

Rebuilding the Household of Faith Being Spiritual, Human, and Christian in today's World*

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Introduction

We have gathered here this week 'in search of holy ground'. So let me begin with three stories that relate to this theme.

Join me, first, at home in rural Scotland. About a year ago, we decided to have some building work done, and called a local builder to come and look over the job. After giving us the advice we were looking for, he sat down in the kitchen to chat over a cup of tea. It turned out that a few weeks later, he was to be in a Passion play, along with others from the small village where he lives. The year before, he had been in such a play for the first time. Because there was only a small cast, several of them had to play more than one part. He began as one of the apostles at the Last Supper, then became a soldier at Pilate's tribunal, before finally being one of the soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb. As he described it, he commented that this was, as he put it, 'the most spiritual experience of my life' - not least because of the questions raised by the way he had to change sides in relation to Jesus. Yet, even as he spoke, he realized what he was saying, and quickly assured us that 'of course, I don't go to church' - and then 'mind you, I am a believer.' He invited us to go and see the play. When we got there, a crowd of hundreds had gathered in the churchyard where the action would begin. He spotted us, came over, and insisted that we followed him to another vantage point. 'Don't stand back here', he said, 'if you want to keep up with Jesus, you need to be out in front'. If that wasn't 'holy ground', what is?

Stay with me in the Aberdeenshire countryside. This time come to a dinner party. It was one of those events where most people didn't know one another - indeed, that was why we had all been invited, to introduce us to others in the same locality. As always on such occasions, I wondered how to introduce myself, remembering that we were all there to enjoy ourselves, and that any mention of religion can be bad news in such a context. I need not have worried, for the first person I met took the initiative, and asked what he no doubt thought was a very bland question: 'what have you been up to today?' It was a Saturday, and it so happened that I had spent most of the day lying under the floor of my house, rewiring part of the property. He empathized with this at once, as he had also been engaged in something similar, except that he had removed the electricity meter from the wall and was wondering how to put it back again without blowing himself up. Then he turned to my wife, who works in Christian ministry and is a clown. When she explained to him what that is about, he might as well have been plugged into the electricity supply. He just took off, in every sense of the word. Excitement would too dull a word to describe his response: he was in raptures, wanting to know how he might become a clown, and especially how he might tune in to the spiritual side of his person. In the course of the evening, we learned that he was human resources director for a large multinational corporation,

* An address given to the 2002 national assembly of *Churches Together in Britain and Ireland*.

responsible for the organization of training and development courses for thousands of employees all over the world. Eventually he pulled from his coat a book which he had been using in this connection: *Jesus CEO: using ancient wisdom for visionary leadership*.¹ 'Have you read this?' he enquired. It so happened that I had. In fact when I first came across it, it had a significant impact on my own understanding of what Jesus was about, for - as you would expect from a book written by a management consultant rather than a preacher - it looks at Jesus in a totally different way, exploring how he was able to take a crowd of wasters and turn them into world-beaters. 'This is the most wonderful story I've ever heard,' said my new friend, 'why has nobody ever told me about this before?' You might be surprised to think that someone in his forties, who was intelligent enough to have risen to a prominent position in the business world, knew nothing significant about Jesus until he came across that book. But he is typical of many thousands of others, whose lives have remained completely untouched by any Christians. Since that occasion, we have had many conversations, as he works through what it might mean to order his own relationships, in the home as well as the workplace, in accordance with the principles he is uncovering in the stories of Jesus. I could be wrong, but right now I can't see him ever joining a church as we know it - but he clearly wants to follow Jesus, and is actively seeking to live his life the way Jesus did. Now, is that 'holy ground' - or what?

For another story, come with me to the place where I work, the University of Aberdeen. In the autumn of last year I moved my office or, to be more precise, a group of porters moved my stuff - which was quite a job, in an ancient building with no lifts, and carrying thousands of books and other items up and down stone stairways.

When we finished, we all went for a coffee, and by way of small talk they began to ask me about my work. It so happened that a couple of days later I was going to be speaking, along with my wife, at the Scottish Ecumenical Assembly in Edinburgh on 'Breaking into Dynamic Ways of being Church'.² So I asked these men what they would say, if they were to go in my place. Without hesitation, one of them said: 'Tell them to learn to speak about God'. By way of explanation, he added that to him the churches had become just one pressure group among many others, and as a result he knew what they thought about many social issues, but really had no idea at all what their core message might be. It wasn't that he disapproved of Christians being involved with politics or economics - but he was struggling to understand why they had so little to say about things that he imagined should be central to faith. We went on to talk for another hour or more about that would mean, and indeed what Christians might want to say about God. Was that 'holy ground'?

These stories merely confirm what the pundits have been telling us for some time. In his book *The Death of Christian Britain* Callum Brown concludes his investigation with these words: 'Britain is showing the world how religion as we have known it can die'.³ Many aspects of his argument can be questioned, but no one could disagree with the outcome of it all. However, not all commentators on contemporary culture leave it there. In another recent book, a couple of Harvard Business School

¹ Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion 1995).

² John Drane & Olive M Fleming Drane, 'Breaking into Dynamic Ways of Being Church', in *Breaking New Ground: the First Scottish Ecumenical Assembly 2001* (Dunblane: ACTS 2001), 138-154.

³ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge 2000), 198.

professors look into the future, with a view to identifying the kind of business opportunities that will be successful in tomorrow's world. They suggest that people are now searching for 'experiences to learn and grow, develop and improve, mend and reform'. As they explain what that will mean they affirm that '... [such] transformations turn aspirants into a "new you". with all the ethical, philosophical, and religious implications that phrase implies' - and then go on to claim that 'We see people seeking spiritual growth outside the bounds of their local, traditional place of worship ... the rise of spiritual directors will become a business opportunity.'⁴ Actually, this is not the future, for it is happening already throughout the country. Spiritual direction in many different forms has indeed become a business opportunity. The high streets of our towns and cities bear witness to the many 'spiritual' businesses which are now flourishing, offering everything from life coaching and mentoring to ayurvedic medicine and astrology.

There is now a growing body of empirical evidence to back up what some of us have intuitively felt for some time, namely that while people today are evidently turning their backs on organized religion, they are by no means rejecting spiritual values. The report entitled *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church*⁵ builds on earlier research inspired by the work of Alister Hardy, and published in 1987 by David Hay (one of the authors of the present report) and Gordon Heald.⁶ This most recent study contrasts the state of the churches with the rising tide of spirituality in the wider culture. Though church attendance in Britain has fallen by something like 20% between 1987 and 1999, reports of 'spiritual experience' increased by 60% in the same period - and some forms increased dramatically. Professor Hay claims that 76% of British people now say they have had a spiritual experience - a figure that he believes is probably on the low side, because there is still a cultural inhibition or embarrassment in this country about speaking openly of such things. Moreover, the things of which people speak in such a context can all be recognized as authentically 'spiritual' from the perspective of the Christian tradition, for they include such items as discernible meaningful life patterns ('somebody is looking out for me'), awareness of God's presence, answered prayer, awareness of a sacred presence in nature, or of the dead, or of an evil presence.

'Postmodernity'????! What is going on?

So what exactly is going on? It has become fashionable to blame it all on 'postmodernity' - whatever that might be. I have to confess that many commentators - both Christian and others - have much greater confidence than I do in explaining what all this is about. It seems to me that the sheer level of chaos and uncertainty that is found in every aspect of Western culture today is far more complex than anything that is likely to be understood by the application of a single label to it. In

⁴ B Joseph Pine & James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press 1999), 163-4, 183.

⁵ David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church: a report on the findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham*. Available from CSHR, Jubilee Campus, Nottingham University, Nottingham NG8 1BB. Also at <www.ctbi.org.uk> - follow the links to Mission and then Download Documents.

⁶ David Hay & Gordon Heald, 'Religion is good for you', in *New Society*, 17 April 1987. For another recent survey which produced similar results, see Gordon Heald, 'The Soul of Britain', in *The Tablet*, 3 June 2000; and David Hay & Kate Hunt, 'Is Britain's soul waking up?', in *The Tablet* 27, June 2000.

fact, I wonder if we aren't just kidding ourselves when we claim to know what is going on, and we imagine that by naming it we can understand, and therefore control it all. If only it was that simple!

Naturally, the philosophers of the postmodern do lay claim to such understanding, and almost all recent Christian apologists have accepted their key ideas. Jean-François Lyotard famously described postmodernity as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'.⁷ If that is the case, I want to ask, then why are we so busy spreading the metanarrative of consumerism, globalization, McDonaldization, materialism, and all the rest? Others have assumed that today we have no idea of anything that might be called 'truth'. Douglas Groothuis is typical of the many Christian apologists who have seized upon this. In his book *Truth Decay*, he sums up his basic assumption in the statement that 'The concept of truth as absolute, objective and universal has undergone serious deterioration ... Ultimately, truth is what we make it to be.'⁸ But if that was true, why have Western governments become so insistent that their definition of 'human rights' is a universal standard by which the truth or untruth of all things can be judged? And - more significantly still - why did we not respond to the events of September 11th 2001 in this so-called post-modern way? Why did we not say, 'That would not be my way - but if it's yours, then who am I to stop you?' The answer can only be, because we do actually still have some sense of absolute values, and a shared metanarrative that has no place for what happened on that day.

Postmodernity in everyday life

I have argued elsewhere that we place ourselves in great danger if we only listen to what the exponents of 'high culture' are saying.⁹ Regardless of what the élite intellectual Establishment might believe or wish to be the case, they are no longer the leading opinion-formers that they once were. Most ordinary people are not asking, 'Can we believe in truth any more?' - but 'What is the truth that will help me make sense out of my life?' Nor are they wondering, 'Is there a big story that will give meaning and purpose to my own personal story?' - but 'Which big story is the one that I can trust?' The fact that we now ask the questions in that way highlights the tension facing us, as we attempt to sort out the difference between truth and lies, doubt and certainty. But that does not mean that we are no longer interested in the big issues that have always engaged humankind - merely that we approach them differently. From a Christian point of view, one of the key aspects of today's search for meaning is that we are less likely to look to religious institutions to provide us with answers, and - despite all our stated cynicism about it - more likely to look to the media. Why otherwise do you think that some of our most popular TV programmes are *East Enders*, *Friends*, *Ally McBeal*, and *The Simpsons*, or that Hollywood movies exploring the meaning of relationships - not to mention ultimate meanings - are attracting ever larger audiences?

I want to suggest that we will engage more meaningfully with our culture by focusing on the practical aspects of post-modernity (which I use simply as useful shorthand to describe today's cultural chaos) that we all struggle with every day of our lives,

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), xxiv.

⁸ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity 2000); quotation is from the back cover.

⁹ John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd 2000).

summed up in three simple slogans:

“Nothing seems to work the way it used to” Ideologically, we aren’t certain of much at all, whether it is science, or industrial processes, or politics, or the law ... or the church. We are not even certain of ourselves. The relentless fragmentation, not only of family life but of relationships at all levels, has left huge numbers of people asking that most fundamental question of all, ‘who am I?’ In his novel *Microserfs*, Douglas Coupland describes this condition well: ‘People without lives hang out with other people who don’t have lives. Thus they form lives...’¹⁰ If you think that is problematical, then you haven’t seen anything yet. With the emergence of new genetic technology, not to mention the prospect of human cloning, even that question ‘who am I?’ is about to get a whole lot more complicated. We are just a hair’s breadth from a generation who literally will not know what they are made of.

The same thing is true at the level of everyday practicalities. We simply don’t do things the same way as our grandparents did, and for the most part we would be unable to do so, even if we wished. For many people, church falls into the same category, as a thing that doesn’t work like it used to. It is something that occupied a significant place in the lives of previous generations, even of their own parents and grandparents. But it no longer works for them - so why would you choose to engage with it, any more than you would want to go back to the kind of coal-fired stove that your grandparents had, when you can use a microwave? In a qualitative analysis of the spirituality of younger people, one of George Barna’s interviewees expresses this concisely: ‘I honestly tried the churches but they just couldn’t speak to me .. All I want is reality. Show me God. Help me to understand why life is the way it is, and how I can experience it more fully and with greater joy’.¹¹ It seems that an increasing number of people, when looking at what we now do in church, simply ask: ‘but why would you do that?’ More especially, ‘why would you do that in order to be spiritual?’ I have no doubt that, within the rich resources of the Christian tradition, there may easily be an answer to that kind of question, but if there is we are obviously not communicating it very well - for it is also being asked with increasing frequency by people in mid-life, who have spent all their lives in the church, and are now wondering how much longer they can continue with it.

“There must be other ways of doing things” Thanks to global travel, and the way in which the media brings the world into our living rooms, we know a lot more than any previous generation of Western people about other world faiths, including the spiritualities of native Americans, the first peoples of Australia, and other first nation groups from around the world. In the process of establishing their empires, our forebears set out to displace these worldviews, but thoughtful people are now wondering whether in the process they may have destroyed some insights that could help us in our present predicament. This raises an enormous set of questions for the church, that can only be noted here rather than discussed in any way. But to engage with it will be as much of a challenge to our personal identity as it will be to our inherited belief systems. What do we have to learn from others, and where can we learn it?

A similar challenge presents itself from within the heart of today’s world church. It is a simple fact that a sizeable majority of Christians today are neither white nor

¹⁰ Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs* (London: Flamingo 1995), 313.

¹¹ George Barna, *Baby Busters* (Chicago: Northfield 1994), 93.

western, and among them many different ways of being church have emerged in the last twenty years or so. In respect of beliefs, probably no one involved in the ecumenical movement would claim that their own ecclesiastical tradition has a monopoly on the truth. We meet together on occasions like this to acknowledge - perhaps even to celebrate - our evident diversity. But sometimes it never moves beyond the realms of theory, because actually to engage with the diversity in an affirming way would raise some questions about control and domination that most of us are unwilling to face and deal with. Why else would we be so keen to talk the language of inclusion, while being so resistant to active engagement with, say, the church styles of black Pentecostals - or, for that matter, the ways of doing things that would come naturally to the many semi-literate people living on bleak housing estates across the country? Our personal tolerance zones are evidently not as wide open as we would like to think that our theology is. Perhaps we need to re-examine the way in which our avowed commitment to open dialogue sometimes inhibits the very thing we claim to promote. Could it be that we only really speak to other people who share our own agendas? The fundamentalism of the liberal élite seems to be remarkably deeply embedded in some of our churches.

“We want to be more spiritual” We could spend hours, maybe days, splitting hairs over what people today mean when they use a word like ‘spiritual’. But a central core to it all seems to be located in the search for personal encounters with God (however that is defined), which will lead to a sense of meaning in life, and the fulfillment of our own true potential to be the best that we can be, and in doing so to make the world a better place. This is connected to the conviction that we are less than fully human if we are subservient to the attitudes of others, who want to tell us how it is, when in reality we all aspire to make our own contribution, because we believe that we have one to make. In his book *The McDonaldization of Society*, sociologist George Ritzer sums up the way many people feel: ‘Human beings, equipped with a wide array of skills and abilities, are asked to perform a limited number of highly simplified tasks over and over ... forced to deny their humanity and act in a robot-like manner.’¹² When I first came across that description, I have to admit that for me it had ‘church’ written all over it - in fact, that realization was a major reason why I then went on to apply Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis to the church. Others have expressed the same sentiments, in a less benevolent way. In her autobiography, Shirley Maclaine put it pointedly when she wrote that ‘Your religions teach religion, not spirituality ...’.¹³ Her message is clear: that religious institutions - at least as she has experienced them - are actually holding people back from being both spiritual and fully human. If she is right (or even half right), there are some big issues that we need to address. How is it that the good news of life and new possibilities, of renewal and empowerment, of new birth and the banishment of evil, has come to represent the very opposite of all that for so many of today’s people?

We deceive ourselves if we imagine that this provides anything other than a strong challenge to church as we know it. It is a major reason why we need to think of new ways of being church: the simple fact is that, for whatever reason, what we now do just doesn’t seem to ‘work’ for large numbers of people. That includes many people who are in our churches, for whom our present ways of doing things are becoming increasingly problematic. Whereas once it was predominantly young people who were leaving the church, today it is people in their fifties and sixties as well.

¹² George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks CA: Pine Forge Press 1993), 26.

¹³ Shirley Maclaine, *Out on a Limb* (London: Bantam 1986), 198.

People Today: what are the big concerns?

As with everything else, there is no one simple answer to this question. But - again, from a practical point of view - there are some aspects of people's aspirations that we do well to reflect on as we work out ways of being spiritually relevant to the concerns of our day.

People today celebrate diversity. The mentality that said 'one size fits all' is no longer appropriate. It never was, of course, but in previous generations when people were more deferential toward experts, we were more willing to accept ill-fitting clothes, as well as spiritual solutions that didn't quite match who we thought we were, and hoped to be. The rise of a consumer culture, with its infinite variety of choice, has merely acted as a catalyst to encourage deeper reflection on what sort of response to God might most adequately meet our needs, to be fully human as well as to be spiritual. There ought to be plenty of resources within the Christian tradition to enable us to deal with all that. The creation story on the very first page of the Bible emphasizes the sheer diversity of the world and its people, and depicts God pronouncing that this is all 'very good' (Genesis 1:1-2:3). In the New Testament, one of the central images used to describe the church is 'the body of Christ', a notion which St Paul famously expounded in terms of the diversity of ministries and charisms that should be exercised in the context of the local Christian community (1 Corinthians 12:1-31). And recent scholarship has reminded us of the enormous diversity of church styles in the first generation. In the intervening centuries, many historical and cultural factors have conspired to homogenize church life.

Our inability to affirm diversity might well be the single most important challenge facing us today. It is always dangerous to generalize, of course, but it strikes me that Protestant mainline churches in particular have come to be attractive to only one kind of person, namely those who are bookish, thinking types, who like to process ideas in abstraction in their minds. I suspect that we do pretty well with that sort of person, but they are a diminishing group in Western society. It is no coincidence that the fastest growing churches around the world (including here in Britain and Ireland) are those which have managed to create spaces for other types of people to be true to who they are, while being faithful to the Gospel. Such innovations are regularly described as 'alternative' church - which rather gives the game away, because it implies that what we now do in traditional churches is the norm, the 'right' way of doing things, compared with which other ways of being church are deviant in some way, rather than merely 'different'.

People today distrust institutions This is not a completely new phenomenon: people have always been somewhat cynical about big institutions. But this is taking a more acute form today. Those who want to make a difference in the world are more likely to join a single-issue pressure group than a major political party, because we no longer have confidence that the mainstream political institutions will deliver what we want. The same thing is happening in healthcare, where - in spite of advances that, in truth, none of us would wish to be without - large numbers of people increasingly distrust western scientific medicine. As a result, they either go to the Internet to learn about their condition, so they can keep a check on what their doctor is doing, or they ignore conventional medical wisdom altogether, preferring instead the ministrations of so-called 'complementary' therapies of one sort or another.

When people question the relevance and usefulness of the church, it is clearly the case that, at one level, church as an institution is just suffering the same fate as other institutions in today's world. We need to take note of that, though I am not at all convinced that we can afford to take comfort from it. One of the key questions being raised about institutions is the way they tend towards denying their core values, so that the bureaucratic concerns of the institution take priority over the needs of people. This is one of the major criticisms being made of the National Health Service, and if it is also true of the church it raises a fundamental question, because 'church' has no reason at all to exist apart from the core values of the Gospel. Is 'the church' getting in the way of the work of God? It wouldn't be the first time. Almost every significant spiritual movement in Christian history has started with people who faced this same frustration, and who were prepared to step outside the box, believing that this is where God was to be found. The ancient Hebrew prophets, indeed Jesus himself - not to mention the prophets of every subsequent generation - struggled with that very question. Have we learned nothing from our own history?

People trust their own judgments Church people in particular often speak of today's 'me-generation' in a pejorative way. I'm not sure we can do that if we take seriously the Biblical claim that we are all, as humans, 'made in God's image'. Nor if we accept the reality of structural sin in our culture. The conviction that we will have to trust our own judgments is often borne out of bad experiences of being exploited by the systems. Many cannot trust even their nearest and dearest, let alone external 'experts'. The only way to be certain of anything is therefore to trust yourself. This is a real challenge for the church. Some will insist that human judgments are bound to be flawed, by definition. Many more will question the judgments of others because we have a tendency towards being control freaks. We can be incredibly suspicious of what might happen when other people express their opinions, especially if they are 'untrained'. We must have something to learn from Jesus here, who always valued and affirmed those he met, while at the same time having the knack of being able to challenge people, inviting them to move on, but without destroying them. As far as I can see, there was only one group of people whom Jesus did not affirm, namely those self-righteous religious leaders who thought they knew it all. Not, of course, because they were intrinsically beyond redemption, but by their very attitude they were incapable of listening to anyone except themselves. As Jesus said, 'Let those who have ears ...' (Matthew 13:9).

People follow relational leaders This is nothing new either. None of us will ever be made into leaders by being appointed to so-called positions of leadership. We are only leaders insofar as others are prepared to follow us. That was one of the main frustrations that the Pharisees had with Jesus: he wasn't supposed to be an accredited leader, but people found him attractive and went after him in their thousands. He was, in every sense, a relational leader. He hung out with people, listening to their concerns, encouraging them to take responsibility, and dealing with the things that might threaten their personal growth. Leaders of industry are coming to recognize the importance of all this, which is why books like *Jesus CEO* are such an attractive model to increasing numbers of them.¹⁴ What is this saying to the church?

¹⁴ In addition to the book, see the enormous variety of resources at <www.jesusceo.com>.

Building for the Future: a Biblical model

Our foundational documents in the New Testament have no shortage of inspirational stories that can inform our practice today. One that I have found especially relevant is the story of St Paul's visit to Athens (Acts 17:16-34) - not least because the situation there was remarkably similar to the 'supermarket of faiths' in which we now find ourselves. In fact, many of today's most popular spiritual pursuits are mere variations of what was going on in the Hellenistic world of the first century (some of the ingredients in what we call the 'New Age' are remarkably similar to aspects of ancient Gnosticism). So what might we learn from the apostle?

First of all, that we need to **trust God**. As the university porter reminded me, we need to regain our confidence in speaking of God. We would all affirm as an article of faith that this is God's world, and God is at work in it - what we call the *mission dei*. But we need to remind ourselves what that means in terms of practical evangelization. It should encourage us to realize that there is no need to be afraid, because God goes before us. It will also inevitably challenge us, for how can we believe in the *missio dei* and also imagine (as many of us do) that there are no-go areas for God. It also calls us to see the world not from our own cloistered circumstances, but in a global perspective, asking 'How does the world look to God?'

That in turn means that evangelization actually starts not with us, nor even with our best-conceived programmes, but with recognizing where God is at work in people's lives, and then going out to wherever that might be, to work alongside God.

We also need to remember to **listen before we speak**. This is nothing new-fangled, but it is tough to operate this way. In Acts, Luke specifically notes that Paul spent a couple of days hanging about in Athens, just seeing what was going on, no doubt listening to all the purveyors of spiritual goodies and observing the different offerings that were on display in the supermarket of faiths. It might sound obvious to suggest that if we are to connect with people's questions, we need first to hear what those questions are. But we seem singularly reluctant to do so. Never forget that it is possible for a message to be 100% true, but 100% irrelevant. I suspect that is where we are often perceived to be by society at large. It has been well said that 'If you scratch where people are not itching, the only thing you'll make is a rash'. That is undoubtedly how some have come to regard Christians, as irritants - not because we have nothing to offer, but because we don't know how to engage effectively with the issues of today. Again, Jesus is our supreme example of One whose message was always carefully crafted to match the concerns of his hearers. With fishing people, he spoke of fish; with rich people he talked about money; at the side of a well, the topic was water, and so on. Put like that, it sounds amazingly simple, and so it is. But it's often the simple things that we miss.

Then St Paul also invites us to join him in **affirming people's starting points**. This is possibly the toughest challenge of all. When Philip joined the Ethiopian diplomat, he asked the obvious question, 'do you understand what you're reading?' (Acts 8:30). On that occasion, the answer wasn't too threatening, because he was reading the Hebrew Bible, something that Christians have always felt more or less comfortable with. When Paul met Jewish believers in the synagogues, he also began with the Hebrew scriptures. But in the ancient equivalent of a 'secular but spiritual' society like Athens, things were more complex. They were not reading the Bible. Paul's approach in that situation is worth noting, for instead of going in to clear other

spiritualities off the supermarket shelves - as many of us would do today - he instead looked around to see where there might be a touching place to connect with his own faith. This was completely in line with his conviction that the *mission dei* does indeed mean that God is to be found in the most unlikely of places - and he was not disappointed. The altar 'to an unknown god' offered just the right point of contact, and enabled him to tell them that 'this is the very thing that I happen to know something about'. It is easy to admire his confidence and courage, but more demanding if we are to do something about it in today's world. How much risk are we prepared to take in order to invite others to engage with the Gospel? How much change is too much? Would we, for example, be bold enough to abandon the Bible, as Paul seems to have done here, but still speak authentically of Christ while using the spirituality of our own culture as a starting point?¹⁵

Finally, we need to *acknowledge the reality of our own spiritual journey*, while not ignoring Walter Wink's warning that this is the last thing some Christians want to do: 'the vast majority of people in churches are not there to be changed but to shore themselves up against the too-rapid changes of a souped-up society. Their metaphor is not the journey but the fortress ...'¹⁶ Perhaps ultimately, it is that sense of defensiveness, and the aggression which often accompanies it, that more than anything else prevents us from engaging not only with the mission of God, but also with our own spirituality and humanity. Yet the provisionality of our spiritual journey is affirmed throughout the New Testament, for we all await that final transformational experience which will enable us to match up to the maturity which is in Christ. In the meantime, as persons in the process of becoming the way God intends for us to be, two further attributes should characterize our witness.

We should be *generous with one another*. Too often, we talk a good talk, but fail to walk the walk. The WCC Ecumenical Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism said it back in the 1980s, and it is no less true today: 'Churches are free to choose the ways they consider best to announce the Gospel to different people in different circumstances. But these options are never neutral. Every methodology illustrates or betrays the Gospel we announce. In all communication of the Gospel, power must be subordinate to love.'¹⁷ People outside the church read us before they contemplate anything else. They will either conclude that 'if God is like you, then I need to know more', or 'if God is like you - forget it!' Some years ago, a woman whom I had been helping in a pastoral way and who was really excited about Jesus and her own spiritual journey, turned to me one day and said, 'I'd really like to explore more about Jesus - but don't ever ask me to join the church, because I have enough problems in my life already.' Though I regretted it, I knew exactly what she meant.

We should also be *vulnerable and open*, recognizing that if we do indeed have anything to share with others, it is not because we're different from them, but precisely because we're no different. In our own lives and tangled relationships, we struggle with the same things as other people. When we pretend otherwise -

¹⁵ For an example of what that might mean, see John Drane, Ross Clifford & Philip Johnson, *Beyond Prediction: the Tarot and your Spirituality* (Oxford: Lion 2001), in which - very much inspired by Paul in Athens - we have used the Tarot as a key evangelistic tool to reach one section of today's spiritual searchers. I have no doubt that there will be other 'altars to unknown gods' which can be used in a similar way, if only we have the vision and spiritual wisdom to see them.

¹⁶ Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1990), 69.

¹⁷ *Mission and Evangelism: an Ecumenical Affirmation* (Geneva: WCC 1982), para 28.

sometimes for the best of reasons - we invite the often-heard criticism that we are 'hypocrites'. When people lay that accusation at our door, I don't think they are accusing us of being deliberately devious or manipulative or dishonest - just that they can see that we do indeed wrestle with the same challenges as everybody else, and sometimes we get it wrong as well as getting it right. But the Gospel takes us beyond that, for the really good news is that, in the midst of life's difficulties and uncertainties - and its joys and blessings - following Jesus does actually make a difference. Perhaps, after all, it will not take much to rebuild the household of faith. From his prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer recommended: 'We should give up the foolish task of trying to be saints, and get on with the more important task of trying to be human.' We could do worse than take his advice as we engage with the calling that God gives us, to be spiritual, human, and Christian in today's world.

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