, following two different sets of ethics -one for their private, Sunday life, and one for their life in the workaday world. Still others always remain recruits in the barracks, becoming more and more refined in the use of the spiritual armour of God, but never leaving their Christian camp in order to fight for the reconciliation for the world. Under these circumstances, no wonder the battle soon begins in the barracks!" ³¹

³⁰ 13. Robin Greenwood, *Reclaiming the Church* (Fount, London 1988) 138f.

³¹ Hans Ruedi-Weber, *Salty Christians* (Seabury Press, New York 1963) 12.