

Church Life Before the Crisis

Although, according to its heading, this chapter deals with past days, I will largely use the present tense, since I am really speaking about what is considered, by most believers, to be normal practice, and that from time immemorial.

I remind you of the three new-covenant principles we need to bear in mind regarding the *ekklēsia*: its exclusive nature, the smallness of numbers, and the believers' participation in mutual edification. We must keep setting these three, as a plumb line, against current practice.

Even though the concept of 'going to church' to 'attend a church service' was unknown in New Testament days,¹ for centuries the overwhelming majority of believers have simply taken it for granted that 'church services' are 'the done thing': believers 'worship God' by 'going to church' or 'attending church' at the time of 'divine worship'. While the first believers knew nothing of this practice, so strong a grip has 'attending a church service' come to have on the minds of men (especially believers), almost anything and everything is turned into an occasion for yet another 'service' – wedding, funeral, harvest, Advent, Christingle, Christmas, Good Friday, countless so-called Saints' Days, Easter, Pentecost, baptising, preaching, worship, family, guest, and so on, have all been turned into adjectives qualifying 'service'. Such 'services' are legion, mostly held in a location which is regarded (even if only for the occasion) as a place of 'public worship'.

What do most people understand by 'a church service' and by 'worship'? What is really going on?

¹ Jews, of course, went to the synagogue or temple, and pagans frequented temples, for what might be called 'a service'.

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It goes without saying that there must be a very wide spectrum of answers to those questions, but even so, some common factors stand out.

Although it will horrify many to hear it, even in evangelical nonconformist churches – when all is boiled down – most ‘church services’ are, in essence, performances – performances which are watched by 99% of the congregation, with minimal participation on their part, and that participation – such as it is – being of a liturgical nature, specified and institutionalised. Church leaders are, in the main, happy to allow the congregation to unite in singing hymns, songs or psalms, perhaps to repeat some kind of liturgy (written or not), with, maybe, specified individuals performing delegated tasks such as leading the silent congregation in public prayer, the reading of a designated passage of Scripture, the giving of a children’s ‘talk’, or taking part in (or even leading) ‘the worship team’ or band. The climax of ‘the service’, however, comes when the congregation settles down to listen to the delivery of a monologue discourse by ‘the minister’.² (Cynically – but I fear factually – the climax for a growing number is the ubiquitous cup of coffee and biscuits – or something more exotic!)

As a result, most of ‘the service’ is a performance, a performance by the few (mainly one), watched and listened to by the many, punctuated by an interval for refreshments.

Indeed, even before the crisis and the consequent rise in the use of the internet, with the increasing use of a technology which has been getting ever more sophisticated, the notion of ‘the service’ as ‘a performance’ has been remorselessly gaining ground, as more and more preachers have chosen to read their fully-prepared and documented discourses, often from an openly-manipulated electronic device, used PowerPoint, and capping it all by the distribution of their

² See my *Sowed*.

sermon notes. The growth of the professionalism in all this has been so inexorable over recent years, that it is almost certain to become the accepted format for many, and will soon be established as the next institutional tradition.

Why is this? What is the driving force behind it? Could it be that an impeccable performance is wanted, not only at the time but, more especially, for internet distribution? Things certainly give me that impression. Services are designed to run like clockwork: presentation is king. Glitches are to be avoided, not only by the minister reading his detailed notes but with his carefully orchestrated – programmed – sermon illustrations appearing, as if by magic, at the appropriate moment on the public screen. The entire enterprise can then be edited to remove any remaining flaws, any ‘going off script’, before the whole is uploaded to the internet as a polished, seamless performance. But, it must not be forgotten, the medium has a large bearing on – if not rules – the message.³ It won’t be long – it is probably happening as I write – that church leaders will be consulting pagan TV producers to learn ‘how to do it’.⁴ If so, it will only be the latest in a growing list of such consultations.⁵

In addition, evangelicals have come to look upon such ‘church services’ as the ideal venue for evangelism; ‘worship’ and evangelism are combined, with evangelism ruling the roost. This, in itself, has had a massive damaging

³ Preaching is ruined if a sermon is prepared and delivered with a view to later publication. See D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ 1964 paper: ‘John Calvin and George Whitefield’ in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1987, pp122-123 (I quote it later in this booklet). See also his *Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, pp15-16; ‘What Is Preaching?’, *Knowing The Times...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1989, p264. See my *Preaching*.

⁴ As I will show, there is no shortage of such material, even now. And it is growing by the day.

⁵ See my *Relationship*.

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effect on the life of the *ekklēsia*.⁶ In particular, a deep-rooted inclusivism is now endemic,⁷ with believers and unbelievers joined in one ‘service’, the congregation being treated as believers from start to (almost) finish.⁸

What is more, the culture-led pressure has been rising to make the *ekklēsia* and its message ‘fitter’ to reach and communicate with ‘the unchurched’. We seem to be ignoring the biblical fact that the natural man – and the natural man is the sinner who needs to be regenerated, converted and saved (not merely ‘reached’ and ‘communicated with’) – is by nature hostile to God and the gospel (Rom. 8:7). ‘The unchurched’ might well be finding the re-vamped church more attractive, but this is a far cry from being convicted as sinners and converted. It is possible to tinker with the gospel to make it acceptable to pagans, but will what is left be the gospel? To be able ‘to communicate’ is commendable, but to communicate what? *That* surely must be our topmost priority in this area. Only the Spirit can effectively ‘communicate’ the gospel – Christ – to the natural man. This, I fear, is being forgotten in the modern drive to ‘understand the culture and accommodate to it’.

Before the crisis, such was becoming normal church life for many evangelicals. Believers attended ‘the house of God’ for ‘a church service’. This is how God was worshipped. This was the ‘done thing’. And it was combined with attracting unbelievers into ‘church attendance’ in order to evangelise them. All had to be ‘performed’ as professionally as possible.

⁶ See my *Relationship*.

⁷ See my *Infant; Baptist Sacramentalism* pp275,327-332; *Glorious* pp187-195; *Dilemma*; ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’ in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume 12*.

⁸ In his closing remarks, the preacher might gently address any who are ‘not yet believers’, but the damage has long since been done – a case of shutting the stable door long after the horse has disappeared. See my *Dilemma*.

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It is time now to see how the Christendom church matches the three principles I delineated concerning the *ekklēsia*.

1. The *ekklēsia* is (in the right – biblical – sense of the word) exclusive.
2. Smallness of numbers is essential for *ekklēsia* life.
3. The *ekklēsia* is for the mutual participation for edification of believers, each believer playing a full part; this is the essence of *ekklēsia* life. Believers do not assemble merely to listen to a monologue – which large assemblies can cope with – but for mutual participation.

I will not beat about the bush. On all three points, the Christendom church fails miserably.

In contrast to the principle that the *ekklēsia* should be exclusively for believers, ‘church attendance’ today is for everyone! How else can we evangelise ‘the unchurched’?

In contrast to the principle of smallness, many churches place the endless increase of numbers in attendance near or at the top of their list of priorities.⁹ Indeed, the modern evangelical church’s drive for a wide variety of well-run professional schemes demands a large congregation, which can supply the necessary wide range of workers to run the programmes.

The principle of participation by all, to the mutual edification of all, has been replaced by the congregation listening to a monologue discourse.

The cost – the damage – of these departures from Scripture is incalculable. It has meant that observation has replaced participation, performance by virtually one man (or, at most, a few) has replaced mutual interaction, and the priesthood of a few believers (mostly one) has ousted the priesthood of all believers. This concept of ‘performance’ – as many believers largely watch delegated people do their religion for them, –

⁹ See my *Relationship*.

makes it clear that many – most? – have never really left Rome.¹⁰

I can best illustrate my claims by reference to the apostle's words when writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:4-31; 14:1-40). He would not need to write to most churches today as he did then. Does his illustration of the church as a body, each member of which is equally active, no passengers, all eager to encourage (in the biblical sense of the word) the rest and (it is to be hoped) encouraged by them in turn – paint a realistic picture of today's churches? If we were honest in portraying today's church, would we not delineate a huge head, mostly mouth, addressing a mass of docile sheep?¹¹ Allowing for the extraordinary, Paul was not rebuking the Corinthians for their mutual interaction – far from it – but for the uncontrolled, carnal way in which they were going about it, breaking new-covenant principles by their pride and self-centredness. 'Stop your wildness, put an end to your pushiness, mortify the love of the sound of your own voice, and get down to real edification!' This is what he was saying.

What would he say to the average evangelical church today?¹²

¹⁰ It was Rome who turned the many into spectators who watched the few – see the Appendix 'A Glance at History'.

¹¹ Daphne du Maurier, in her *Jamaica Inn*, was clinically cruel in the vicar of Altarnun's – Francis Davey's – sketch which Mary Yellan discovered. It showed that he thought of his congregation as gullible sheep, mouths gaping, sitting before him as he preached.

¹² In 1959, Lloyd-Jones said: 'Take 1 Corinthians 14... Would you need to write that chapter to a church today? Of course not! Why? Because the church today is not in this pneumatic [that is, spiritual – DG] condition... [In those early days] there was more of the freedom of the Spirit. more spontaneity, more taking part by the mass of the people [than with us]' (Lloyd-Jones: 'Revival: An Historical and Theological Survey' in *Puritans* p13). A bit rich coming from Lloyd-Jones, but true!