

Stewardship Conference

George Herbert captures the restlessness of the human condition that is the source of our weariness which leads us to God in prayer. It is important for us never to forget that the beginning of our giving lies in our praying.

When God at first made man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by,
‘Let us’, said He, ‘poure on him all we can:
Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.’

So strength first made a way;
Then beautie flow’d, then wisdom, honour, pleasure;
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all His treasure,
Rest in the bottome lay.

‘For if I should,’ said He,
‘Bestow this jewell also on My creature,
He would adore My gifts in stead of Me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.

‘Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlesnesse;
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tesse him to My breast.’

National Stewardship Network Conference – September 2008
“Culture, Context & Change”

There are two particular features within the Acts of the Apostles which you are studying here in your Conference. The first is about mission; the second is about praying.

In Acts Chapter 1 v8 the disciples are given the great commission all over again: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”. It is worth pondering what spurred the moving forward in mission. Was it a strategy devised by the Apostles? Did it happen in Chapter 2, or 3, or 4, or 5 or 6 or 7? No, the followers of Jesus stayed in Jerusalem for the first seven chapters and the prophesy of Acts Chapter 1 verse 8 was not fulfilled until Acts Chapter 8 verse 1 when we are told “That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the Apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria”. In other words, it was persecution and turbulence that propelled the people of God forward in mission.

Any study of church history shows that the church always puts fellowship before mission! In fact, you could almost conclude that fellowship is the enemy of mission! There’s an inherent conservatism in all groups that prefers the security of their own company. Any opening up to the outside world is disturbing and threatening. It is no wonder that the church ignored the commission of Acts chapter 1 verse 8 and spent the first seven chapters in Jerusalem.

It should teach us that when turbulence hits the church, as it is at this moment in time, it is not always a negative outcome as far as the mission of God is concerned.

The second feature in the Acts of the Apostles is that there are approximately 13 times when the Evangelist writes “And they prayed”. The context, content and consequence of each of these episodes of prayer are worth reflecting on when it comes to understanding how the church moves forward in mission. The first time

it says “And they prayed” is when they ask God to show them whom he has chosen to succeed Judas in the apostolic company. The first time they pray is for leadership. This is vitally important. We need to recognise the strategic importance in praying for leaders and especially in the area of lay leadership. There are two leaders who can blight a church – the organist and the treasurer!

An unspiritual organist and an unspiritual treasurer can thwart the mission of God. Conversely, a spiritual organist and a spiritual treasurer can be a source of blessing as a church is liberated to move forward in mission.

If you analyse these episodes of “And they prayed” you will see that before Chapter 8 there is a strong link between praying and giving; then after Chapter 8 there is strong link between praying and sending people out and releasing the gifts of God.

What this seems to suggest is that before we can become a missionary church we must become a giving church and before we can become a giving church we must become a praying church.

Giving is fundamentally a spiritual issue, not a strategic issue. When we give that is when we are most like God who gives of Himself in creation, in Christ, on the cross, in the Spirit. Giving is the expression of love. You know when you have fallen in love because that is when you simply want to give and keep on giving to the beloved. Giving is to be like God. That is why God loves a cheerful giver. He doesn't love a cheerful giver because it will fill the coffers or makes some project possible or enable the church to be reordered. No, God loves a cheerful giver because God himself is the cheerful giver. When we learn to give cheerfully then we have become like God Himself which is our destiny. That's why God loves the cheerful giver.

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I began with George Herbert’s “The Pulley” and I end with George Herbert’s “Love bade me welcome”. Why? Because giving is fundamentally a spiritual matter and anchored in the love of God.

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack’d any thing.

‘A guest’ I answer’d, ‘worthy to be here’:
Love said, ‘You shall be he’.
‘I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee’.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
‘Who made the eyes but I?’

‘Truth, Lord: but I have marr’d them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.’
‘And know not you,’ says Love, ‘Who will bore the blame?’
‘My dear, then I will serve,’
‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my Meat.’
So I did sit and eat.

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*Based on the notes from an address given by the Rt. Rev. James Jones,
Bishop of Liverpool at the Stewardship Conference.*