

Tuesday 3rd January 2006.

At the Carey Conference.

What kind of churches should we plant?

Scripture Reading: Revelation 1:9-2:7.

Introduction:

I stand before you as one who is committed to the idea of church planting. It has been my privilege to have a small share in seeing a new church planted in Cumbria. Reformed Baptists of all people should be engaged in it. The apostle Paul instructed his younger co-worker, Timothy, that the local church is *“the pillar and ground of the truth”* (1 Tim 3:15). It is undeniable that there are communities in the United Kingdom where there is no pillar to hold up the truth in the sight of men and women. Others are engaged in Church planting. One conservative Evangelical venture in the North West aims to plant 15 new congregations over a five year period. If we are confident in the Reformed faith and our Baptist churchmanship, our constituency should be leading the way. But what kind of churches should we plant? All kinds of desiderata could be mentioned, contemporary, traditional or both, seeker-sensitive or emergent. Surely our first concern should be to plant churches that will meet with God’s approval. With this in mind I have tried to glean some lessons from the verdict of the risen Christ on the seven churches mentioned in Rev 2 & 3. This survey is not exhaustive but an attempt to extract some practical lessons that speak to our own times.

A “back to Ephesus” movement (Rev 2:1-17)?

Our country needs churches that appreciate fervour and robust commitment to Christian truth, like the church in first century Ephesus. Perhaps our perception of this church has been unfairly skewed. Yes, the risen Christ found fault with it. This church was guilty of a glaring omission. A serious deficiency is outlined with terse drama, *“I have this against you, that you have left your first love”* (4). This flaw should not be minimised. It called for drastic action. Yet the *“nevertheless”* in v.4 tells us that this Church also had its strong points. The NKJV, has given this section the sub-heading, “the loveless church”. This is unfair. The believers there loved certain things very much indeed. It was, for instance, a church that valued fervour. Commitment to the cause was prized. The Lord commended this church for her self-denial and steady effort. These Christians meant business. Here was a church characterised by *“labour”* (2). (Greek: hard work to the point of exhaustion). There was also *“patience”*, or steadfast endurance. The members of this church were dogged people; they *“persevered”* (3). Is this not the kind of Christianity that Jesus called for? *“If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”* (Matt 16:24-25). This quality has always marked Evangelical Christianity in its best days. William Carey would have been at home in Ephesus. He left England for India in 1792 and for the first six years had no fellowship with another English Christian apart from his wife. He spent forty two years in India, never returning to England. During that time he supervised the translation

of parts of the Scriptures into thirty-six languages. He summed up his achievement under God by saying, “I can plod”. Today’s churches need this quality. Society at large is a playground. Material comforts and pleasures are easily come by. We have bred a generation whose main aim is “having a laugh”. Modern Britain is not a breeding ground for tenacious individuals who can serve a cause with steady determination when the encouragements are few. Postmoderns do not “do commitment”. Tomorrow’s churches will need to produce believers who can buck this trend and be counter-cultural.

The church in Ephesus also loved righteousness and truth. The leadership had taken to heart the apostle Paul’s moving appeal a generation before, especially his warning about “*savage wolves*” (Acts 20:29) emerging from within its ranks. The church at Ephesus had seen through men with a bogus claim to be apostles (2). The leaders of the Church had also taken a stand against a group called the “Nicolaitans” (6), (reputedly named after Nicolas of Antioch [Acts 6:5]). This faction, reacting to pressure from the surrounding culture, had tried to redefine Christianity to make it more inclusive and attractive. Why make people with alternative lifestyles feel that there is no place for them in Church? Why not be accommodating and welcoming? Why should people have to change before they can belong? The leadership at Ephesus saw this for what it was, an attempt to corrupt the gospel. No doubt they paid a price for their stand. Ephesus was dominated by a fertility cult with large-scale temple prostitution. The occult was rife. When standards are disintegrating, those who seek to uphold them will be portrayed as fossils, dinosaurs and worse. Ephesus was strong where many modern churches are weak. They had grasped the connection between doctrine and behaviour. Many modern believers regard doctrine as an optional extra for those with an intellectual turn of mind, but the way we think will ultimately affect the way we act. (This is why we should be planting confessional churches. Church planting initiatives driven by new pan-denominational alliances will inevitably have a lowest common denominator ecclesiology.)

Before we leave Ephesus, having given the Church her due for her sterling qualities, we must pause and give due weight to the Saviour’s chilling rebuke, a warning to local churches in every age. Many things that are extremely important may be right, but the most important thing of all might have fallen by the wayside. Once love has gone, other qualities cannot make up for the want of it. Commitment, for example, needs love for Christ to sweeten it. The committed man without love is a driven person, all angles and corners. In the same way, our concern for holiness must spring from love for a holy God and gratitude for his forgiveness to keep us human and prevent us turning into unlovely Pharisees. It even has a bearing on our quest for excellence in teaching. Without love for Jesus as its mainspring, the quest for pure doctrine becomes an intellectual parlour game. Love for Christ makes these other sterling qualities attractive. That is why the risen Lord emphasised three active verbs in v.5, “*remember*”, “*repent*” and “*do the first works*”.

A “back to Thyatira” movement (Rev 2:18-29)?

Our country needs churches that combine practical love and wise discernment. The itinerary that we have in Rev 2 & 3 follows the route that a messenger would take, who, beginning at Ephesus, delivered messages to all seven churches. I have taken the liberty

of altering this sequence and leap-frogged Smyrna and Pergamos because the church at Thyatira was almost a mirror-image of the one at Ephesus. At Ephesus there was discernment but love was deficient. In Thyatira there was love aplenty and a shortage of discernment. This town began its life as a military outpost, where important routes met. It became a regional centre for trade with associations for wool-workers, linen-workers, leather-workers, tanners, dyers and potters. There was also a flourishing trade in human flesh, with guilds for those engaged in slavery and prostitution. Lydia, who ran a business selling purple cloth in Philippi, originally came from Thyatira (Acts 16:14). The various guilds operated a “closed shop” policy. Unless you belonged to the relevant guild, you could not get a job in your chosen line of work. Each one had its patron deity, the guardian of the craft. Members of the guild had to attend feasts held in honour of the god. Food would be offered to his image and ritual sexual intercourse took place. The pressure on believers was intense. Hungry children are an acute test of nerve. The same pressures are at work today in the form of what C. S. Lewis called the “Inner Ring”, wearing the “old school tie”, joining “the Craft” being one of the “people who matter”, one of those on the inside, letting it be known that you are “a team player”.

The Church in Thyatira was a warm refuge for those felt bruised by the world’s attempts to squeeze them into its mould. Emotional needs were met. There was “*love*” and “*service*” (19). The one lead to the other. Love for Christ and his people was worked out in a practical way. People were looked after and felt that they belonged. There was warmth, affection and tenderness. “*Faith*” is also mentioned in v.19. This was more than mere intellectual conviction. Note that it is linked with “*patience*”. It was durable faith; it stood up to hard knocks. Moreover, this Church was not static. Their “*works*” were more at the last than at the first. There is something attractive about this Fellowship. It was devotional and kindly. Anyone longing for acceptance and practical care would feel at home there. It makes an interesting contrast with the Church at Ephesus, a tough-minded Church with no sympathy for dabblers and lightweights, a Church with standards yet perhaps a Church where spiritual stretcher-cases felt overawed and intimidated by the high-flyers around them.

At the same time, this was a gullible church. It had been taken in by a woman nicknamed “Jezebel” (after the consort of king Ahab, who brought Baal worship into Israel). She may have been the pastor’s wife (a variant reading of v.20 has “your wife Jezebel”). She should never have been given a hearing for two reasons. Firstly, for all her claim to prophetic gifts she was female. Secondly, she advocated breaking two Commandments, those concerning idolatry and sexual immorality. Jezebel taught this naïve church that spiritual warfare can only be successful if we “know our enemy”. This explains the reference to the “*depths of Satan*” in v.24. The apostle Paul was not ignorant of Satan’s devices (2 Cor 2:11) and Christians ought to familiarise themselves with the stratagems of the evil one. Claiming prophetic insight, Jezebel urged, “You need to know these things by experience! Go down into the very depths, taste the forbidden fruit. You will know the mind of the adversary. Your eyes will be opened; you will know both good and evil!” The Church in Thyatira had been corrupted by a form of Christianised occultism. Not every voice that comes into our minds from outside is the voice of God. The Thyatira syndrome occurs when Christians seek the Spirit of God without seeking him in

the Word of God. Will the Holy Spirit forbid one thing in Scripture only to permit it through the utterance of a prophet? The modern scene has its versions of Ephesus which need to develop generous, imaginative, sensitive and dogged love. It has even more examples of Thyatira which need to learn a tough-minded commitment to Biblical truth and Biblical standards of morality! Perhaps the problem lies with our tendency to react against the errors of others by embracing the opposite extreme, whether we react against scholastic aridity on the one hand or Biblically illiterate super-spirituality on the other. Is it possible to plant churches that combine the best of both Ephesus and Thyatira?

Walking a knife-edge: the Pergamos syndrome (2:12-17):

Our country needs churches that are not lop-sided. Some of the situations we encounter in Rev 2 & 3 present us with a challenge familiar to those who walk in mountain country, that of navigating an exposed, airy ridge with steep drops on both sides. Over-reacting to one error may lead us into equal danger on the other side. In Pergamos we meet a Church that responded robustly to one set of challenges yet caved in when faced with a different set. It was strong on gospel essentials but weak on holiness. Does Pergamos sound familiar? It was the home of dogmatic and intolerant multiculturalism. The political capital of the Roman province of Asia, it was the chief centre of the Emperor cult. Pagans did not object to the idea that Jesus is Lord provided his devotees accepted that Caesar is Lord too, but societies that claim to prize tolerance rapidly become intolerant when people insist that Jesus is the only Lord. Pergamos was also the Lourdes of Asia Minor with a temple devoted to Aesculapius, the Greek god of medicine, whose symbol was a serpent entwined around a vine rod. Those who experienced miraculous cures referred to him as “soter” or saviour. It was a society dominated by religious pluralism and alternative lifestyles, besotted with the “signs and wonders” complex. Anecdotal evidence of spectacular miracles was abundant. Like the modern West, it was the home of a strange fusion of academic sophistication and superstition. Christians who insisted that there is but one saviour were a social menace. In Pergamos the gloves were off. Satan had his throne there and resented the challenge (13). His first attempt to silence the Christian community took the form of outright intimidation. A man named Antipas had been a “*faithful martyr*”. Tradition has it that he was roasted to death inside a brass bull. The Church had refused to bow before the storm of persecution. Should Christian leaders in the modern West be preparing our churches for a return to Pergamos? Are modern Christians in the West made of the same stuff as Antipas, people who will not be pushed beyond a certain point? Can we draw inspiration from the tough-minded Christians of Pergamos? In a flabby age, the world is crying out for Christians with backbone, followers of Jesus whose gospel is not up for negotiation.

It is sad to relate that Satan’s other stratagem succeeded. The Nicolaitans were active there too (15), repeating the tactics used centuries before by Balaam the soothsayer, who, when he found that he could not manufacture a curse against Israel, corrupted the people of God by enticing them to fall in with the sexual mores of the Moabite nation. Suppose a group of believers cannot be swayed over its core beliefs, the enemy is likely to engineer a fall into sin so that the church becomes undistinguishable from society at large. There is nothing to be gained from planting churches full of chameleons.

Research from North America suggests that rates of divorce within Evangelical churches are only marginally lower than rates outside. Churches and pastors whose antennae are finely attuned to detect heresy still fall into sin at an alarming rate. Surely it is desirable to plant churches that stand firm for the truth and for Biblical morality. Do we really want to give believers the impression that we are no different to them?

Life in the jaws of a vice: the Smyrna experience (2:8-11):

Our country needs churches whose members can stay the course when times are hard. The church in Smyrna was one of only two churches that met with no word of complaint. The church was undergoing “*tribulation*” (9). This translates a Greek word which means “crushing”. Like the victims of a mining disaster held fast under hundreds of feet of earth, it seemed as though life was being squeezed out of them. Have you ever known trials so heavy that the load is almost physical? It was also a church which knew the debilitating effects of grinding “*poverty*” (9), having been victimised by the Jewish community in Smyrna. At that time Christianity had not been recognised by the state. Having no official status, it was an easy target for those with political or economic muscle. The large Jewish mercantile community had control over trade and the banking and made life difficult for the Nazarene heretics. And more was to follow (10). Note the words, “*those things which you are about to suffer*”. They had suffered in the recent past. There would be more of the same in the near future, financial ruin for some, imprisonment and the threat of death. The vice would be screwed tighter, the constriction all the more powerful, like the coils of a terrible python. The statement in v.10 that “*the devil is about to throw you into prison*” is a reminder that whenever Christians are persecuted there is always a deeper explanation than human malice. Those people who try to harm or neutralise Christians are the dupes and playthings of the Devil himself.

At present British Christians do not face violence and economic discrimination, as our ancestors once did, but if overt persecution were to reappear, how should we prepare the churches for the onslaught? Clarity of mind is our greatest need, firstly, with regard to what we are up against. In Smyrna the enemy was Jews who were not true spiritual children of Abraham but members of the “*synagogue of Satan*” (9). Modern fighter aircraft carry a radar system known as IFF (Identification: friend or foe). Can we tell friend from foe? Can we avoid turning on our spiritual allies and recognise where the real threat is coming from? Secondly, do we have clarity of mind about our own position? (“*But you are rich*”, v.9) It is a lie that becoming a Christian makes you worse off. The believer is the one to envy, with riches too great to calculate. It is unbelievers who have the worst of it, even in this life. Thirdly, we need clarity of mind about the challenge that we face, the call to be “*faithful*” even at the cost of our lives (10). They took this challenge to heart in Smyrna. It was there that Polycarp met his end, telling those who insisted that he swore by the genius of Caesar, “*Eighty six years I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?*” The Church of Christ is an anvil that has worn out many hammers. The 21st century demands believers like the Covenanter James Guthrie, “the little man who would not bend”. We are always under pressure to compromise. When it does not take the form of crude threats, it is insidious and subtle. Will we give way to the materialism and moral

shabbiness that surrounds us? Can we say no for Jesus' sake and go on saying it? Finally, we need clarity of mind about the future. The "crushing" will not last. "*Ten days*" (10) means that the period of testing, while intense, is limited. Eventually, the eleventh day will dawn to a cloudless sky. Christians down the centuries have often greeted the eleventh day. Mary Tudor died and her reign of terror died with her in 1558. In due time, another eleventh morning will break that will never end, when the troubles of the Church will be swallowed up in glory and Christ makes all things new. The enemy would have us believe that the Christian is a loser and a fool. Where does his faithfulness get him? But there is light at the end of the tunnel. The eleventh morning will break. In that case, can we plant churches made up of people who can hold on?

Slaughtering a sacred cow: Philadelphia (3:7-13):

Words of comfort from the risen Christ to this first century church might surprise many modern Christians. A small church isn't necessarily failing. The current perception of a church with only "*a little strength*" (8) is that something must be wrong. If, as it is widely assumed, the true measure of a church is its power to attract numbers, a small church isn't worth a second glance. ("There's nothing there for the kids.") Small size means low visibility. If most of the locals don't know that it's there, it deserves to be written off! This has a particular bearing on Church planting. It is widely assumed that a critical mass is necessary, that only large churches which can spare the numbers to set apart a sizeable core group can plant other churches. Yet the Lord was pleased with this church, unlike the smug and complacent church in Laodicea. Perhaps the church at Philadelphia was blessed with poverty of spirit, the kind of weakness where God delights to show his strength. They knew they had just one asset so they did not look elsewhere. The Philadelphian Christians had learned the hard way that they could not rely on numbers, financial resources or even the gifts and spirituality of their leaders. There is an acute challenge here for growing churches. As numbers grow and financial pressures ease, as more people with a greater range of gifts add their different contributions to the life of the fellowship, it becomes temptingly easy to rely not so much on the Lord but on the people and resources that he has provided. What do we prize most, a packed building, talented people, a healthy credit balance or hearts that are humble before God? This church also had staying power. For all the low numbers it had hung on tenaciously, clinging to the truth of God's word and refusing to deny the name of Jesus (9).

What does a small church need? It is too superficial to say that it needs additions. Its great need is for spiritual power, defined here as Christ opening the door (7). A big church has no guarantee that the wind of the Holy Spirit will blow and that lives will be transformed, but when the Son of God begins to work in human lives, who can stop him? We must therefore plant churches that believe in prayer. If God is our only asset, it is criminal not to call upon him. A Church that perseveres will be preserved. The faithful few at Philadelphia who had kept the "*command to persevere*" would be kept "*from the hour of trial*" (10). Best of all, a small church needs to be reminded that the final outcome is guaranteed. The present may be a story of insignificance and contempt, being derided, overlooked and written off even by other believers but the future lies with the New Jerusalem (12).

A want of healthy realism: Laodicea (3:14-22):

We must plant churches with the courage to face facts. The Church at Laodicea in the Lycus valley is famous as the church with an emetic quality. The imagery of a church so nauseating that it was enough to make the risen Christ vomit (16) is intended to make churches in all ages take a sober inventory of their spiritual state. The real problem at Laodicea was the air of unreality that gripped the place. This church believed its own propaganda. "...you say, *'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'* ---- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (17). This church was a mirror-image of the one at Philadelphia. Their small size and poverty of resources made them spiritual realists. At Laodicea they had talked themselves into believing that theirs was the church to go to. This in itself is a striking reminder that just as a small church isn't necessarily failing, a large and prosperous one isn't necessarily succeeding. Mega churches beware! How well do we know ourselves?

Real Christianity is passionate. Without fervour, it is an empty show. Enthusiasm is contagious. People who are focused and keen have the effect of galvanising others into action. Jesus was a man of passion. Zeal for God's cause consumed him (John 2:17), he was eaten up by it. In the same way, the apostle Paul was a man of one thing: "*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*" (Phil 3:12-14) C. T. Studd argued that Calvary leaves us with no other option. "If Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice I can make can be too great for him." What would Hudson Taylor or Jim Elliott make of Laodicea Evangelical Church? Small wonder that Jesus found it nauseating. In the longer term, a tepid Church has no future. Christ will have done with it as surely and as decisively as a man expels a mouthful of vomit. Holman Hunt has done us a disservice with his picture, "the Light of the World". It portrays a wan, pathetic looking Christ. The Church at Laodicea was in serious danger because it had marginalised the Saviour, pushing him out beyond the periphery of the church's life and then closed its ears to thunderous, insistent knocking from one who had every right to demand a hearing (20). There are places in England where, while the doors still open and close, tired of pounding on a door to a house where nobody listens, the Lord of glory has walked off.

A church close to extinction: Sardis (3:1-6):

Above all, we want to plant churches that last. Few things are more tragic than the single generation church, the fellowship that began with high hopes but grew old together and sputtered out. It is obvious that a church has died when a place of worship lies empty and is converted to other use, but the church in Sardis is a stark reminder that a church can become moribund without anyone realising it but Jesus himself. This church had a name for being alive when it was actually dead (1b). Nineteen hundred years ago, the Church at Sardis in Asia Minor had a good name. Respected judges would have recommended it

to visitors. Everyone thought it a live church but the one person whose judgement really matters. The risen Christ saw it as a fellowship in a deep coma. He was close to turning off the life-support systems. And nowadays there are places where the doors open and close every week, people come and go for a packed programme of activities and the notice-board advertises “services as usual” while the one who sits enthroned in glory sees it as a little better than a corpse. Spend too much time in Laodicea and you end up in Sardis. Smugness and complacency had seen the city fall to besiegers on two occasions in its history. Sardian Christians would have understood the relevance of the challenge to “*be watchful*” (2a), to be spiritually alert and vigilant. The call to “*remember*” (3) can be very poignant. Is the Christian that I once was a standing rebuke to the Christian that I am now? Can we try to produce churches that don’t go off the boil?

Conclusion:

“*Who is sufficient for these things?*” (2 Cor 2:16) There are so many pitfalls to avoid, so many delicate balancing acts to negotiate, teetering on a knife-edge between extremes. Certainly this is not work for brash, self-confident men but work for those who can learn to depend on the God of all grace whose “*strength is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Cor 12:9). Perhaps the most telling phrase that we meet in Rev 2 & 3 is, “*I know your works*”. Sometimes it comes as a warning. Others may be deceived or hoodwinked but not the one who walks amid the golden lamps. Whether in Willow Creek or Suffolk, we cannot pull the wool over his eyes. At other times however, it comes as an encouragement. Smyrna, under terrible pressure and Philadelphia without the resources to attempt much could be reassured that someone was watching who cared very much. Therefore, whether planting new churches or maintaining existing ones, as Samuel Rutherford said on his death-bed, “My Lord and Master is chief of ten thousands of thousands. None is comparable to Him, in heaven or in earth. Dear brethren, do all for Him. Pray for Christ. Preach for Christ. Do all for Christ; beware of men-pleasing. The Chief Shepherd will shortly appear.”