

Sunday 5th August 2018
The World Mission Supplementary Report 2018
Lessons for Scotland

Part 1.

The General Assembly of 2016 instructed the World Mission Council to bring a preliminary report to the General Assembly this year, on the Church in Sub Sahara Africa and its rapid growth. The idea is to see what is happening, what things the African Church prioritizes. This was done to see what lessons the Church of Scotland could learn about Church expansion, especially in light of the decline of the Church of Scotland in the last eight decades or so.

In many ways there is nothing new in this report. It is only new to the degree that we in the West have departed from Biblical priorities. Observers of the world Church see similar growth in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Korea, China, Russia, India, and examples in many other places often called the Third World.

The encouraging thing is that many of these Churches have their origins in the work of Missionaries who went from the United Kingdom. For example, in Korea, there are many large Presbyterian Churches which would be comfortable doing what we do. However almost all of these Congregations would be called Charismatic Evangelical and Reformed by observers in the West. We do like to label things here. Out there, they are just 'churches.' They use the same hymns as we do, but in Korean, and speak in tongues and dance, especially in Africa! However what they also do in Korea and elsewhere, is Early Morning Prayer, Bible studies, which has homework which is marked, and most of the people are in a house group of some sort. Break that down, and what we have is an expression of Acts 2.42. 'They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. This was the experience of the early Church and has been the way ever since, simple but sincere. In the Church of Scotland we have gone complicated, and..... fill this bit in yourselves!

The methodology of the study was a bit 'management study', and the results were what I would have expected even though many African congregations and affiliations have separated from the Church of Scotland

in recent years over various decisions which have been made contrary to Scripture.

There were six things which were highlighted as elements basic and foundational to the growing African Churches. In the order given in the report they are:

1. Bible Study.
2. Prayer and testimony.
3. Evangelism, Discipleship and Commitment.
4. Repentance and reconciliation.
5. Faith in social action.
6. Worship and Lay Participation.

If we were to read out loud the early chapters of Acts, we would find all these elements present.

The difference between the growing churches and the Church of Scotland is that we have dropped most of these and replaced them with a formalized version and have given other things a more prominent part than is warranted. If you were to have the courage to read through the 'Blue' Book, and did not realise that it was the book of business of the Church of Scotland, you might think that it was the annual general report of an NGO charity!

Part 2.

I have never visited Africa, but I have spoken with people from there, from Ruanda and Cameroon. I recently met a Pastor from India, and have visited two South American countries. Years ago, when in Dunfermline, there were quite a few people from South Korea in the area. They were there to build a factory, and as Christians, to bring blessing to our nation. Sadly the recession came and changes in the computer world meant that the factory never opened! The Koreans, the engineers and top brass, wept and apologized to us when the project was moth balled. They said that they had failed us. They actually did not fail us, because while they were with us, they were such a blessing! Over the years I have read widely on historical and recent revivals and church growth. Guess what, in almost every location where the Church is growing, the same features appear.

In Colombia, new converts attend two Bible Teaching sessions a week for six weeks. Each session lasts three hours, and they had hundreds of people coming to faith each week through the influence of their members. They were well on in a revival process. This in turn brought other challenges. A Pastor from Cali Colombia, when asked what methods of evangelism they were using replied that they had no time to do evangelism, because they were so busy pulling in the nets already full of fish! We expected to hear that they were using the Jesus Film, or ALPHA, or Christianity Explored. However, they had no time to do this as so many people were coming to faith through the witness of the church members and services they had been invited to, that it took all their time to teach and enfold these new Christians in house groups! The Church here was being added to and multiplied, just like it was recorded in the Book of Acts!

We find that in places like Colombia and South Korea and Africa that people actually believe what we profess to believe. In Colombia, we asked how people win the people they know. We were told that each Church member is encouraged to pray for three people daily over a six week period and then invite them to a service or their home group. We were told that when they get saved, a new set of three is prayed for. One of our Scottish friends asked what happened when the people prayed for did not come to a meeting or get saved. Our Colombian host looked at us with a troubled expression on his face, and asked what we meant. We explained about how things don't quite work that way in Scotland and he exclaimed, 'why would that happen?' You see, people became Christians and the faith of the people was such that they expected to receive what they asked for! Now, that was a city in the grips of a very powerful visitation of the Holy Spirit.

It has happened this way in the past, and it is happening today. Giving themselves to the activities listed does not earn a visitation, not is it a magic formula, but it does mean that these folk are putting themselves in a place and condition that God approves of and delights to be presence himself. It attracts the Holy Spirit!

The story of Brazil and Uganda is like this. However, in those places there were years of concentrated prayer and walking in these practices by many Christians before God began to move in what we would call Sovereign Power. It is always God who has the initiative, it is always God's time, but

our responsibility is to do the things that He delights in, whether blessing comes soon or late, or even in our life time.

The first thing that the initial investigation shows us is that the Bible, the Word of God is central. Isaiah 11 is a prophecy regarding the activity of the promised Messiah, Jesus, when He came. The picture is both for the day of His coming, and also of the day of His second coming where the transforming power of His life, death and resurrection will be perfected. It always goes back to the Word, the Bible.

The Bible is the revelation that God has given of His person, His nature and His purposes. The Bible is a God given book, and not something we are entitled to edit and adapt to suit our likes and dislikes. However, notice in Isaiah, that the Word is never separated from the work of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah foresees a day of utter transformation, a new earth, and this is yet to come. However, in the meantime, if the hearts of people are changed, the life of the community will change, and if enough people are changed in a community, as they grow as Christians, the national life will change, eventually.

This is not to say that heaven will come down on earth! Even the most radical change will be imperfect, and will be limited by the exposure the Church has to the Bible.

Probably every one of us who has internet connection has had a scam Email from someone in Africa, usually Nigeria, promising us that we have won or inherited a fortune, or someone there wants to give us money! All we have to do is pay an administrative fee of a few hundred pounds to inherit millions, or give our bank details and cash will be deposited!

We have also all probably heard of African Pastors appealing for a special offering to replace their personal jet plane, as the present one is getting old. I joke you not. Sadly, as revival and renewal comes to a place, the devil is busy with falsehoods and over emphasizing, or unbalancing some texts. Parts of the Church have bought into the 'Prosperity and Health' gospel. I even heard one Pastor, when asked about Paul's thorn in the flesh, replied that if Paul had understood the Scriptures as he did, he would not have had the thorn! Sorry, that is garbage, yet in the absence of solid Biblical teaching, that is the sort of thig that happens.

This does not mean that there is no truth that faith brings benefits, but they will not be wealth and health to many or all!

However, the above scenario is not universal by any means, and there are many, many congregations who are more believing and extensive in their knowledge and practice.

One of the most exciting elements in the African Church is the importance many in reaching out to all those around them, and beyond. Many in the African Church are living the Great Commandment of Matthew 28. They are not waiting until they are perfect or accepted by the community. They do not wait until some sort of peace has been made with other faiths, they tell people about Jesus and they are growing in conformity to Christ. In the UK, we are so politically correct, and so scared of being thought extreme or outspoken, that we say nothing and do nothing most of the time. It has not always been like this in the UK, but when we lose confidence in the Bible as God's word, we lose everything.

There are two things that go together very closely in the experience of African Christians. Firstly the Word, and secondly, Repentance. The Bible, when illuminated by the Holy Spirit to our hearts as truth and light gives rise to repentance. The things that accompany Repentance are humility, meekness and the confession of being poor in spirit. These in turn give rise to the desire for and the pursuit of holiness, which is to follow after Christ likeness.

Repentance has had different definitions over the years. One definition is that Repentance is to change one's mind, and that is correct. However, that does not go far enough. We can change our minds and still do nothing about it. Another definition is that Repentance is to do an about turn. The idea is that we stop going with the stream of life and do a U turn and follow God's path. That is also correct, but I think incomplete. To me Repentance is to agree with God's verdict on all things. That means that when He says that we have to change, we do. This means that when God says put that off, and put this on, we do so. This means that when God says that we can do nothing without Him, that we accept that and ask, seek and knock until we get His instruction and help. It includes all that went before, and everything else that arises from the Word.

As we grow in God, we discover areas of our lives that God is now dealing with. We find some things that we used to think or do, even neutral things and good things in themselves, that are no longer appropriate to us as God calls us on in holiness. Repentance is therefore not only something that we experience as the way into being a Christian, it is also the way ahead as we grow as Christians.

If we in the West would take the Bible seriously, as the people elsewhere do, things would change. If we would agree with it and not try to rewrite it to suit ourselves, as is our present practice. If we would read it, meditate on it, and let it deal with our hearts by the working of the Holy Spirit, then we would soon be led into deep repentance and a turning back to God with our hearts and not just our heads! If we were to do this, by God's grace, then I believe we would soon see the sorts of fruit and growth that is being seen in many African nations, and other parts of the world. Even if it takes a long time, as we regard long, we have nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

However, you may object to this and point out the many revolutions and genocides and troubles that there are in Africa. Is there an answer to this? I was stunned to read in the book, 'Under the Thorn Tree', the words of an African minister about this. Essentially he pointed out that Europe had gone through wars and genocides and all manner of troubles since the beginning of the Reformation. His view was that we in the West should not be surprised if Africa is having its troubles as it has its Reformation! His view was that Africa is going through spiritual birth pains, and we should let the child be born.

I am sure we would all like to see Africa spared from troubles, so while the convulsions of governments and tribal matters continue to role on, we have the privilege and duty to pray. Pray for the peace of Africa, but also pray that the Acts 2.42 dynamic which is active there would again become the way we live in the UK, and Europe, and the USA!