

Church-splitting

Sooner or later, someone is going to object that what I have been saying will inevitably lead to church-splitting and sheep-stealing. But let me state quite categorically: *that is not the aim of this book.*

My one sincere desire is that all the people of God move into all the purposes of God. But I am well aware that, while some are eager to move on, others are firmly entrenched and refuse to budge – and as the old song says, when an irresistible force meets an immovable object, something's got to give!

Accusations of church-splitting and sheep-stealing will inevitably arise. So I intend to deal fairly with these issues over the next two chapters in order to put your minds at rest.

Locked into the past

Throughout history, every move of God has shown that it cannot be contained within the religious environment from which it emerged. That environment somehow seems to blind people to the next revelation of God's truth and life.

Many Jews, anxiously awaiting the coming of the Messiah,

completely missed it when he did come. Refusing to accept Jesus as the promised Saviour of the world, and closing their eyes and ears to all he did and said, they remained locked into the law of the Old Testament. Being bound to the past, they completely missed the blessing of what God was doing in the present.

They never knew what it was to experience the reality of God as a close, loving Father, or the forgiveness of their sin through Christ's blood. Nor were they able to experience the power of the Holy Spirit within them, raising them up into resurrection life – that abundant life which Jesus lived on earth and longs for each one of us to experience too.

New wine needs new wineskins

How could such a tragedy for so many people have occurred? Jesus described it like this: 'No-one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins' (Luke 5:37-38).

There is no place for rigidity or inflexibility in the kingdom of God. Our first allegiance must be to *life*, not to structure. It must be to the new wine of God's ongoing purposes, not the old skin of yesterday's blessing.

If a structure is unchangeable and inflexible it must be abandoned, because where desperate attempts are made to contain the new wine (move of God) within the rigidity of a tradition or denomination, split wineskins (churches) are inevitable.

For example, let me describe a hypothetical situation. A local congregation is exposed to biblical teaching foreign to its traditions. It could be baptism in water, baptism in the Holy Spirit, divine healing, spiritual gifts or any number of other scriptural truths not previously practised in that church.

A section of the membership is gripped by this 'new truth', and is convinced by the Holy Spirit that it must be embraced

and obeyed. Like the merchant in the parable who finds the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46), they are motivated by the joy of possessing more of the revelation of God.

Within the same congregation, however, are the hard core traditionalists. They will not tolerate these deviations from established practice, and are quick to point out that the doctrinal position of their denomination effectively forbids them. Those who have determined to obey the Word of God are no longer welcome, being viewed as heretics or, at best, troublemakers. And, in all honesty, these no longer feel at home among many of the people to whom they were once joined.

A division has taken place, and invariably it is those who have embraced the new who leave the old. Those who are left may find some perverse comfort in misapplying such scriptures as, 'They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us' (1 John 2:19). And, inevitably, they accuse the leavers of splitting the church.

The question is: Who *really* split the church? Was it not those who refused to move with God?

Do you recall David and Jean, back in chapter two, and their experience? Once with a two-hundred-strong congregation, their church had clearly known the blessing of God in the past. But many steadfastly refused to allow God to operate among them in any way with which they weren't one hundred per cent familiar. And they refused to listen to the warnings given by visiting ministers.

Eventually the church split into factions - those trying desperately to introduce the new, and those trying equally desperately to keep it out. Finally, many were forced to leave and find elsewhere the freedom into which God was longing to bring all of his people.

In David and Jean's own words: 'We were dying on our feet, but the environment made change impossible.'

Don't get left behind

As God moves, we must move with him – or be left behind.

As God reveals more of himself to us we must be prepared to make the changes that revelation requires. We dare not, like Israel of old and many in David and Jean's church, remain locked into the past, refusing to accommodate change.

This necessity for the church to remain open to God's continual unveiling of himself – sometimes known as 'progressive revelation' – isn't a new one. Jesus himself explained to his disciples: 'I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you' (John 16:12-14).

The same idea is powerfully expressed in the charge which John Robinson, pastor to the Pilgrim Fathers, gave to his flock as they prepared to return to England from Holland and then go on to America:

'I charge you before God and his blessed angels, that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his holy Word.

'For my part I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which are come to a period [full stop] in religion, and will go, at present, no further than the instrument of their reformation.

'The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw: whatever part of his will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that

great man of God, who yet saw not all things.

'This is a misery much to be lamented, for though they were burning and shining lights in their times, yet they penetrated not into the whole counsel of God; but were they now living, would be as willing to embrace further light as that which they first received, for it is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-Christian darkness and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.'¹

Before somebody points out to me the warning contained in Revelation 22:18 let me quickly add that not for a moment am I suggesting that we should expect to receive any fresh revelation that is extra-biblical. Only what is in the Word of God can be in the will of God.

But I stand with John Robinson, being fully persuaded that the Lord has much truth still to break forth out of his holy Word. And like the psalmist I pray, 'Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law' (Psalms 119:18).

The apostle Paul lived at a time when the gospel, the mystery of God which had been kept secret for long ages past, was being supernaturally revealed through Jesus and being seen to be confirmed in every respect by the writings of the prophets (Romans 16:25-27). It was imparted by divine revelation but endorsed by biblical confirmation.

In other words, when God revealed himself through Jesus he did nothing he hadn't already promised to do in his Word. It was simply that what had been closed to people's understanding before had now been opened.

And along with these early pioneers, the psalmist, Paul and John Robinson, we too must be ready and willing to receive a greater revelation of God and move into the next phase of his recovery programme for us.

The word 'pilgrim' isn't just a quaint description of those early religious historic adventurers. It is an apt word to apply

to all the children of God, those who, like the heroes of faith in past generations, confess they are strangers and exiles on the earth, seeking a heavenly country (Hebrews 11:13-16).

We are not called to be settlers but pioneers, constantly pushing back the frontiers of our experience with God. The overriding pull of God's ultimate – that city designed and built by him – should be dictating our conduct in the immediate. For what we see determines how we live. If we are looking for the city of God, we won't have the time or the desire to build anything less. And if our vision is clear we will get on with its building whatever the cost.

'Come in' and 'come on'

Divisions and factions are not all bad news. Paul strongly rebuked the Corinthian church for forming 'personality cults' and fomenting party spirit, but he did point out the positive nature of divisions: 'Doubtless there have to be factions or parties among you in order that they who are genuine and of approved fitness may become evident and plainly recognised among you' (1 Corinthians 11:19 Amplified Bible).

The wheat must be separated from the chaff. The precious must be extracted from the worthless (see Jeremiah 15:19 NASB). The pure must be extracted from the impure. True spirituality must be separated from empty tradition.

But separation isn't an end in itself. God only moves with a purpose. What is approved must be separated from what is not approved *in order that the approved may be clearly seen*. Separation alone is pointless – it must be separation to the Lord and to his purposes. Just as he called Abram out of Ur, and Israel out of Egypt, his call to 'come out' is always a call to 'come in' and 'come on'.

Ask yourself again the question: Who really splits the church? And as you consider the answer, remember that God's purpose is greater than just 'you' or 'me'. There is a world to heal, people

to save, and God has already chosen how he is going to achieve it.

Will we – and our church connections – be a help to him, or a hindrance?

Chapter 8 NOTES

1 Quoted in *The Pilgrim Church*, by E.H. Broadbent (Marshall Pickering)

Sheep-stealing