

Manifesto

Introduction

For a number of years, I have had the privilege of meeting many Christians from a wide variety of backgrounds: some highly involved in church life, some hardly at all, some focussed in the local congregation, some on denominations and other groupings, and some on Christian activities and projects. Their circumstances and church backgrounds varied; some had a strong theological education and some had almost none at all.

I met these people largely as a result of the different strands of my work, either through shared interests or friends in common. I spend a fair amount of time talking and listening to people, and have become astonished at the similarities of the issues, concerns and frustrations these people shared with me. These were not a carefully selected, representative sample in any way: I cannot claim they speak for all 'ordinary' Christians, or even for the majority. Nobody was speaking for anybody else: they were simply sharing what they felt, what they believed and what they hoped for, with a sympathetic listener and a fellow traveller. I gained enormously from each and every conversation, from each new person I had the privilege to meet.

This is, first and foremost, an attempt to articulate what I have heard. If it achieves nothing else, it may provide comfort and encouragement to people who are struggling, through offering them a simple message: *you are not alone!* No one person said everything you will find here, but everything has been said to me many times, and it feels like there is a basic consistency in much of what was shared; my hope is that, whether or not you disagree with some details of this message, you will recognise where it is coming from and – at least – sympathise with the concerns.

I have not written this in an attempt to create discontent: if you are happy with your church experience and the Christian life, then I am happy for you, and have no desire to upset you or take away anything which you value; but even some people who are happy with their church experience can wonder: maybe there is more?

And I have not written this for the people who want to tear everything up and start again, who believe there is no hope for the Church in its current form with all the inherited systems and structures we are so familiar with – at least in part because any new start would involve the same flawed people who inhabit the old systems.

This is for those who are in between: who love the Church, who appreciate and value the people, the systems and structures, the wisdom and traditions – whether they have been built up over centuries, or just in the last couple of years – but, despite all this, find that church just does not work for them. You may be surprised, as I have been, by how many church leaders feel this way. It makes no difference what our role in church life may be: much of the time, many of us feel trapped, unable to express in words and deeds the things which matter to us.

It is too easy to criticise, to point fingers at the things we consider to be wrong: the challenge is to find something better which we can agree upon and be willing to work together to achieve. Which is why this is presented as a manifesto – not a promise of

what I will achieve if I get into power (God forbid that that should ever happen!), but as a first, fumbling attempt to articulate what I, and others with me, currently understand.

I don't have the answers – none of the people I spoke with did. What we shared is not a better set of doctrines or a program to follow, but a conviction that we don't have the answers, and desperately need to hear God's word for us today; that He speaks to us through His Spirit, through His book and through His people; and that we have a few reasonably solid starting points from which to explore.

In brief: *we are being called to integrate faith and life into a coherent whole; to combine prophetic teaching from a Biblical, Trinitarian and Jesus-centred perspective with prophetic action arising from a Spirit-filled place of resting and peace.*

Prophetic teaching: the Bible says we have to get the big things right; but in practice we often teach people to strain out gnats and swallow camels. The mainstream Church is essentially right about most of the things it teaches, but is significantly mistaken in aspects of what it communicates (sometimes through what it fails to say) about Heaven, Hell, the gospel, salvation and evangelism.

Prophetic action: the Bible says we have to put our faith into practice; but much of our attention is directed at telling people to attend church, pray and lead moral lives. This is a good starting point, but wholly inadequate for building a community of disciples which is seeking first the Kingdom of God. We have to love our neighbour both individually (personally) and corporately; the challenge is to start with what we have, then to receive the training and support we need, not only to do it well but also to build the structures required to enable the life to grow.

Spirit-filled rest: the Bible says that though Jesus' death and the Spirit's indwelling presence, we already have everything we need for life and godliness; our activity is a joyful expression of the life we have received; motivated by gratitude, not guilt; freely offering what we have freely received.

Prophetic teaching

Heaven: the Bible says the Kingdom of Heaven is the place where God's will is done, and we are to inhabit it and work and pray to make it a reality for others here and now; but we teach people that Heaven is the place we go to when we die. We turn the Kingdom of heaven from a vital instrument for social change into a final destination which is totally disconnected from how we live here and now.

Hell: the Bible says that the ultimate fate of those who choose to reject God is destruction; but we teach people that God will torment them for all eternity, and we have to be happy about this, which has the effect of turning the loving Heavenly Father of the Bible into a sadistic monster.

Gospel: the Bible tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is coming, so we must turn our back on the ways of this world and follow Jesus in living the ways of the Kingdom; but we tell people the gospel is about believing the right doctrines, about believing that I am a sinner and that Jesus died for me.

Salvation: the Bible says that salvation is about loving God with everything I have and loving my neighbour as I love myself, it is about growing in wholeness and relationship with God and neighbour; but we teach that salvation is about me as an individual believing the right doctrines, trying not to do bad things and going to Heaven when I die.

Evangelism: the Bible says that evangelism is about communicating the good news of the Kingdom with love and power and calling people to a life of sacrificial love in the community of God's family; but our evangelism training teaches people to explain a few selected doctrines, telling people about a God of love in a carefully prepackaged way and offering them an individual ticket to Heaven which enables them to live almost exactly they way they did before – apart from attending some extra meetings.

Prophetic action

Faith has to be put into practice by loving and serving both God and neighbour. We have to love our fellow believers because we are called to love everyone, because this visible love is a witness to the people currently outside God's family, and because the nature of the love they see being expressed by us will reveal the character of the God we are telling them about and make Him real for them.

Action must be both motivated and shaped by our faith. *Christian Action Bristol* seeks to support Christian social action projects in many ways; it helps Christians communicate that our faith not only motivates our work, but also shapes the way we do that work. It also seeks to counter the view that expressing our faith can only be done through evangelism, and encourages individual Christians to be active in all forms of social action, whether they are explicitly Christian or not.

Love your neighbour is the bottom line activity of the Church: we are not followers of Jesus if we don't do this. Yet many churches struggle to really connect with people in their local community – partly because they are struggling to put the love into practice, and partly because they think that evangelism should be the occasion of their contact with people, instead of being a natural outworking of the relationship which they are building with these people. *Local Friends* is a practical scheme which can address both these problems (<http://localfriends.pbworks.com>).

Making disciples is the primary function of our church life, training the followers of Jesus, equipping them for increasingly effective service and preparing them to speak and act for Jesus in a society which is increasingly hostile to the public expression of faith, partly as a consequence of a misguided 'secular' totalitarian movement which masquerades as liberalism.

Perspective

The Bible is mostly written for believers and includes many issues important in discipleship and practical living; but the way we approach it often assumes that it is mostly about salvation, how to get to Heaven and the doctrines we need to believe in order to get there; so what we teach is mostly true, but often unbalanced and without the necessary context for a clear understanding.

The Bible also tells us that we meet God in and through Jesus, and that He shows us perfectly what God is like; but we teach people that the whole Bible is inspired by God (which is true) and therefore all of equal importance, relevance and significance (which is false), or we focus more on the early Church than we do on the Jesus they were (imperfectly) seeking to follow.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all vital in our work and worship: the loving Heavenly Father we are called to love and worship, the Son Who reveals Him and invites us to know Him (in experience as well as head knowledge) and the Spirit Who guards, guides and transforms us and Who gives us the power to make all this real; but we reduce the Trinity to a test of doctrinal orthodoxy.

Jesus is the full and final revelation of God, which means that nobody and nothing else is – so we interpret both Moses and Paul in the light of Jesus, in the light of both His words and deeds. Jesus calls us to follow Him, which means ongoing and continual fellowship with Him, in community with our fellow followers; it means acknowledging that Jesus is both our master (our Lord Who we must obey) and our model (Who we must emulate, in both His mission and His methods).

Jesus fulfilled the law, so the things the law was given for are still important, but a slavish obedience to the letter of the law while ignoring its purpose is not acceptable. We are called to a growing, loving relationship, and we cannot achieve this through following a set of rules, no matter how well crafted they might be.

Further details

This document contains a brief summary of material I have been developing through conversations with people for many years. Very little of it should be a surprise to anyone who has been involved with these conversations, and most of it is mainstream orthodox teaching – just aspects of mainstream teaching we don't articulate very often.

If this speaks to you, *please let me know*. What part of this is important to you? What is unimportant? What do you feel has been missed, or glossed over? What would you like to change, or to know more about? What do *you* want to say?

And, if this speaks to you, can you help us to explore these issues and how we might live them? On our own, we can do very little; together, who knows?

You can get in touch or express support by email (paul@hazelden.org.uk) or through visiting the *Local Friends* Support page and completing the form you will find there (<http://localfriends.pbworks.com/w/page/113718484/Support>).

If you have any questions or would like more details, please visit the *Strong Foundations* web site (<http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>), where we are exploring how to build a community of people who think these ideas matter, and how they might be put into practice.