

Introduction

In this book, I draw attention to an aspect of church life which, I admit, at first glance seems small. Many would say I am trying to ‘strain out a gnat’ (Matt. 23:24). I disagree. Appearances can be deceiving. ‘A great work’, as Andrew Fuller rightly said, ‘may be hindered and stopped by little things. Little follies will spoil the whole (Eccles. 10:1)’.¹ It is *little* foxes, let us not forget, which spoil the vines (Song 2:15). C.H.Spurgeon pointed out that it is usually a dead fly which spoils a pot of ointment, not a dead camel.²

As David Clarkson put it:

A small evil in itself may become a great evil in consequence; by giving way to the least we may make way for the greatest... The least evils [ignored] are wont to draw us into the greatest. This is evident in all experience. The greatest abominations in the Christian world have had their rise from small beginnings, and such as it would be counted a nicety to scruple at... So that... it is manifest that a small and seemingly innocent thing may make way for a dreadful mischief.

So there it is. What I am talking about may seem small – but however small it may appear, it carries large consequences. It is, I am afraid, ‘a dreadful mischief’. I am convinced I have serious business in hand. I do not intend to engage in ‘quarrelling about words’ – which Paul describes as ‘of no value, and only ruins those who listen [or read]’ (2 Tim. 2:14). That is, I am not engaging in controversy for controversy’s sake. I am not trying to subvert and destroy believers and churches. I am not trying to be clever or satisfy carnal curiosity.

Even so, I admit I do strive in this book. But not, I hope, ‘about words to no profit’ (2 Tim. 2:14, NKJV). What I strive *for* is a return to the biblical pattern – the biblical essence – of church life. I fear we have gone astray – badly – in this area, and have been

¹ Fuller: *Sermons in Works* p696.

² Spurgeon: *Lectures: Second Series* p152. From time to time, I will refer to J.A.Spurgeon, the brother of C.H. Unless otherwise noted, by ‘Spurgeon’, I mean C.H.Spurgeon.

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doing so for a long time – starting with the Fathers. What I strive *against*, in the spirit of Ephesians 4:15 and 2 Timothy 2:15, I trust, is the invention of a non-biblical office or practice in the church; or, to put it another way, the unwarranted giving of new meanings to biblical words. I make no apology for striving against *that*.

On this very point, Clarkson made a penetrating observation. It is not only bad practice which causes trouble, he said, but it is the misuse of (biblical) words which has a lot to answer for:

Some words, though less material than things, being incautiously used, have been the foundation of pernicious errors... There is a danger in words, not only in rites and actions. Change in words may occasion some change in religion... If the ancients [the Fathers] had foreseen that their [lack of caution] in some smaller matters would have been of such pernicious consequences to after-ages, they would have kept closer to the rule, both in rites and words, though they had suffered for it. And we, being warned by such experiences, will be left inexcusable, if we do not endure the cross rather than yield to the least thing which may be of dangerous consequence either to the present or future generations... Small things may be accompanied with such circumstances, effects and attendants, as may swell them into a monstrous and very formidable bigness. Those things which seem small, when you consider them in themselves simply, yet behold them in their concomitants, and you may discern them to be exceeding great evils.³

Exactly so! Hence my book.

I have already spoken of the sensitive nature of this material. I had almost completed my manuscript when I came across this from A.W.Tozer. I use his words as my own:

I know how ticklish this matter is and, while my writing this will not win me any friends, I hope it may influence people in the right direction.

I hope my writing will influence *me* in that way! I also hope that I will not fall foul of another of Tozer's pithy observations, but I certainly feel its force: 'It is true that the church has suffered from

³ Clarkson pp504-510. By way of illustration, he pointed out that the Papist invocation of saints is a massive corruption, but 'the beginnings of it seemed modest'.

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pugnacious men who would rather fight than pray'. Nevertheless, as he immediately went on to say: 'But she has suffered more from timid preachers who would rather be nice than right'. I hope I can be right. More, I hope I can be right *and useful*. And while I do not claim to have met all the positive criteria he spelled out, I am one with Tozer when he asked:

Could it be that too many of God's true children, and especially the preachers, are sinning against God by guilty silence? When those whose eyes are opened by the touch of Christ become vocal and active, God may begin to fight again on the side of truth. I for one am waiting to hear the loud voices of the prophets and reformers sounding once more over a sluggish and drowsy church. They'll pay a price for their boldness, but the results will be worth it.⁴

Now for an even more sensitive matter. I realise that some will not only be offended; they will be hurt by what I say – perhaps deeply. That is not my intention, but, I am afraid, it will be an inevitable side effect. I have pondered on it. Should I not publish? Well, if so, it wouldn't stop with this volume, would it? Should I not publish, say, on justification by faith, so as to avoid hurting those who fondly cling to the notion that justification is by works? Should I not write against eternal justification because I might stir up a hornet's nest among the hyper-Calvinists? Should I not publish my convictions on the law because they fly in the face of Reformed teaching, and contradict the views of valued Reformed friends of many years' standing? And so on.

As for those who might be hurt, obviously I have in mind the men who occupy the office raised in my chosen title – 'the pastor'. My words will grieve them, and I am sorry. But I fear that some of these are in pain already – inwardly and secretly – more than they would care to admit. And it may be – just may be – that what I say might help them see why they are in such a state, and actually bring them a measure of relief. Further, it might make some young man pause before taking a step that he may later deeply regret.

⁴ Tozer: *God* pp94-95,131,180. The chapter headings for these extracts tell the story: 'Perils of the Preacher'; 'Artificiality Is a Disease of the Soul'; 'Let's Break That "Guilty Silence"'.

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Above all, let it be heard loud and clear: ***I am not talking about particular individuals, but about what I consider to be an invented office – or, at the very least, a serious distortion of the New Testament.*** I am striving for what I see as biblical truth. And biblical truth ought to be brought out. I know we must speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) – but we must speak it! Scripture does not tell us that love prevents us speaking the truth. Speak it we must.

What is causing anguish for the men in question? Some of them are carrying a burden they dare not name, let alone share. Perhaps they cannot even allow themselves to think about it. They just have to keep grinding on. Let me quote Tozer again. His words resonate:

The tendency to make a mere front of religion is strongest among persons engaged in professional Christian service, such as pastors... and those who write, edit and publish and promote religion generally. The Christian worker must be always ready to lead in public prayer or to offer a ‘word of prayer’ under all sorts of circumstances and in almost every imaginable situation. He must be ready with a spiritual epigram for all occasions, and [at] a moment’s notice must be able to come up with wise and devotional counsel for anyone who might ask for it. The necessity to say the godly thing at all times often forces him to display an enthusiasm he does not feel, and to settle, for others, questions about which he is not [very] sure himself. His profession compels him to *seem* spiritual whether he is or not. Human nature being what it is, the man of God may soon adopt an air of constant piety, and try to appear what the public thinks he is. The fixed smile and hollow tones of the professional cleric are too well known to require further mention.

All this show of godliness, by the squeeze of circumstances, and through no fault of the man himself, may become a front behind which the man hides; a plaintive, secretly discouraged and lonely soul. Here is no hypocrisy, no intentional double-living, no actual desire to deceive. The man has been mastered by circumstances. He has been made the keeper of other people’s vineyards, but his own vineyard has not been kept. So many demands have been made upon him that they have long ago exhausted his supply. He has been compelled to minister to others while he himself is in desperate need of a physician.

It reminds me that not a few comedians live tragic lives which not infrequently end in misery – if not suicide. To make others laugh when one’s heart is breaking... Well then! To be the one man in the church who has to carry all the burden... to be Jack-of-all-trades in

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all weathers... to be expected to take responsibility for everything in the congregation (and wider), whatever one's own spiritual, mental or physical condition... to be the expert in all matters theological and spiritual... to be the model believer at all times... never to be off duty... to be at everyone's beck and call... and not forgetting one's own soul and the care of the family...

Something worth thinking about – if you are the man in question, *or if you are one of those who has loaded everything on to him.*

Really, this book does sound a miserable read, doesn't it? Before you run away with that impression, let these encouraging words from Tozer sink in:

Our wisest course will be not timidly to skirt this subject, but to face up to it and deal with it courageously... While this condition prevails more widely than we like to admit, it must not be accepted as inevitable. There is a better, a truer, a happier way, and it is not hard to find. We need only be bold and frank about the whole thing, and the remedy will soon be discovered.⁵

Yes, but before we get to the remedy, we need to unearth the cause of the trouble, painful though that may be.

This book follows on directly from my *The Priesthood of All Believers*. As I showed in that work, every believer is a royal priest by virtue of his union with Christ. What I write against in this book comes about largely because the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has been abused, ignored, forgotten or simply unknown. It is worse. The universal priesthood of all believers has largely been replaced by the special priesthood of the few.⁶ And I am not talking about Roman Catholics only; indeed, I do not really have them in my sights at all at this time. No! I am talking about the Reformed, evangelicals, dissenters. Sad to say, in such churches, and among such believers, the New Testament doctrine of the universal priesthood has been almost entirely replaced by the special

⁵ Tozer: *God* pp114-115, emphasis his.

⁶ I am eager to leave the tautology – 'universal' and 'all' – for two reasons. 1. For emphasis. 2. Because 'universal' means more than 'all'. It carries the notion of 'collective'.

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priesthood, and with tragic results. I want to do something about it. Hence this volume.

Some acquaintances might think me guilty of double standards in what I say here. ‘Weren’t you a pastor, yourself, at one time?’ The truth is, although I have never been ‘a pastor’, I was, for several years, a settled elder in a Reformed Baptist church, with responsibility for public preaching and teaching. When the church started, I was the only member able to take this on, and I had sole responsibility for it. After a while, and with some growth in the church, I was recognised as an elder. Later, I resigned my post in education, and received a small salary from the church for my preaching commitment. (I intend no slight by ‘small’; the church was small, and their prayerful support was magnanimous). Later still, another (unpaid) elder was appointed, and we shared the regular teaching work in a ratio of about 2:1. But from the church’s foundation, it was our stated intention to have a plurality of elders as soon as circumstances allowed.

I hope this testimony will assure readers that though I do not pretend to have lived up to the standard as I ought, I am not guilty of gross hypocrisy in this volume. Let me also say that I have the highest regard for any man who is labouring alone, maybe unrecognised as an elder, but who desires, as soon as possible, to see another man (men) able to join him in the eldership.

I conclude with a few technical matters; technical, but not trivial. The English translation of certain New Testament Greek words – principally *diakonos* – has enormous repercussions in what follows. ‘Minister’, for centuries, has been used in reference to ‘someone who is authorised by a church or religious organisation to perform functions such as teaching of beliefs; leading services such as weddings, baptisms or funerals; or otherwise providing spiritual guidance to the community’.⁷ In other words, ‘minister’ means someone in some sort of clerical office. As such, the word has carried huge unbiblical overtones. Sadly, the AV, NKJV and NASB often, if not always, use ‘minister’. Take the 1611 King James version of the Bible. The authorities stipulated that the translators

⁷ Wikipedia.

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had to retain ‘the old ecclesiastical [Church] words’. They complied. And that led to far-reaching damage – to this very day. For, in the New Testament, the word means ‘servant’, having been derived from ‘less’ or ‘minus’, *and it should be translated ‘servant’*. The NIV rightly does it – almost consistently – but falls back into ‘minister’ on occasion. So, I say again, *diakonos* ought to be rendered ‘servant’. Now and then, at a particularly important juncture, I will repeat this crucial caveat, but it should always be borne in mind.

Next, let me say something about a phrase which will come up now and then in what follows; namely, ‘institutional church’. This is not easy to define, and I know I can so easily convey the wrong impression by what I say. I am thinking of churches where the emphasis is upon organisation, structure, historical Statements of Faith to which all are supposed to subscribe, a calendar of programmes, and a heavy dependence upon a professional pastor, rather than an emphasis upon the members and their individual and corporate spiritual life being worked out with a measure of spontaneity. The key word is ‘emphasis’. I am most decidedly *not* against structure, order, Statements of Faith, and leadership.

Further, as in other books, I have difficulty about church and Church. By the former, I mean the New Testament concept; by the latter, I mean one of the many inventions of men. I have found it impossible to be consistent – just one of the consequences of Constantine and Christendom; of both, more later. And when I speak of ‘the New Testament concept’ of the church, I mean local, independent churches. The New Testament knows nothing of the traditional visible/invisible approach. It speaks in terms of local churches and the whole body of the elect. In fact, we should not talk about ‘the New Testament church’ – unless we mean a particular local church; rather, we should talk of ‘the New Testament *churches*’.

To end this introduction on the most important note of all, let me say that the Lord Jesus Christ himself has been the chief casualty in the historical and theological developments I address in this book. It is his glory which has been grievously diminished by them. In other words, I am firmly with John Calvin when he wrote:

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‘Whatever men ascribe to themselves is taken away from the Lord’.⁸ And that is why I chose his words as my epigraph.

This volume, reader, represents my effort to magnify the Lord Christ in the area I write about, and, with all the vigour at my disposal, to point as many as possible to *him* – to him as Saviour, to him as Lord, and to him as Pastor.

⁸ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.22 Part 2 p146.