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Defend Christendom or Welcome the Stranger?

Chris Ruddle, Folkestone Baptist Church, prompts thought on Christian response to immigration issues.

On the 20th November 2004 the Daily Telegraph printed an editorial about the views of Cardinal Ratzinger. It relayed, and seemed to endorse, the thought that

> *"A falling birthrate is altering the ethnic composition of Europe, as Muslim immigration transforms the ancient heartlands of Christendom. Churches are emptying as Christian culture is threatened by an aggressive secularism, even an intolerant one."*

The article cites two cases. Rocco Buttiglione, forced to stand down because his orthodox Catholic views were seen as incompatible with an EU portfolio including justice for homosexuals and a Swedish protestant pastor imprisoned for a month for preaching against homosexuality. Our culture is under threat and, the editorial asks, would Ratzinger agree to ecumenical compromise *"for the sake of a united Christian front against secularism and jihad?"*[1]

Here we see a link between the protection of Christian culture and a fight against not just secularism but Islam. It is a link picked up by the Conservative Christian Fellowship.[2] What I find interesting in this instance is that the view of homosexuality in the Muslim world would be more in line with Christian orthodoxy than the secular world. However, that is an aside. The real issue is the linking of the protection of Christian culture and the invasion of Europe by Islam: i.e. - immigration. What concerns me is that 'Christian culture' vs. Islam is being used as a metaphor for White vs. Asian. My fears were heightened at a Christian conference I recently attended. It was the conference of a highly respected evangelical para-church organization. In one seminar, with around 30 people in attendance, the case of Ezra's protection of the racial purity of the people of Israel was applied to Britain today, and nobody other than myself seemed to have a problem with this.

I sense that the media is taking an interest in the idea of Christian heritage and culture. I see in this no attempt to engage with the gospel of Jesus Christ in a meaningful way. Contrariwise, my fear is that the need of government to protect the icons of Christian culture will be used as one of the reasons to limit immigration. Thus, any Christians engaged in immigration issues will be more reticent in speaking out in case they are helping Muslim immigrants to take over Europe.

In addressing this issue, I have two questions to pose before going on to the meat of a biblical reflection.

1. Immigrants & faith

Are all immigrants Muslim? No - many immigrants are Christians. As far as I can ascertain, the government does not publish a breakdown of immigrants and asylum seekers by religion. There is a breakdown of nationality, but this does not tell the whole story. While 6 out of the top 10 applicant countries are predominantly Muslim[3], many refugees are fleeing religious or ethnic persecution by a dominant culture. My own (albeit

anecdotal) experience has been of growth through contact with Christians from Zimbabwe, the Punjab and the Czech. Republic. An assumption is made that most immigrants are Muslim. If it could be shown that this is not the case, the argument for protecting Christendom from a tide of Islam stops before it has started.

2. Do we have a Christian culture?

The signs are that we live in a post-Christian culture. In a post-modern world we may still have the icons of a nativity scene and a crucifix but there is little knowledge of the content of the Christian story and no understanding of how our laws were formed in relation to Christian faith. A very small percentage of children attend church on a Sunday[4]. In such circumstances, how can a culture be deemed Christian. How do you define Christian culture if not by a commitment to Christian values, beliefs and practices?

3. Scripture

Finally, and by no means of least importance, the scriptures have a great deal to say on the issue of immigration. I will not here go into the many texts which talk of the value and blessing of all peoples in God's sight. From Creation & the Noahic covenant through to Revelation it is plain to see that God is not and never has been an Englishman but values all peoples whom he has created in his image.

It should be noted that for the nation of Israel, all immigrants would be of a different religion. From the beginning of God's covenant with Abraham & his descendants, the whole point of their 'special relationship' was to be a sign to those round about.

Through you I will bless all the nations.[5]

The history of the people of Israel shows a vast amount of immigration and asylum - for political and economic reasons. We can list among the famous immigrants Cain, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph's family, Moses, Naomi, David, Elijah & the exiles in Babylon[6]. And we see through many of these men and women of faith that people who are not descendants of Abraham enter into the blood line of the Israelites. This is not seen as being a problem apart from when the exiles return in Ezra 10, rediscovering old texts, possibly Exodus 34:11-16 or Deuteronomy 7:1-6. In both of these places the purpose of not intermarrying is to keep the people and their offspring faithful to Yahweh. The land and the ethnic group are here linked with the faith.

The question is, can you then extrapolate from the nation of Israel 2,500 years ago to the UK today? Are we a Christian nation in the same way as they were God's people? Are we called to keep the nation as a model of Christendom to the world? To me, the answer is plain - no.

When Jesus was speaking to the woman at the well he made it quite clear that his new covenant would no longer be based on nationhood or geographical location.

> *Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the time will come when people will not worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem... But the time is coming and is already here, when by the power of God's Spirit people will worship the Father as he really is, offering him the true worship he wants."*[7]

The witness to the grace of God in the world is no longer a nation or an ethnic group, but those who are part of the Body of Christ. *'May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me'*, Jesus prays. This is a gathered community of believers, with the glory of God and faith in Christ uniting them in loving witness, not

the colour of their skin or their geographical location. The relationship between the early church and the state ranged from uneasy tolerance through to outright hostility. At no point in the New Testament is church confused with the state and at no point is it thought a desirable position to work towards. Quite the opposite. The book of 1 Peter is a categorical spelling out of the position. The church is a nation - a special, holy one at that. It is a royal priesthood, a people set apart and belonging to God,

> *"... chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who has called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light."*[8]

As with the Abrahamic covenant the purpose of being set apart is to show the world what it is to be God's people. However, unlike the covenants of the Old Testament this is not done by settling down as a nation state somewhere.

> *"I appeal to you, my friends, as strangers and refugees in the world!"*[9]

We do not belong anywhere in this world. There is no such thing as Christendom. So, if there is no such thing as Christendom in the Bible, how can there be a biblical requirement to defend it? There cannot and there is not. The only rules that still apply in the New Testament with regard to foreigners are those which say 'welcome the stranger and provide food for the alien amongst you[10], for you do not know if you entertain angels unawares'[11]. Where Jesus says 'when you clothed and fed the stranger, you clothed and fed me'[12].

There is one New Testament verse that bears some analysis. It is the occasion of Paul's speech to the Areopagus. Here Paul seems to advocate the separation of ethnic groups - for the sake of the promotion of the gospel!

> *"From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him ..."*[13]

This verse has been used to suggest that ethnic groups should stay where God has put them. However, all this verse actually says is that God is in control of all people. The emphasis is actually upon our common humanity as descendants of Adam & God's closeness to us, whatever ethnic group we belong to[14]. This affirms the common thread in Paul's writing that in Christ, the ethnic boundaries which previously divided us are broken down by the cross[15].

A post-script from Baptist history

I add one note which is more to do with the history of our denomination based on a specifically non-conformist reading of scripture. Early Baptists suffered under a system of government that tried to enforce Anglicanism. Those who disagreed were often compelled to flee from England. Early Baptists thought that government should have no part in the religious decisions of the people. As each person was responsible for their response to the gospel message it was not the role of the state to impose religion. This was a view held most strongly by those notorious asylum seekers, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys[16].

> *"A ruler's power must be limited to temporal matters, since a confusion with spiritual issues has resulted in much suffering. To use the temporal power to destroy false churches was contrary to the Gospel ... Since each person has competence before God in religious matters, it is a fundamental requirement that everyone shall have liberty to seek this truth in his or her own way."*[17]

I hold passionately to the truth of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ, that he alone is the path to reach God and that his death and resurrection are solely sufficient for salvation. However, this does not mean I want to see persecution of those who think differently. To use religion to exclude others is wrong. As Gamaliel said, in effect: The Truth Will Out. If the gospel message is God's revealed truth then it has nothing to fear from other man made religions. To use the defence of Christendom as a reason to restrict immigration goes against all Baptist principles of the liberty of conscience.

My conclusions are these:

- The concept of Christendom is not biblical. To defend it, therefore, has no grounds in scripture.
- To limit immigration on the grounds of protecting Christian culture is not a biblical idea. Such a policy goes against biblical imperatives to welcome the stranger and makes Christianity look racist.
- Conversion is in the hands of the Holy Spirit of God and he will convert Europe if it is in his will - whatever the level of immigration.
- Conversion is assisted by the witness of the people of God. Living by the biblical principle of Welcoming the Stranger is more likely to show the grace of God that a reactionary defence of a non-existent Christendom.
- Use of the excellent "Welcoming the Stranger" pack produced by the Baptist Union should be encouraged - to reflect with congregations on our attitudes to and interactions with immigrants and asylum seekers (but look to the Refugee Council website for up to date statistics and information on the law.)
- Those leading worship should explicitly preach against 'Defending Christendom' and for 'Welcoming the Stranger'.

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Footnotes

[1] Daily Telegraph Website http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2004/11/20/dl2002.xml&sSheet=/opinion/2004/11/20/ixoplead.html *(14 December 2004)*

[2] Conservative Christian Fellowship Website *(14 December 2004)*

[3] Home Office Website Top ten countries for 3rd quarter of 2004 are : Iran, China, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Iraq, Pakistan, Eritrea, India, Afghanistan, Sudan. *(21 January 2005)*. Cross-referenced for religious dominance with Operation World, 2001 edition. Eg: While Sudan is predominantly Muslim, many of the refugees are from the non-Muslim Darfur region.

[4] English Church Attendance Survey shows half the numbers of under-15s in church on a Sunday compared to 20 years ago. If statistics are accurate this is set to drop to less than 3 percent by 2016. Information gleaned from *"Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers"*, pages 3-4.

[5] Genesis 12:3

[6] Cain - Genesis 4:12, Abraham - Genesis 12:10-20, Jacob - Genesis 27. Joseph's family - Genesis 47:27 , Moses flees from Egypt after killing Egyptian - standing up for justice against a slave who is being beaten hard, Ruth's Mother-in-Law Naomi - Ruth ch 1, David - 1 Samuel 21 & 1 Samuel 27, Elijah -1 Kings 19, Exile in Babylon - Psalm 137:1-4

[7] John 4:21 & 23

[8] 1 Peter 2:9

[9] 1 Peter 2:11. See "A home for the homeless" by John Elliott for a fuller exposition of 1 Peter as a counter-cultural letter.
[10] Leviticus 19:9-10
[11] Hebrews 13:2
[12] Matthew 25:31-46
[13] Acts 17:26-27a
[14] See NIB Commentary on Acts - DJ Williams.
[15] Ephesians 2:11-16. Galatians 3:26-29
[16] Both escaped to exile in Amsterdam in 1608. (B.R. White. Page 18)
[17] Roger Hayden, *"English Baptists - History and Heritage"*, page 115.Summary of Smyth's *Confession of Faith* and Helwys' *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity.*

Beyond Local Church Ministry

Colin Cartwright, Trinity Baptist Church, Chesham. A study exploring the factors relating to why ministers, between 1994 and 2003, have been leaving local churches for other forms of ministry or 'secular' employment.

Introduction

Towards the end of the year 2000, I was called to lead a Baptist church in Buckinghamshire. During the previous year, when I had been seeking to move to a different pastorate, I had discovered that there were roughly twice as many ministers looking for a new church as there were churches without ministers. By the time I had been at my new church for only 2 years, I discovered that the situation was reversed: by 2002 there were twice as many churches looking for ministers as there were ministers looking for churches.

I am sure there must be constant fluctuations in this particular ratio of 'seeking ministers' and 'vacant' churches. Equally, I am not sure whether the imbalance I described in 2002 is continuing. But whatever is the case, I was intrigued by what appeared to be such a sudden turn-around. At the same time, I was coming across more stories of ministers leaving local church ministry for a whole variety of reasons.

A Wider Background

This was the immediate context in which I decided to pursue a short sabbatical study on the phenomenon of ministers journeying beyond local ministry - either to some other form of paid Christian ministry or to 'secular' employment.

It quickly became apparent to me that, while there seemed to be no shortage of books and papers about clergy stress and the problems of church ministry, there seemed to be a paucity of specific research concerning ministry breakdown within the Free Churches particularly. Nigel Coles' dissertation, completed in 1999, is a notable exception to this. His individual research, 'An Investigation into the Casualties of Free Church Ministry, 1946-1995 (with special reference to the Baptists)' provides a very valuable and detailed insight into the phenomenon of ministry breakdown.

There seemed no need for me to add to Coles' very thorough research, except perhaps to provide a shorter, much less detailed up-date of this research.

Scope and Method of Research

In order to make it manageable, this research was focussed solely on Baptist ministers in the last 10 years (1994-2003). I deliberately chose to study both those who had left paid Christian ministry entirely and those who had moved from local church ministry to other forms of Christian ministry (e.g. sector ministries,