

Turn or Turn Up?

I could have used other titles: ‘Trust or Attend?’, ‘Crisis or Process?’; ‘Convert or Conform?’; ‘Crunch or Course?’; ‘Believe or Mingle?’; and so on.

What am I talking about?

Have you not noticed the sea change which has taken place in recent years in the evangelical world? Have you not seen how evangelical terminology is being altered, even diluted? Instead of referring to ‘sinners’, ‘unbelievers’, ‘the ungodly’, ‘pagans’, ‘the lost’, and the like – all scriptural terms – a growing number of evangelicals now talk about ‘the-not-yet-Christians’, ‘the unchurched’, and the like. The key word – ‘conversion’ – is quietly being dropped in many quarters. Indeed, what ‘conversion’ stands for is suffering from neglect – if not meeting serious attack, both insidious and open. It is not just a question of words; a vital principle, a vital practice and experience is at stake. I am speaking of regeneration, a new heart – the work of the sovereign Spirit – leading to conviction of sin, heart-repentance and heart-trust in Christ, inevitably followed by obedience to Christ in his law (progressive sanctification). This, the great essential (see, for instance, Ezekiel 11:19-20; 18:31-32; 36:26-27; John 3:3-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Hebrews 12:14), is being seriously undermined, not least among – of all people – evangelicals!

Although I have written extensively on all this,¹ the issue is so big and so far-reaching, I really must try again.

¹ See my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*; *Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder; To Confront or Not to Confront?: Addresses to Unbelievers*; *Letting Loose a Gadfly: Edward Miall Speaks Today*; *Infant Baptism Tested; Conversion Ruined: The New Perspective and the Conversion of Sinners*; *The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T.Wright’s view of Baptism and Conversion*; *Deceit in Death: Christendom in the Raw: ‘Christian’ Last Rites for Unbelievers*; and so on.

Today, the advice (note the word; I use it deliberately) an increasing number of evangelicals proffer to ‘the unchurched’, ‘the not-yet-Christians’, is often along these lines (though the full details are never spelled out):

- Come to our church, join in the activities we have specially designed just for you, get to feel at home among us, and stick at it until something ‘clicks’.
- Attend one of our courses, and be ‘coached’ or ‘indoctrinated’ in the system.
- Having learned the system we will present to you, tick the boxes.

Of course, I am being deliberately provocative: I want to draw attention to what is going on just beneath the surface. No evangelical church uses such explicit language,² but this is what more and more evangelistic efforts boil down to.

There are four big errors here.

First, ‘the community’ – not God – is made the centre; the church focuses on ‘the community’ and not God – how to devise schemes to help ‘the community’, to fix ‘the community’s’ problems, ameliorate its hang-ups, rather than see sinners converted to the glory of God.

Secondly, in furtherance of the first end, the church no longer confronts sinners; rather it seeks to be ‘helpful’ to ‘the unchurched’. ‘Awkward’ words, off-putting words – above all, the scriptural content of such words – are dropped; in addition to ‘conversion’, in saying this I include words such as ‘sin’, ‘transgression’, ‘iniquity’, ‘guilt’, ‘condemnation’, ‘wrath’, ‘damnation’, and the like.

² Having said that, I am working on a booklet in which I quote various sources which get close to it. Take this from the website of the Kempston Community Church: ‘Our meetings are designed for absolutely anyone’; that is, of course, designed for ‘you’ – the members of ‘the community’.

Thirdly, in furtherance of the first two aims, the two regimes which should be kept separate – the church and the world – are being deliberately mingled. I say ‘church’, but the error I am referring to is starkly brought to light if we give ‘the church’ its proper, scriptural, name – the *ekklēsia*, the called-out ones, those who have been called out of the world and are separate from it. Today, however, increasingly the church and the world are being formed into one homogenous, happy body.³

Fourthly, conversion (as much as its biblical content is left) is turned into a managed process.

In short, today, instead of condemned and ruined sinners being called immediately to Christ for salvation, ‘the unchurched’ are being invited to come to ‘church’, to make themselves at home there, and thus ‘explore Christianity’.

I know of no scripture that gives the slightest warrant to any of this. In Scripture, no unbeliever is ever invited to attend church, join a course, learn the ropes, and so on. Rather, the call is always to repentance and saving trust in Christ – and trust in him at once, now.

Let me prove it. Listen to some biblical preachers going about their work.

Take Joshua:

Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Josh. 24:15).

Isaiah:

Look to me [that is, the LORD] and be saved, all the ends of the earth! (Isa. 45:22).

³ I am not saying it is just a modern phenomenon. C.H.Spurgeon spoke about it often enough even in his day. In addition to the extracts in my *Attracting*, see the extract from Spurgeon at the end of this article.

This does not mean: ‘Attend church, go on a course’. It means what it says: ‘Look to me [that is the LORD], turn to me, do it now, and be saved’. This is God’s call to sinners. And the response required is immediate, without the slightest suggestion of a process:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6-7).

This does not mean attend church, keep seeking, keep hoping the penny might drop. It means what it says: ‘Call upon the Lord Jesus to save you, and do it NOW!’

As Christ demanded:

Repent and believe [put your trust] in the gospel (Mark 1:15).

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

‘Come to me’, says Christ, not: ‘Come to church, join a course, participate in our activities...’.

And we know what Paul said to unbelievers:

Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved (Acts 16:31).

God... now... commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 16:30).

Moreover, the gospel offers sinners the glorious assurance of what will always follow saving repentance and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

In short, believers should recognise their duty and privilege under God, and stick to it, not adjusting Christ’s manifesto to

make it appeal to pagans – their likes, their culture. And that manifesto is what? This:

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16).

We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God... Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 5:19 – 6:2).

God condemns sinners, not for neglecting to attend church, not for failing to go on a course and complete it, but for not obeying the gospel, for not trusting Christ:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:14-19,36).

[The Spirit] will convict the world concerning sin... because they do not believe in me (John 16:8-9).

They have not all obeyed the gospel... All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people (Rom. 16:16,21).

I will not labour the point. Nevertheless, the issue is critical, the situation desperate. Eternal consequences hang upon getting it right. Reformation in this area is urgently needed – before it is too late! Let us hear no more of the bleating: ‘Will you come to church?’ Rather, let us make every effort to urge and persuade

sinners to obey the clarion command, invitation and exhortation of the gospel: ‘Go to Christ!’ ‘Flee to Christ, now!’

Extract from C.H.Spurgeon on the need for the church to keep itself separate from the world

A garden is a plot of ground separated from the common waste for a special purpose: such is the church. The church is a separate and distinct thing from the world. I suppose there is such a thing as ‘the Christian world’; but I do not know what it is, or where it can be found. It must be an exceptional mixture. I know what is meant by a worldly Christian; and I suppose the Christian world must be an aggregate of worldly Christians. But the church of Christ is not of the world. ‘You are not of the world’, says Christ, ‘even as I am not of the world’. Great attempts have been made recently to make the church receive the world, and wherever it has succeeded it has come to this result, the world has swallowed up the church. It must be so. The greater is sure to swamp the less. They say: ‘Do not let us draw any hard-and-fast lines. A great many good people attend our services who may not be quite decided, but still their opinion should be consulted, and their vote should be taken upon the choice of a minister, and there should be entertainments and amusements, in which they can assist’. The theory seems to be, that it is good to have a broad gangway from the church to the world: if this is carried out, the result will be that the nominal church will use that gangway to go over to the world, but it will not be used in the other direction.⁴ It is thought by some that it would perhaps be better to have no distinct church at all. If the world will not come up to the church, let the church go down to the world; that seems to be the theory. Let the Israelites live with the Canaanites, and become one happy family. Such a blending does not appear to have been anticipated by our Lord in the chapter which was read just now [that is, John 15]: ‘If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own: but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you’ (John 15:18-

⁴ Today, many believers are erecting a gangway from the world into the church – and a broad gangway, at that. This is what this article is about. See also my *Relationship; Attracting*.

19). Did he ever say: ‘Try to make an alliance with the world, and in all things be conformed to its ways?’ Nothing could have been further from our Lord’s mind. Oh, that we could see more of holy separation; more dissent from ungodliness, more nonconformity to the world! This is ‘the dissidence of Dissent’ that I care for...

I long to see Christian people become more distinct from the world than ever, because I am persuaded that, until they are so, the church will never become such a power for blessing men as her Lord intended her to be. It is for the world’s good that there should be no alliance between the church and the world by way of compromise, even to a shade. See what came to pass when spiritual men⁵ and the world became one in Noah’s day: when ‘the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair’, and were joined with them.⁶ Then came the deluge. Another deluge, more desolating even than the former, will come, if the church ever forgets her high calling, and enters into confederacy with the world.⁷

The conclusion? I can do no better than quote the word of God to Judah through Jeremiah. Please do not misread the word ‘old’ or ‘ancient’ in what follows; the need is not to return to the ‘traditional’, but to the ‘scriptural’:

This is what the LORD says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls’ (Jer. 6:16).

Alas, the people’s response was grievous:

But you said: ‘We will not walk in it’ (Jer. 1:16).

May we show a better spirit, a wiser spirit, than that.

⁵ Spurgeon had ‘the church’. We should reserve the use of ‘church’ for the days of the new covenant. See my ‘*A Gospel Church: A Warning*’, and the shorter article with the same title.

⁶ Hear my ‘Sons Of God & Daughters Of Men’.

⁷ C.H.Spurgeon sermon 1957.