



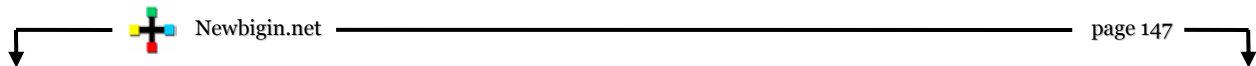
## Pastoral Ministry in a Pluralist Society

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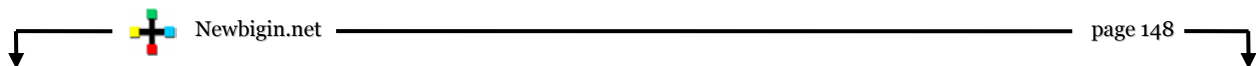
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The Christian Church was launched into a pluralist society at its very beginning. The Mediterranean world, permeated by the philosophical and religious ideas of the Greeks and the Romans, with considerable admixture from Persia (the present Iran) was a vast melting pot of religions and cultures. In the words of St. Paul, it was a world in which there were many 'gods' and many 'lords'. The historian Gibbon's sarcastic description has often been quoted: all religions, he says, were for the common people equally true, for the philosophers equally false, and for the government equally useful. Roman law was in general tolerant of religious diversity. As long as religion confined itself to matters of personal salvation, the state did not interfere. There were many forms of religious teaching and practice, mostly coming from the East, which offered to their adherents the promise of salvation. These 'private cults' were not in general interfered with. However, in view of the difficulty of holding together the vast medley of different peoples which constituted the Roman Empire, it was considered necessary that the absolute authority of the emperor should be recognised by a public act of homage in which he was acknowledged as 'Lord'. Refusal to make this act of homage could, as the Christians soon discovered, lead to the severest punishment.

In this medley of religious beliefs and practices, there was one community which did not conform. In every major city there was a synagogue of the Jews, the people of the god of

Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They affirmed, against all other claims, that the God of Abraham is the only God, the creator of heaven and earth, and that all other so-called 'gods' are nothings. For their stubborn intransigence they were sometimes persecuted, sometimes tolerated, often secretly admired. The preaching of the Gospel began from the synagogues. It was not the announcement of a new religion, but the announcement that the God of Abraham, the one and only God, had acted decisively to bring the whole world into his embrace. God's promises to Israel were to be fulfilled not by the rebuilding of the Temple, not by the re-conquest of the holy land, not even by the preservations of the ethnic purity of the descendants of Abraham, but in a new community embracing Jews and pagans in one new people, one living temple.

How was this new community to understand itself in the midst of the multi-religious society? Its members were both Jews and pagans but it was itself something new. It had to find a new name - 'people of the Messiah', 'Messiah-wallahs', 'Christians'. There were new questions to be answered; a new style of discipleship to be learned. And we have a very full picture of the ways in which these questions were formulated and answered. The letters of Paul and the other apostolic writers are our classic and canonical resources for learning the kind of pastoral ministry which

is needed for the life and witness of a Christian congregation in a religiously plural society. What do they teach us? I find **five** features of this pastoral ministry which have enduring validity for us today.

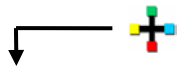
### 1.

There is a tremendous emphasis on the need for absolute fidelity to the Gospel. These apostolic writers do not talk about 'Christianity'; they talk about the Gospel. The Gospel is an account of things which have happened. It is about events in the public life of the world, about what happened 'under Pontius Pilate'. It is about 'what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have handled' (I John. 1:1). It is about how 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was buried and that he was raised again on the third day according to the Scriptures' (I Corinthians 15:3). It is about 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). The Gospel is an account of facts, of things which have happened and which therefore cannot be changed. What has been done has been done.

'Christianity' is what we have made of these facts. It is a complex of thought and practice which embodies the ways in which, at different times and places and in different cultures, the Gospel has been understood and interpreted. Christianity is therefore a constantly changing and developing thing. It has no absoluteness or finality in itself. But the Gospel, with which the Church is entrusted, is an account of things which have been done and therefore cannot be changed.

The Gospel has to be told in different languages, and that means using words which have a meaning derived from their context in another story, another world-view. There is always the danger that this other story, or world-view, will so take control that the original story is lost. Thus there is a big difference between the language in which Peter, talking to Jews in Jerusalem, tells the story, and the way Paul, writing to the Colossians, tells it. In his pastoral letter to the Church in Colossae Paul uses words popular in contemporary pagan philosophy such as 'fullness' (*pleroma*) and 'mystery' (*mysterion*) but he does not let them take control of the story. It was (and is) easy for pagans to say that the 'fullness' of reality must be much bigger than Jesus, who is, after all, just one human being in history, but Paul says that the whole 'fullness' was present in Jesus and that 'through the blood of his cross' all things are to be reconciled to God (Colossians 1:19).

In that multi-religious society it must have been very hard to resist the arguments of those who would say 'Of course we can respect your beliefs, but - after all - yours is only one among many beliefs, and Jesus is only one name among many'. The only answer to this is to tell and tell again the story of what God has actually done. It is always possible,



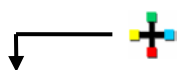
of course, to disbelieve. But if the story is true, if almighty God has really done what the Gospel affirms that he has done, then there is nothing in all the religious ideas and practices of the world that can be put into the same category as this. In all these pastoral letters, therefore, the writers remind their readers of what God has done in Jesus Christ and call for total faithfulness to him.

## 2.

The second feature to be noted in this apostolic pastoral ministry to congregation living in a religiously plural world concerns the proper attitude to those of other religious communities. Here we may look first at the attitude which is to be taken towards the Jewish people. Here, just because the relation was so close, the tensions could be most acute. The great majority of Jews had rejected the Gospel. It is very understand-able that there should be hostility on both sides.

Those who had accepted Jesus as the true fulfilment of God's promises to Israel could be bitter about this rejection. Those who remained with the synagogue could resent an upstart cult which was so successfully 'sheep-stealing'. In his most sustained discussion of the relation between the Church and the Jewish people, namely chapters 9 to 11 of the Letter to the Romans, Paul reminds the congregation of their permanent indebtedness to the Jews. In the famous illustration of the olive branches he reminds the Gentile Christians that they are only wild slips grafted (in contradiction of all normal practice) into the true olive tree which is Israel. For Christians to adopt an attitude of superiority to Jews is therefore quite shocking (Romans 11, especially 17-21). The position with regard to Gentiles who are not believers is different, but here also Christians are reminded to show proper respect. God has not left himself without witness in the hearts of any people (Acts 14:17), and there are pagans who do the works of the law even though they are outside the household of Israel (Romans 11 : 14-16). The worship of the pagan Greeks is, even though they do not know it, directed to God. (Acts 17:23).

This respect for those who follow a religious path other than the Christian does not mean that we have no message for them. In every one of the cases just referred to, when we read a little further, we find that the Gospel is being announced. The Jews who are still God's chosen people must be the first to hear the Gospel. The pagans who do the good works of the law, but who, like all of us, share in the sin which has all humanity in its power, are told ('But now.....' Romans 3:21) of the new thing which God has done by which all people — Jew or pagan - can be liberated from the power of sin. The Athenians, who are worshipping an unknown god, are told of the new thing that God has done to make the unknown known ('But now.....' Acts 17:30). Cornelius,



the pagan Roman soldier who has been told that God has accepted his worship (Acts 10:4-6) is nevertheless told that he must send to Joppa to hear something which he does not yet know, and when, in response to the summons, Peter comes to Cornelius, it is simply the facts about Jesus which are told and believed and which bring Cornelius and his household into the family of God. (Acts 10:34-48).

This combination of total respect for the religious beliefs of others with willingness to tell the Good News (to 'evangelise') is the result of being careful to make the distinction to which I have referred earlier - the distinction between Christianity and the Gospel. We are not in the business of comparing Christianity with other religions and trying to find points where Christianity is 'better' than others. We are not called upon to judge the status of other people in the sight of God. We have been entrusted with good news about what God has done for all human beings and for the whole creation. If we do not tell the good news, no one else will. 'Christianity' is what we have made of this good news over the past 2,000 years, and we know that the record contains a great deal of bad as well as good. We are not better than other people. But we have been entrusted with a responsibility and - in the sight of God - we must discharge it. As St Paul says: 'We commend not ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. (II Corinthians 4:5).

### 3.

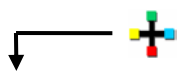
This has already brought us to the third point. Pastoral ministry in a pluralist society must prepare Christians to be witnesses for the Gospel. Of course Christians, like everyone else, have to spend most of their time in carrying on the ordinary business of life along with neighbours and friends and fellow-citizens of whatever religious affiliation. We cannot be evangelising all the time, and if we tried to do so we would soon lose contact with our neighbours. But there are moments when God gives us an opportunity to speak a word about the Gospel. In that beautiful pastoral letter, the first letter of Peter, we have this little word; 'Always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect' (I Peter 3:15). Notice two things about this. Firstly, it is the other person, the unbeliever, who asks the question. The authentic opportunity for evangelism is when the unbeliever asks the question because there is something about the Christian fellowship that prompts people to ask for the secret. Indeed, if you look through the record of Christian evangelism in the Acts of the Apostles, you will find that the great majority, beginning with St. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, are prompted by a question asked by the unbeliever: What is going on? What is your secret? And secondly, we note that the question is about 'the hope that you

have'. A believing Christian congregation will be a community of hope in a world which is often without hope. Christians are people who look forward to a glorious future – God's future. When that is so, people will notice it, and they will ask the question: 'What is your secret?'. If that is not happening, a Christian congregation must ask why.

### 4.

Pastoral ministry in a pluralist society must include the kind of leadership which nourishes pluralist congregations – that is to say congregations in which men and women of very different social and ethnic backgrounds live together in harmony. Only so can the congregation be an authentic representative of the Lord who said 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself' (John 12:32). The cross of Jesus is the one place in all human history where men and women of every race and class and caste and kind can be brought together into one reconciled fellowship. It is the one place where we can forgive one another for our sins against each other because God in Christ has forgiven our sin and wiped it out. This is why St. Paul, in his controversy with St. Peter which is recorded in Galatians 2, insisted so passionately that Jews and Gentiles must live together as one family, sharing a common life. To deny this would be a contradiction of the Gospel. The local congregation can only be a true witness to the work of Jesus on the cross if it is a place where people of all social and ethnic groups can find themselves at home in the Father's house.

It is perhaps specially important to make this point just now because of the considerable influence of the missiological teaching of the late Dr Donald McGavran. Dr McGavran was rightly concerned to ask the question: 'Why do some churches grow and others do not?'. In his earliest writings he gave some very true and penetrating answers to these questions, and I did my best to encourage people to read his writings. Later on, however, he developed what he called the 'Homogenous Unit Principle' - often referred to as the H.U.P. By this he meant that churches will grow more quickly if they aim to gather together people of the same race, caste, or social class. And of course it is true that this makes it much easier for people to join a church where they meet only people of their own kind. But, as I pointed out to Dr. McGavran, this advantage is purchased at the cost of a direct contradiction of the teaching of St Paul. I'm happy to say that, before his death, Dr. McGavran recognised that he had been wrong in this matter and abandoned the H.U.P. In a pluralist society the Church can only be a true witness to the Gospel if the local congregation is itself a plural society in which men and women - whatever their natural differences - come to know that Lord Jesus Christ as the one in whom all people of whatever kind are made one in him.



## 5.

And this brings me to my final point. Pastoral ministry in a pluralist society calls for great gentleness and patience. People cannot be forced into a fellowship which unites them across the strong natural divisions of kith and kin, social group or class. We have seen how passionately St Paul felt about the scandal of divisions within the Christian congregation on the basis of the old division of Jew from Gentile. And yet, when he is dealing with the divisions in the church at Corinth, he uses only the language of appeal. He does not use coercion. He does not 'lord it over their faith'. Rather he writes in such words as those in II Corinthians 10:1, 'I appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ'. As I have said, the Christian congregation is called to be a plural society in one sense, in the midst of a society which is plural in another sense. The pluralism which we have to reject is the pluralism which abandons truth, the pluralism which says 'All roads lead to the top of the same mountain'. We have to reject this because it is false. There are many roads which do not lead to the top of the mountain but to the edge of a precipice. We cannot forget the grave warning given by our Lord: there is a broad road that leads to destruction but the road that leads to life is narrow and there are few that find it. However unpopular this may be, we have to continue to reject the pluralism that leaves everyone to take that broad way, that fosters a lazy reluctance to make hard decisions between truth and falsehood. But in another sense the Church is itself a plural society. It is the company of those who have been drawn out of every race and caste and class and culture to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the one in whom God himself is present, in whom God has acted uniquely once for all for the salvation of the world, and through whom we are united by the Holy Spirit into one family embracing people of every kind. Every congregation is called to be a sign and foretaste and witness to that plurality in unity. But this cannot be brought about by any kind of coercion. It is by the 'meekness and gentleness' of Christ who went to Calvary for our sake that we are drawn into this unity. Pastoral ministry in a pluralist society can only find its model and pattern here.

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