

BORN TOO LATE

I've had this feeling most of my life that I was born too late. My wife says she was one of the "lucky generation", who got their education free - including grants for college courses and degrees - and then found there was no lack of jobs when they got out. My time at university coincided with the first post-war recession and the three-day week. My plan had been to come out of university, and spend a few years in a secular job before candidating for the ministry. But when the time came, the jobs weren't there, and employers (who could suddenly be choosy) wanted workers who would give body and soul for their firm, not somebody who was using them as a stepping stone to other things. I got through that, and the difficulty I experienced gave me some sympathy with those who find it difficult to get work, and ensured I got experience of working, successively, in both an office job and outdoor labouring work, which I found to be useful.

But it goes deeper than that. When - about halfway through my ministry - I came into contact with Myers-Briggs Personality Type theory, I was told that the typical profile of a minister up to that point was of an introvert - like myself - but that the trend was changing to an extrovert profile. Trust me to be getting into the game just when my type of person was going out of fashion! It would appear that when churches were more full, the emphasis seemed to be on looking after the congregation. Congregations that were looked after attracted people and kept the ones they already had, whereas people left churches where they did not feel cared for. By the mid-90's, however, congregations were getting so low, and the church's profile in the community so non-existent, that the church was seeking for evangelists - holy salespersons - to make the community aware of their existence and to attract in the crowds. A salesman is something I could never be. I am a pastor and an OK administrator, but I can't be a salesman!

I am also, as a Pentecostal pastor once said of me, a "man of the Word". I don't think it was meant to be a compliment, but it was true. . I think she meant I wasn't a "man of the Spirit", which is rubbish. That's just personality. I am a plodder, not an intuitive: I'm also a "head" person, who keeps his feelings under strict control. And I am good with words. From my first day at school, I could read, spell, and handle language with the best, but I was utterly hopeless at anything to do with numbers, or with my hands. Physical clumsiness made anything remotely creative or sporty utterly impossible. I was quite good at music, but even there my clumsiness, my lack of intuitiveness, and my inability to count meant I would never be a star. So that left words. But ever since I've been in the ministry, I've been assailed by people telling me I need to be more in touch with my creative, feeling side (which is all right if you have one), and disparaging the power and influence of words. Every thing I am (including being a white male - something I can do precisely nothing about!) and every gift I possess is apparently out of fashion and no longer required. Maybe there was once an over-emphasis in the other direction. But that was a long time ago - I do not remember it in my 30 years of ministry - and do we really have to overcompensate by making everyone who fitted the "old mould" feel just as excluded as the feeling/creative types of an earlier generation did? After all, it was not people of my generation who did that, it was our forebears! Why does the human race have to swing like a pendulum from one extreme to another? Why can't we settle for a happy medium?

So I was born too late. Or was I? Maybe I was put here to act as a fly in the ointment, to warn the church not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Obviously, a church which is heading towards a demographic time-bomb needs evangelists who will bring the good news of Jesus to people who have never even heard of him, and who will summon people to faith. However, my experience is that the most effective evangelists are lay people who live alongside unchurched people and witness to them by example as well as word. But the flock also needs caring for. The great cry among the charismatic "community" churches is "shut the back door"! Many in our own church look with envy on these churches, at their mission programmes and the number of people they win for Christ. But they testify that many of those that come into their front doors eventually drift out the back door. People become dissatisfied with inflexible fundamentalist doctrine and ethics and a lack of opportunity to question and debate. Some of those people find their way into our churches, and maybe the Methodist Church has a future as a "second stage" church for people who have been won to Christ in other contexts, but outgrown those contexts. Some such people, however, are lost to the kingdom and become even more fierce opponents of the gospel. The church needs to be a place where people feel valued and cared for. It's not just evangelists and teachers we need, but pastors too!

We need people of the Word too. And I mean “word” with a capital and without one. I believe the Bible must be central to our faith. Of course we must use our minds to interpret it, and we must accept that different believers will interpret it in different ways, while remaining true believers. But a faith that has no standard at all - even one which can be variously interpreted - is a faith which is so vacuous as to be no good to anybody. If we follow Jesus as Lord, our words and actions should be consonant with his revelation - however we understand that. But we do have to stand up and be counted, and be prepared to be counter-cultural at times. We must not confuse our own imaginings with God’s will, and God’s word has to be able to confront us.

But we also need the word with a small “w”. Pictures, dreams, music, and meditation can convey so much and bring us close to the heart of God. But they can also be a means by which we convince ourselves that God wants us to do whatever we want to do, or that he is saying whatever it is we want to hear. There needs to be some “word” to give content to our spirituality and to ensure that our minds are not left out of the equation. Bear in mind, Hitler did not conquer Europe by the power of his intellect, but by the power of feeling - with the help of pictures (including moving ones) and music. We need words to keep our feet on the ground and to keep us from being led astray by our feelings and intuition.

I pray the church of the future will take on board the need, not only to win people for Christ, but also to care for them, and also rediscover the power of the Word of God, and the function of *words* in interpreting that Word and applying it to people’s lives.