

How shall they hear without a preacher?

Romans 10:1-15

As I said this morning, today is preview day. In June we shall be doing an evening series on First Contact. Strange title but we shall see in this series from Acts how the early Christians first made contact and brought the gospel to people and cultures that were different to their Jewish roots. I've had it on the cards for some time but other more important issues came to light, so belatedly we get to how the gospel spread in the early Church.

But why look at mission - again. I certainly said much about it when I first came and some of you have done Sharing Jesus. Why flog it? I don't think I'm really flogging it but I do want to emphasise that that I believe that the primary role of the body of Christ - His bride is to obey Him. And what does He call us to do? His last command which are now familiar verses to some of you.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

I know that my views on mission have taken some of you by surprise. In the past, mission was taken as an optional extra in churches and we have looked at that on previous occasions too. A few keen people got around to evangelism whilst the majority came to worship and deal with all their issues and try to grow in the faith. In fact in most churches in the UK, including Baptist ones or evangelical ones, the gospel was rarely preached and we rarely saw converts.

I must admit that I've sometimes found that people have wondered if I am altogether balanced as a Pastor to emphasise mission so much. Going to the Baptist Assembly made me feel less like a voice crying in the wilderness. I must admit that I've actually come away from the Baptist Assembly finding that I have been encouraged in mission - better still, that I've even come away with some useful resources and have been encouraged by speakers to encourage my church in mission.

Why? Because the Church in Britain is dying. I use the word DYING or perhaps DEAD in many respects. The decline in the Church in the last 20 years has been staggering.

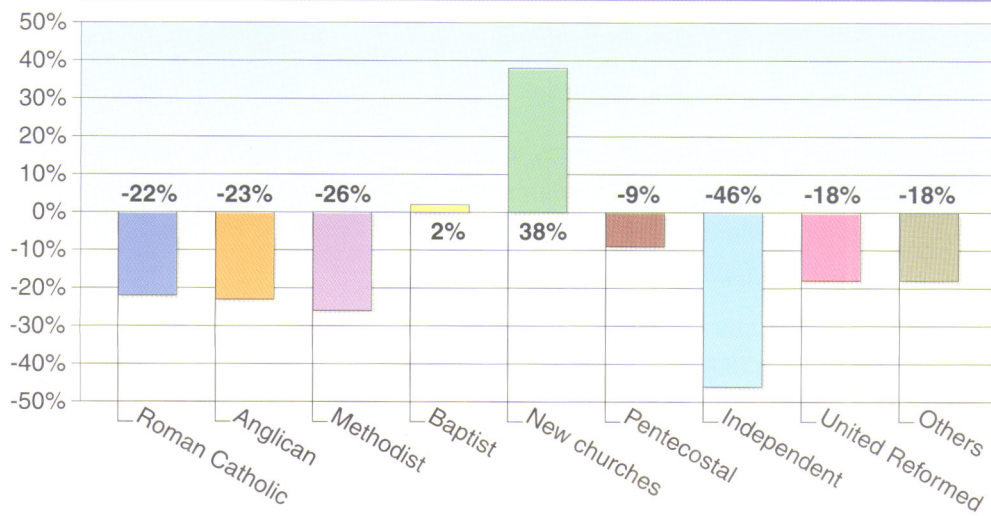
Average Sunday attendance has dropped from 11.7% in 1979 to 9.9% in 1989 and 7.5% in 1998. If the trend continues, the Church will be all but wiped out of Britain in a generation. Christians in 2020 will be a smaller minority than the Muslims in the UK!

Why has this happened? What were we, as the people of God doing? We fiddled whilst the Church burned. Arguing about doctrine. We weren't just sound - we were sound asleep! Arguing about the gifts of the Spirit. Arguing about styles of worship. Being unconcerned about the lost. Not willing to open our hearts and our lives to the lost. Accepting that the "little ones" we talked about this morning could be lost to us because we didn't like their manner of dress, their style of language or their face didn't fit. All those sins have been committed at one time or another at churches we have been members of.

What did we sing tonight?

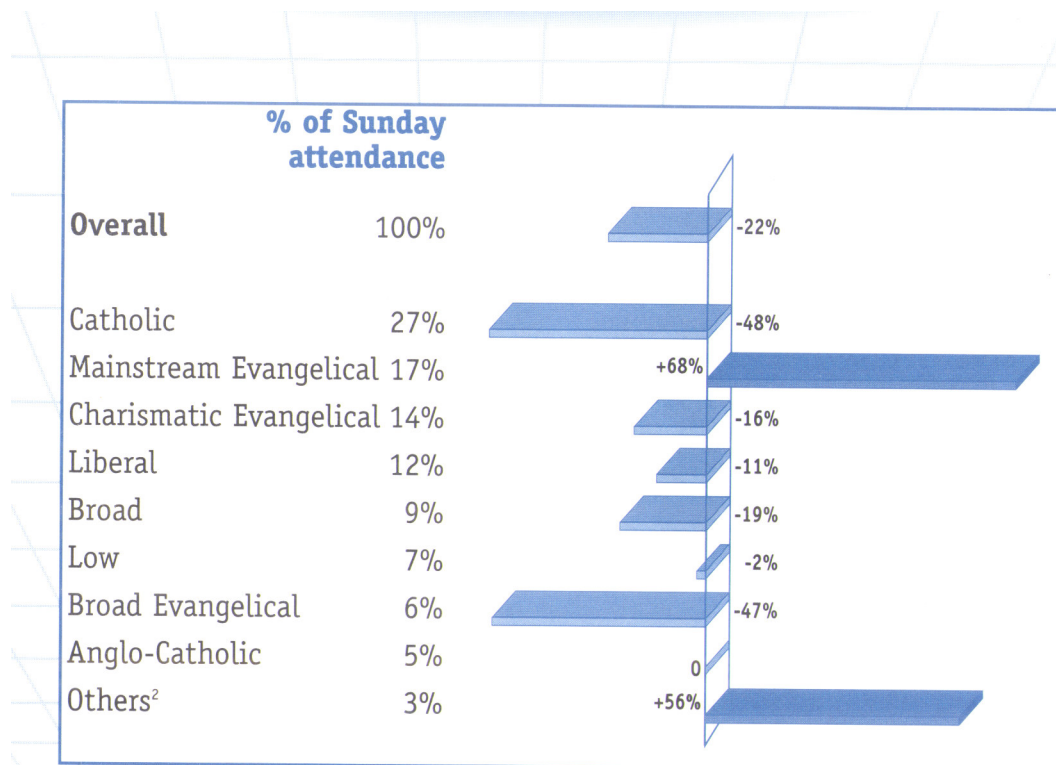
*O LORD, THE CLOUDS ARE GATHERING,
The fire of judgement burns,
How we have fallen!
O Lord, You stand appalled to see
Your laws of love so scorned,
And lives so broken.*

Table 2 Growth / decline of Denominational attendance 1989-1998



Source: BUGB

Only two groups seem to have benefited. The “new churches” and the Baptists. But don’t cheer. There have been converts BUT there have also been transfers across denominations too. If we look at the way in which theological position has change we see another interesting fact.



Source Christian Research

These show where our direction should be - towards the evangelical mainstream, although again we are probably seeing Christians moving towards mainstream evangelical from other positions.

The Church in Britain is a church under judgement and it is time for the people of God to repent and realise what they are here for. And I'm glad that I represent not only Baptist thought but evangelical thought too. The purpose of the church in the 21st century must be mission, because we can't afford to be doing anything else. Making disciples IS our mission. How could we have thought of anything else.

This passage we read tonight is quite a key one in helping us understand our mission. Paul was a Jew. Here's what he said: *Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. 2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. 3 Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*

They sought their own righteousness, but as we read down we see that the righteousness comes from the Lord is one that accepts Jesus as Lord and believing that God has raised Him from the dead. We've looked at Romans 10:9 before because it is a key verse that expresses both the simplicity and yet the profoundness of our salvation.

So that's what the Israelites needed to know but it's what the people of Swaffham and the people of Britain also need to know too.

Then Paul says this - *12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." 14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

How can they hear unless somebody tells them. People don't become Christians by accident - we have to TELL them. Us. We are His disciples. We have the great commission. What we have seen over the past months is the way in which that even though there are people who are gifted in evangelism in the church, the Great Commission was given to all Jesus' disciples and to the Church. We are all His witnesses because we are under His command. Just a minute. Witnessing? Me? Personal evangelism is not my gift.

In the Baptist Assembly last week we heard from a speaker called Reginaldo Krukliis. He challenged us in this way too. He has pastored a number of churches in his native Brazil and has seen huge growth. He encouraged us to be witnesses, to share the gospel. He dealt with the question - me witness - personal evangelism is not my gift. He said "Do you need to have a gift to be faithful to your wife? A bit flippant? But we don't question the Lord's command to be faithful to our marriage partner. So why should we question His command to make disciples?"

And God wants us to be a missionary Church - we should have a passion for people. A passion for seeing them saved, a passion for seeing them develop as disciples until they reach maturity in Christ. That's the gospel. God wants to bring Him too Himself through faith in Christ. To take them through forgiveness, repentance and then through to maturity, to holiness. This is what it means to make disciples - not converts. Somehow the church in Britain has lost the plot in the last 20 years we don't make disciples. In fact our churches are full of the residue of elderly believers that came to Christ when we once did.

I am quite a keen student of Church history. What we learn from history is that we don't learn from history. The desire of churches, congregations and believers to hang on to traditions is one of the most misunderstood things. Many don't like it when change comes. I know that many of you are suspicious at the very least at some of the changes that have come in the last eight months. I understand that. But what tradition are we hanging on to? For many Christians of my age and above, it's not the old faith we believed when we came to Christ. It's not the faith of Spurgeon, or George Whitefield, or DL Moody and Ira Sankey. It certainly isn't the faith of great teachers and evangelists of the 20th century like Billy Graham, Alan Redpath, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Tom Rees, A W Tozer. Do I need to go on? Great men of faith, great

teachers, great soul winners. Men who had a passion for Christ. A passion for making disciples. A passion for doing it at whatever personal cost to themselves. A passion for encouraging personal holiness. And a willingness to do whatever it takes to make disciples. That's the evangelical tradition. That's the tradition I stand for. That's the tradition I came into and the one I never left.

Anything else is a cruel perversion of the evangelical tradition. The tradition of traditional churches is in most cases that cruel perversion. People may have a passion for church, or a passion for the Baptist way, or a passion for old hymns, a passion for the Authorised Version, a passion for doctrine, a passion for this that or the other. But passion for Christ or passion for the lost - NOT ON YOUR LIFE! If you are traditional in your faith and practice, there's nothing wrong with being traditional as long as it's the tradition of the Great Commission!

And now it's time to make sure that the gospel gets to the people of Swaffham. In a few moments we are coming to communion. We'll remember His broken body, His shed blood. Why did He do that. Not just to save me, or to save you. But so that the world through Him may be saved. We sometimes make these things so personal that we don't see the big picture.

"For the Son of God did not come into this world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"

*Yet, O Lord, Your glorious cross shall tower
Triumphant in this land,
Evil confounding.
Through the fire Your suffering church display
The glories of her Christ:
Praises resounding! (Graham Kendrick)*

*Preached at Swaffham Baptist Church
11th May 2003
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