

Cleansing the Temple Today

I refer, of course, to the two occasions – the first at the start of his ministry, the second as it drew to its close – upon which Christ, stirred – righteously angered, incensed – by what he saw, entered the temple and cleansed it. Christ’s cleansing of the temple is recorded in all four Gospels: John 2:13-16 (at the start of Christ’s ministry) and Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-16 and Luke 19: 45-46 (at the end of his ministry). Alas, ‘cleansed’ is too bland, too sanitised (no pun intended). Let me quote the relevant passages. They speak for themselves:

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said: ‘Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’ His disciples remembered that it is written [in Ps. 69:9]: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’ (John 2:13-17).

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ‘It is written’, he said to them, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer’, but you are making it “a den of robbers”’ (Matt. 21:12-13, quoting Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11).

Historically, various kings of Judah – Asa, Joash, Hezekiah and Josiah – had attempted a necessary cleansing of the temple in their day, some to a lesser extent, some to a greater.¹

My question is this: Do we need a cleansing of the temple today?

Well, of course not! The temple has long since ceased to exist, its role having been fulfilled in and by Christ.²

¹ See my series ‘Thoughts on the Kings of Judah’.

But... in a spiritual sense, do the churches need cleansing today?

I say they do. In many cases, in a growing number of cases, I say they do.

Let me give an example of what I am talking about, another example, I mean. I say ‘another’ because I have written and spoken about this matter on several occasions.³

All I quote here is in the public domain.⁴ The church in question is not ashamed to publish the material which now follows. Quite the opposite; it glories in it.

On its website, under the heading ‘About’, the church in question declares:

Church Planting had been on the heart of Bromham Baptist Church (BBC) for a number of years and in early 2005 it came to the forefront as part of the then-minister’s vision. From that time on, we sought God for the way forward, both in terms of location and leadership. After much prayer, and many pictures and words [*sic*], we felt led to Marston Moretaine, a village with a population of approx[imately] 4000, 8 miles south of Bromham and four miles east of Junction 13 of the M1.

Our vision was to establish an emerging expression of church, aimed at unbelievers and the ‘de-churched’, which would develop into a full expression of Christian community for those who don’t connect with ‘traditional’ styles of church. We also felt that as well as focusing on mission locally, we should have an international focus, which led us early on to be an official link with the Williamson family in Cusco, Peru who have been on a similar journey to ourselves. A Special Church-Member’s Meeting in January 2008 confirmed the call to plant a church in Marston Moretaine, to be led by BBC’s Staff Elder, Steve Gaunt, and his wife Jo-Ann. Although two

² See my ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’.

³ See my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*; *Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder*; ‘Why Are You Following Christ?’; ‘A Vital Lesson For Today’; ‘Turn or Turn Up?’; ‘The “O” Word’; ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’.

⁴ I have very lightly edited the grammar *etc.*

couples lived in the village, nobody else had heard of us, and so we spent 12 months building relationships, and becoming known in the community. We helped out at the village Youth Club; took over the running of two Mum & Baby groups; helped restart a Mum's & Toddler's group; started hearing children read at the local lower school; started two 'Chatterbox' cafés in local lower schools for mums, dads and carers to have refreshments and chat after dropping their children off in the morning; and ran a 'Holiday Club' during the first week of August.

The relationships and trust we built up led us to establish 'Sunday Brunch' in October 2008 in the local school hall. 'Sunday Brunch' is a café open from 10.30am to 12 noon on the 1st and 3rd Sundays of the month. Its aim is to provide opportunities for people to make new friends and explore the Christian faith in a relaxed and friendly setting. It's about food – fun – friends – family – faith. We serve a brunch, have a theme for the day which includes a quiz and a ten minute 'food4thought'. Newspapers are available, and there is a crèche area and children's work.

'Sunday Supplement' was launched in September 2009 following a positive response to a feedback survey of those attending 'Sunday Brunch' – part of which asked if people would be interested in coming along on a Sunday morning once a month to a time of modern worship, prayer, a short talk, and the sharing of people's stories with tea, coffee, doughnuts and children's work. 'Sunday Supplement' met on the 4th Sunday of each month from 10.30am to 12 noon.

'Sunday Extra' was introduced at the beginning of 2011 at [the] request of those attending our 'Sunday Supplement' who wanted to meet on the second Sunday of each month as well. However, there was a desire for a slightly different format from that of our 'Sunday Supplement'. People wanted to share communion together, have time for reflection, and receive longer teaching on topics relevant to their daily lives.

We have continued to see growth with anywhere between 50-70 people coming along to our 'Sunday Brunch' and 60-80 at our 'Sunday Extra' services. We have also seen, through the five Alpha courses we have run, 17 people coming to faith, 15 of whom we have had the privilege of baptising.

In July of 2012, we became a fully constituted church with 40 members, and called Steve Gaunt as our Minister and his wife Jo-Ann as our Associate Minister. In 2013 we became

members of the Central Baptist Association and the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

We have taken the name 'Vale Community Church' to reflect our desire to see God's Spirit flow through the whole of the Vale of Marston, and to be at the centre of the community where people can come together to discover God's love for them.

We challenge ourselves not to settle, and believe God has called us to keep pioneering. It has been exciting to see how God has gone ahead of us and opened door after door! And as they say: 'The rest is history!'

On the page: 'I'm New':

For some people going anywhere for the first time can be a bit of a nerve-racking experience. To help avoid any worries, here's a quick summary of what you can expect on a Sunday morning at Vale Community Church.

Sunday Brunch (1st Sunday)

First of all how many churches do you know that serve breakfast and where the children can play table tennis and table football, and parents can relax and chat to each other, or just read the Sunday newspapers[?]

We meet in the hall at Church End [*sic*] Lower School (Forest End site), and start at 10.30am when bacon baps, sausage sandwiches, croissant, pastries, toast, fruit, fruit juices and tea or coffee [are] available. On the tables you will find a quiz based on our theme for the day. There are various activities to try out each time, rounded off by a short thought for the day. Sunday papers are also available, which people are free to take home with them at the end of the morning. 'KidsZone', our children's activities, runs for part of the morning, and there is also an area set aside for pre-school children with all sorts of toys. We finish at 12.00 noon.

Sunday Gathering (2nd, 3rd & 4th Sundays)

We start at 10.30am with light refreshments usually consisting of cakes, fruit juice, tea or coffee, all shared around small tables. At 10.45am we sing some worship songs – both well-known hymns and more-modern songs, to which you can sit or stand; it doesn't matter. We then have a mixture of prayers, drama, sharing our stories, a short talk on subjects relevant to our daily lives and communion (2nd & 4th Sundays). 'KidsZone' our children's activities run from 11.10am, and the

children come back and join us at 11.50am to share what they have been doing, until we close at 12.00 noon.

Family Service (5th Sundays and all throughout August)

10:30 – 12:00, starting with tea, coffee and cakes. [This is] a time when everyone in the church family comes together, from the youngest to the oldest to celebrate a part of the church's life in all sorts of different ways.

We aren't super-spiritual beings, we are just normal people and you will find we are a friendly bunch, and if you don't understand something please simply ask! Our aim is to provide opportunities for you to make new friends and explore the Christian faith in a relaxed and friendly setting. It's about: 'Food – Fun – Friends – Family – Faith'.

When to arrive and what to wear

If it's your first visit then it's probably best to turn up around 10.30am. You'll be greeted on the door by our welcoming team who will show you to a table and explain about breakfast. A little later in the morning our host for the day will explain what is going to happen for the rest of the morning...

What to wear? This is easy. Wear whatever you feel comfortable in. We are an informal gathering and accept people as they are. Whether you come as a suited businessman or a freaked-out punk – that is fine with us.

Is it just Sundays?

Absolutely not! God is with us all week long, and we aim to lead lives pleasing to him. We're not perfect, and we do make mistakes, but we desire to make a positive difference in everything we do.

To further encourage us we have midweek groups ('Life Groups') which help us to be a strong, vibrant and growing community of God's people, and to fulfil His⁵ purposes in our generation. If you are just looking into Christianity, you are welcome to come along to a small group to ask all those questions about God and Christianity that you've always wanted to ask, but never had the opportunity.

⁵ Upper case original.

We are involved in serving the community in various ways and we run various children's events throughout the year. For more details see our 'What We Do Locally' page.

Facilities

We aim to be an all-inclusive church. The school premises in which we meet are easily accessible for those with physical disabilities, with a ramp to the entrance, and a wheelchair-accessible toilet.

Please contact us or speak to a member of the welcome team if you have any specific needs, or any suggestions for further improvement.

The website's 'Sundays' page has further explanation of the terms:

'Sunday Brunch' is a café that provides opportunities to make new friends and explore the Christian faith in a relaxed and friendly setting. We have bacon baps, sausage sandwiches, croissant, pastries, toast, fruit, fruit juices and tea or coffee available. On your table you will find a quiz based on our theme for the day. There are various activities to try out each time, rounded off by a short thought for the day. Sunday papers are also available.

'Sunday Gathering' provides an opportunity for those wanting to gather together as family to: worship; pray; receive teaching relevant to their daily lives; and share people's stories. This all takes place around tables and simple refreshments in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. We share bread and wine (communion) on the second and fourth Sundays of the month.

'Family Service' is a time when everyone in the church family comes together, from the youngest to the oldest to celebrate a part of the church's life in all sorts of different ways.

My Comments

Mere words fail to do justice to the website in question. The graphics and the photographs make things very clear indeed.

The material point is that we are supposed to be talking about a church – to give it its proper, scriptural name, an *ekklesia*; this is what we are supposed to be talking about. All the above,

however, is more akin to an advert for Starbucks or McDonalds, and has only the remotest connection with what Scripture teaches about the *ekklēsia*. That being so, we are faced with something exceedingly serious. To depart from the scriptural pattern, to impose worldly ideas and practices upon anything belonging to the new covenant, must carry a heavy penalty from the hand of Christ. As for the church, Christ loved and died for the elect, and he set up the *ekklēsia*. It is his church (Matt. 16:18); he is the king of the church; he is the only king of his church; only Christ – through his Spirit in his word – has the right to stipulate its terms. Christ purchased the church of God by his blood (Acts 20:28). The church must, therefore, be exceedingly precious to the Lord Christ. Men tamper with the church at their peril!

Yet, in the shenanigans taking place at the Vale Community Church, this is precisely what is going on!

How?

The idea that the church exists to attract unbelievers, the ‘de-churched’, or the ‘unchurched’, to its assemblies in order to evangelise them is utterly foreign to Scripture. It is pure Christendom-speak. The very word chosen by God to describe the saints and their gatherings – the *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’ – precludes any such thought. The first saints no more thought of attracting unbelievers – the ‘de-churched’ or ‘unchurched’ – to their assemblies than flying to the moon! ‘Who or What are these “de-churched” or “unchurched”?’ they would have asked, scratching their heads, looking at each other lost in bewilderment. ‘Attract unbelievers to our assemblies?’, they would have gasped: ‘Impossible!’ ‘Make *ekklēsia* life and the gospel attractive to the unregenerate?’ ‘Unthinkable!’ ‘Form lasting relationships with unbelievers through the provision of bacon baps and coffee in the *ekklēsia*, with a free Sunday newspaper thrown in, so as to prepare the way for those unbelievers to come to church to listen to our message?’ ‘Perish the thought!’ ‘Make the *ekklēsia* appealing to the children of darkness?’ ‘Has not Christ told us in the bluntest of terms that

just as the world hated him and his words, they will hate us and our words (John 15:18-27; 16:2-4,33; 17:14-18)?⁶ How can we even think of attracting them? What would be the point? If we are acting scripturally, in the ways appointed by the apostles, unbelievers wouldn't want to come, in any case. The atmosphere would be utterly alien to them. They would be like fish out of water'.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to discover that there is no evidence in Scripture of any protracted 'church attendance' by unbelievers. Moreover, it is clear that believers would never have encouraged such a practice. There is not the slightest suggestion that the early churches actively sought or encouraged it. The notion that the early believers set up fast-food outlets to attract unbelievers to 'attend church' is ludicrous. The truth is, 'church attendance' is a Christendom concept from start to finish. It was unknown in the first days of the gospel. These are simple but stubborn and unmistakable facts. The church was for believers. The church and the world were separated communities (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:2). The church was what its name implies: the *ekklēsia*, the called-out ones.

As I say, those early believers knew that the world had hated the prophets for centuries past, and killed them (Matt. 23:31,34,37; Luke 11:47; 13:54; Rom. 11:3; 1 Thess. 2:15). They did not forget that the world (to put it mildly) had not welcomed Christ (John 1:11), but had hated him and wanted to kill him, even from birth (Matt. 2:1-20; Rev. 12:1-6), let alone when he began his ministry (Luke 4:28-29; John 5:18; 7:1,19; 8:37,40; 11:47-53,57); eventually they got their way. And now it would hate them. They expected it. Christ could not have made the position clearer:

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,
so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men,
for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their

⁶ I do not see why the world would hate and want to persecute believers who, while avoiding the confrontational aspect of the gospel, are offering them so many carnal goodies free of charge.

synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake (Matt. 10:16-22).

They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake (Matt. 24:9).

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours (John 15:18-20).

As Christ prayed:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18).

Oh yes, the early believers knew that what they were as believers, what they did as believers, what they stood for as believers, what they wanted by their preaching, and how they preached, was going to be anathema to the world. And they knew it was inevitable. They had no illusions about it. They knew that the world's hatred was an integral part of their stance for Christ; it 'went with the territory'. This hatred was not 'a difficulty' which took them by surprise; they had been forewarned and, as expected, they experienced it. They did not go out of the way to court or provoke it, but they knew it was the way God was going to advance the cause of Christ as they took the gospel to sinners. 'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim. 3:12). The suggestion

that they would establish schemes to get round this is a downright insult to the memory of the early believers, and what they had learned from Christ through his apostles.

It is only as sinners are regenerated, converted, given a new heart by the Spirit in the new covenant, and so given a spiritual appetite and love for Christ and his truth, that they will become interested in, let alone want, 'church'. The early believers took this as self-evident, a given.

Consequently, as the apostle asked – rhetorically :

What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty' (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

Is the Vale Community Church in any danger of falling foul of encouraging the practice so roundly condemned by Christ when he confronted the crowds who were flocking to him? What am I talking about? Listen to his words:

Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval (John 6:26-27).

I repeat my question: Is the Vale Community Church in any danger of falling foul of this? I say it is! I go further. It is not merely in danger of falling foul of Christ's accusation. It is actually doing so! Blatantly so!

After his condemning accusation in John 6:26-27, Christ immediately preached his most divisive and confrontational

sermon – and did so deliberately – with the designed effect of causing the overwhelming majority to melt away like snow in summer. The approach of the Vale Community Church runs directly contrary to Christ’s stated principles! And it is not alone!

Let us never forget the clear statements of Christ:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me... Whoever serves me must follow me... You must follow me (John 10:27; 12:26; 21:22).

Paul was adamant that believers should follow him as he followed Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7,9, for instance), that we should be followers of God (Eph. 5:1).

In light of John 6, how can the goings-on at Vale Community Church, and similar places, be said to fit comfortably with following Christ? They can’t!

Consequently, we today need such a prophetic and confrontational ministry as Christ’s in John 6. The present declension – the rapid and widespread declension – among evangelicals makes the need for such a ministry imperative.

Where is the wrath of God, the condemned status and standing of the unconverted (Rom. 1:18 – 3:20; Eph. 2:1-3) in all this fast-food carnality? When will it be raised? Where will it be raised? How will it be raised? With a doughnut in one hand, and a Sunday newspaper in the other?

How will the offence of Christ, his gospel, and especially the cross (Rom. 9:33; 1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:8), be brought into this ‘fun and food’ palaver?

Will it be: ‘When you have finished your sausage roll, replenished your mug of coffee, and had a good laugh at the cartoons in the free Sunday newspaper, I want to preach to you about your sin and your consequent state of condemnation under the wrath of God. I want, by the Holy Spirit’s power, to probe you, to convict you of your sin, to urge you to repent and

savingly trust Christ, and to persuade you to rely entirely and only upon the Redeemer's blood and righteousness for your everlasting salvation, and do so now'? Can you imagine it? After all that food and fun, with all that razzmatazz going on, how is it possible to preach in order to arouse the sinner's sense of sin, to let him know and feel that he is under the wrath of God, to preach the blood of Christ, the need to repent and trust Christ, and all the rest?

What of Paul's determination:

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2)?

Can you picture him saying this – and carrying it out – while making sure everybody had a bacon bap, and encouraging all and sundry 'to have fun'?

Is it just me, or does anybody else see a parallel between this 21st-century evangelical religion and 1st-century Jewish temple-abuse? If so, you must see the tie up between the spiritual today and the physical then. In the days of the old covenant, the temple played a vital – though symbolic – part; in the days of the new covenant, Christ, having fulfilled the shadow, has brought in the spiritual equivalent. Christ is the temple. His saints are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21, for instance). The *ekklēsia* is the local expression of Christ meeting with his saints. Accordingly, I see a direct parallel between 1st-century Jewish temple-abuse (speaking physically) and 21st-century evangelical religion (speaking both spiritually and physically). The *ekklēsia* has been turned into a Starbucks or McDonald's fast-food outlet, varnished with a layer of sentimental 'Christianity'.

Of course, in today's cleansing, our weapons are not material – whips and so on. We do not literally throw out the fast-food ovens, and burn the newspapers. No! But we must confront those who dream of turning the *ekklēsia* into a kitchen *cum* funfair, confront those who organise the kitchens, plan the menus, man the serving hatches, deliver the goodies to the

customers (non-paying, I know, but they are customers all the same). Indeed, the entire paraphernalia and the principles behind it must be abolished in a spiritual way. And that is my purpose in publishing this article. We have the mandate:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Yes, our weapons are spiritual, but Christ has given us those weapons, and he did not give them to us for ornamental purposes! Our mandate is clear: we must do all we can in a spiritual way to bring everything and everyone to submit to Christ. We must not forget our mandate; we must not change our mandate; we must carry out our mandate; and we must use our weapons to keep purifying the *ekklēsia*. The temple must be cleansed. And without delay!