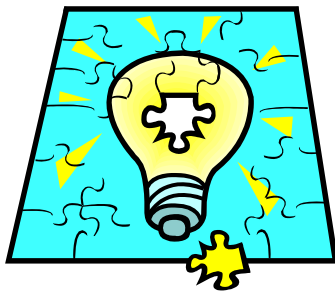




Insights

Martyn-Lloyd Jones and the Church Today

by Andrew Young



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LLOYD-JONES AND THE CHURCH TODAY

Few men have influenced my life more than the late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. It was through his sermons on Romans that I came to see the sovereignty of God's grace in salvation, and it was through his lectures on preaching that I first sensed God calling me to preach. Humanly speaking I wouldn't be where I am today if it were not for Dr. Lloyd-Jones.¹

Over the years I have read many of his books (essentially transcripts of his sermons and addresses) and listened to audiotapes of several of his messages. I haven't always agreed with him, but nevertheless God has consistently used Dr. Lloyd-Jones in a remarkable way in my life. He has spoken to me, enlightened me, and encouraged me more through this man's ministry than through any other.

It is for that reason that I have looked to him for help as I have wrestled with issues relating to the church. Dr. Lloyd-Jones had a great deal to say about the church. That was partly because he loved to expound Paul's letters to churches, and partly because, as a pastor and evangelist, he loved the church himself. But it was also because he was concerned about the state of the church in the middle of the Twentieth century. He believed that it was in trouble and on a downward course, and because of that he seized every opportunity to speak about what was wrong with the church and what it needed to do.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) was for many years the Minister of Westminster Chapel in London. He had initially trained as a medical doctor, but left that profession when he sensed God calling him to preach the gospel. His first pastorate was in Port Talbot in Wales. After moving to London he became known worldwide for his careful and spiritually powerful expository preaching. Many of his sermons series have been printed in book form.

As I have re-read his sermons on the church I have experienced what I can only interpret as the Holy Spirit's anointing on his words. Again and again I have felt my heart burn within me, just as the disciples did on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 32). And when that happens, I cannot but believe that God is teaching me things he not only wants me to know, but others also.

That is what has led me to present this series of insights – a series we might call *Martyn Lloyd-Jones and the Church Today*. In it I want to share something of Lloyd-Jones' perspective on the modern church. To use one of his favourite expressions, I want to “call your attention” to some of the ideas and comments he makes on the church in his exposition of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, particularly the section 3:17-4:16.² Some of these ideas and comments relate specifically to the church the 1950's and 60's, but I think you will see that they are easily transferable to the church today. Indeed, much of what Lloyd-Jones thought would happen if the church continued on its course is happening in our times.

It is my hope that you will share the blessing I have gained from Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this subject. More than that, I hope that this series of Insights will help shape the way you think about the church and live within it.

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² Lloyd-Jones' sermons on Ephesians 3:17-4:16 were published by the Banner of Truth Trust in two books, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* and *Christian Unity*, in 1979 and 1980 respectively. Copies of these books can be obtained through most Christian Bookstores.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CHURCH?

I mentioned last week that Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones thought that the church of the 1950's and 60's was in trouble. What made him think this was so?

One of the things that concerned him was **the modern church's obsession with activity**. He wasn't again the church being active – indeed, he thought a healthy church couldn't but be active. But he was concerned when outward activity was the focus of a church's life, when it was absorbed with such things as numbers attending worship services, building programmes, attractive music, leadership strategies and outreach events. And he was especially concerned when he saw this happening at the expense of solid teaching and vital spiritual experience.

He expressed his concern on one occasion in this way: “We are living in days when the practical aspect of Christianity is being emphasised almost exclusively by some Christians. It is the day of activity and activists. The world has never been so busy in trying to deal with its various problems; the same is largely true of the Church” (*Unsearchable Riches*, p. 250).

Lloyd-Jones believed that churches could be very active, and show outward signs of growth, and yet still be spiritually dead. “There are churches in the world today,” he said, “which appear on the surface to be very flourishing. People crowd into them and they display much zeal and enthusiasm. But on closer examination you will find that most of the time is taken up with music of various types, and with clubs and societies and social activities... The fact that a church is very active does not of necessity prove that what she does is right; it may be all wrong. A church may be living on her own energies, doing things on her own initiative, and deliberately ignoring the

Head, and refusing to be subservient to him” (*Christian Unity*, pp. 201, 274).

Churches that were obsessed with activity and results, Lloyd-Jones noted, were usually also churches that were **more interested with practical rather than doctrinal and spiritual aspects of Christianity**. He lamented the lack of interest in serious doctrinal thinking in many Christians. “Intellectual lethargy,” he said, “is undoubtedly the greatest sin of many Christians today... We are lazy Christians who do not read, do not think, and do not delve into the mysteries” (*Unsearchable Riches*, pp. 138, 208).

He also noted that many Christians were not interested in vital spiritual experience of the sort that characterized the church during times of revival and reformation. While people were interested in experiences, they were not interested in the deep, costly spiritual experience described in the Bible. They wanted quick, easily obtained spiritual thrills. This led Lloyd-Jones to make the comment “If I were asked to name the greatest trouble among Christians today, including those who are evangelical, I would say that it is our lack of spirituality and of a true knowledge of God” (*Unsearchable Riches*, p. 6).

Here, then, is his assessment of the weakness of the church in his times. Its over-emphasis on the practical at the expense of the doctrinal and spiritual was, he believed, creating a dangerous situation. It was the recipe for a church that was shallow and superficial, addicted to entertainment and liable to being misled. Were he alive today, I am sure that he would say that his concerns were warranted.

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DOCTRINE AND LIFE

Last week we noted that Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' was concerned about the lack of emphasis upon Bible teaching and doctrine in the church of his day. What was it that made him so burdened about this?

We don't have to guess. He discusses the issue so often that the reason is clear for all to see. Dr. Lloyd-Jones believed that the church – and the individual Christian for that matter – was courting disaster when it ignored doctrine in the interests of being practical **because doctrine and practice are inseparably linked in the Christian faith**. How we live is the product of what we believe. That, Lloyd Jones argues, is that way that it always is.

To put it differently, the way a Christian lives is the inevitable result of what they have become in Christ. Lloyd-Jones loved to stress that when a person becomes a Christian, they become a new creation. Certain things are true now that were not true before they became a Christian. They have been spiritually renewed, they have the Holy Spirit living in them, they have been united spiritually with all other Christians, they are children of God, and they are destined for heaven. And these things determine how they live. As Lloyd-Jones puts it, “The life which we are to live is a life which always results from the application of doctrine” (*Christian Unity*, p. 17). It is a matter of being who we really are – of “walking worthy” of the calling with which we have been called (Ephesians 4:1).

That's why he insists that doctrine must always come first, and always be the foundation of the way we think and live. “Doctrine must always come first, and we must never reverse this order. It is, I repeat, the invariable practice of the New Testament itself to speak of doctrine before the application of doctrine. We must not act before we are clear about our doctrine. That is, beyond all question, the

most vital principle of all in connection with the New Testament doctrine of sanctification” (*Christian Unity*, p. 17).

Furthermore, he emphasizes that **the more clearly we see the doctrines** – what is true about ourselves and about the church – **the more we will be motivated to live as we should**. When the truth grasps us, it will change us. “We must see the things to which we have been called,” he says, “the glorious possibilities that have been opened for us; and the more we see and understand and grasp them the more we shall be ready, and indeed anxious, to work them out in practice... It is to the extent that we grasp the truth of the doctrine that the desire to be holy is created within us” (*Christian Unity*, pp. 20, 21).

That's why he thought it was perilous for the church to neglect doctrine. When it does, it becomes rootless, and liable to being led astray. It becomes little more than a human organization, and lacks the spiritual power and motive that characterizes true Christianity.

True, Lloyd-Jones knew that the church could become unbalanced in this matter and become overly taken up with teaching and doctrine. When that happened, it could become cold and critical and lifeless. But that was always, he insisted, the result of imbalance, never the result of doctrine itself. True doctrine – doctrine taught with the balance and purpose of Bible itself – always produces action. “All Christian doctrine,” he said, “is meant to lead, and is designed to lead, to a practical result and outcome. This cannot be overemphasized. Truth is not merely something for the mind or intellect... If doctrine stops at that point I do not hesitate to assert that it can even be a curse. Doctrine is meant and designed to bring us to God. It is meant to be practical” (*Unsearchable Riches*, p. 94).

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THE PARTS AND THE WHOLE

There was another danger that Martyn Lloyd-Jones saw connected with the lack of interest in doctrine. It was the danger of dealing with *particulars* in the church's life without reference to the *larger doctrine* of the church.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones often stressed the importance of **seeing details (parts) in terms of the larger unit they belonged to**. He did so most often when commenting on how we should read and interpret the Bible. It is essential, he used to say, that we don't confine ourselves to reading just parts of the Bible – our favourite Psalms, and Gospel portions and so on. If we do, we are liable to imbalance and lopsidedness. And the same thing is true when it comes to interpreting any verse or passage of the Bible. It is perilous to isolate it from its immediate context, and ultimately from the larger context of the Bible as a whole. When we do this, he says, we are on “the high road to the development of an unbalanced and lopsided Christian life and experience” (*Christian Unity*, p. 14).

The same is true when we focus on individual aspects of church life without considering how they fit into the doctrine of the church. People commonly develop specialist interests in such things as leadership, preaching, community ministries etc., and throw themselves into these with little regard for how they fit into the larger life of the church.

This, in Lloyd-Jones view, is a serious mistake and a cause of many of the church's troubles. Commenting on the Apostle Paul's method of first making a general statement (or stating a general principle) before developing its details, he says, “I must emphasize that this is the Apostle's invariable practice; he never goes on to particulars without first laying down general principles. It seems to me that many people get into trouble in their Christian lives because they rush to particulars. ‘What about this or that?’ they ask. The answer to

such questions is to go back and to find a general principle. The details can never be properly understood except in the light of the whole. The whole is greater than the parts, and controls our understanding of them. The particular problems in the Christian life must never be considered in isolation; to do so is to court error and heresy and much trouble in practice” (*Christian Unity*, pp. 23-4).

Lloyd-Jones believed this was true of the church as well as individual Christians. Many of the problems in the church in his day, he believed, were due to people absorbing themselves in individual activities (the parts) without any reference at all to the whole (the doctrine of the church). And as a result, the church was getting into trouble.

Take for example, the activity of evangelism. Lloyd-Jones was himself an evangelist, and yet he was critical of the way in which many churches were going about evangelism. He noticed that in many cases churches were emphasizing the importance of getting unsaved people to meetings, and then getting them to come back again. To achieve this they were introducing more contemporary music into worship services, more informality, and at the same time they were reducing the amount of teaching. He believed this was a serious mistake, and that it would inevitably have a major effect on the church – as indeed it has done.

This kind of thing, he insisted, was the result of failing to see one activity – evangelism – in terms of the larger doctrine of the church. It produces lopsidedness and imbalance. It is typical of what happens whenever we isolate one aspect of the church's life and make that our focus. “It is only as we who are in the Church have a right view of the Church that she will begin to function truly,” he said. “Defective views of the Church and her functioning lead to the employment of worldly and carnal methods” (*Christian Unity*, p. 197).

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THE CHURCH'S GREATEST NEED

So far we have seen what Martyn Lloyd-Jones thought was wrong with the church of his day. What did he think it needed to do?

It shouldn't surprise us to learn that Lloyd-Jones believed **the greatest need of the church was to understand itself**. How could the church be what it was supposed to be, he asked, if it didn't know in the first place what it was meant to be? And the only way it could see that was to grasp fully the doctrine of the church. It wasn't enough to live by isolated verses that referred to the church. No, the church needed to grasp what the whole Bible (and especially the New Testament) had to say about itself. "Our greatest need," he said, "is to recapture the New Testament teaching concerning the Church. If only we could see ourselves in terms of it, we would realize that we are the most privileged people on earth, that there is nothing to be compared to being a Christian and a member of the mystical body of Christ" (*Christian Unity*, p. 209).

As these words suggest, Lloyd-Jones believed that the church had **special need to understand its relationship to Jesus Christ**. While he appreciated that there were many ways of looking at the church – as a community of called people, as the family of God, as the temple of God etc. – to his mind there was nothing that Christians needed to understand more clearly than that they were the body of Christ. If the church was to be vital and useful in the world, if it was to be revived and restored and become an effective force for Christ, it had to appreciate that it was intimately and inseparably united to Christ. "Christ and he alone is Christianity," he said. "It is not a collection of ideas; it is not a collection of thoughts or philosophies; it is not a mere matter of teaching. Primarily Christianity is the Lord Himself and our relationship to Him" (*Christian Unity*, p. 97).

For Lloyd-Jones, Christ was so central to the idea of the church that he – like the Apostle Paul (Col. 3:4) – could talk about **Christ being**

"the life" of the church. He often stressed the fact that as the Head of the church, Jesus was the source of its life. He puts it this way: "He is the source of all her life, her energy, and her growth; apart from Him there is no Church, and could not be" (*Christian Unity*, p. 258).

Lloyd-Jones knew that this was widely accepted, but nevertheless he believed that many churches failed to work it out in practice. "This is obvious in theory," he said, "but it is something we can so easily forget. And as I have suggested, the real explanation of the state of the Christian Church today, and during much of the 20th century, is that she has not understood this" (*Christian Unity*, p. 270). Instead of drawing their life from the Head, churches were simply "maintaining the institutional church", or busying themselves with a whole range of activities designed to make the church grow.

But in doing so, Lloyd-Jones argues, they were on the wrong track. "You cannot maintain the Church, the body of Christ by such means and methods. Christ is the life of the Church, and if there is no vital relationship to Him there will be no life, and the Church will be dead" (*Christian Unity*, p. 272). His plea to church leaders was to realize this truth and act upon it. "When will the churches realize the truth?" he asks. "When will they realize that apart from His activity all our activities lead to nothing? Life is the one thing that matters; and the life is in Him. Our first concern, therefore, should be to know that we are vitally connected to Him, and that the channels, the bands of supply, are open, and that His power, strength, life and sustenance are flowing into us" (*Christian Unity*, p. 273).

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NO LONGER INFANTS

Lloyd-Jones believed that the church needed not only to see its relationship to Christ, but also be growing in that relationship with him. Becoming a Christian, becoming a member of the body of Christ, is just the beginning, he would say. The church exists, but it is not yet perfect. It needs to make progress and become filled with the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was for that reason he believed **the great emphasis of the church needed to be upon building itself up in love**. True, the church needed to evangelize – indeed, in a sense it could be said to exist to evangelize. But it would only be effective in reaching the world if it was in a strong and healthy condition itself.

Lloyd-Jones emphasises this as he expounds Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:14, “*Then we will no longer be infants...*” “The first thing we have to understand,” he says, “is that we all start in the Christian life as children. That seems so obvious, and yet we are always forgetting it” (*Christian Unity*, p. 222). As spiritual infants, he says, we find ourselves “born into an entirely new life, an entirely new realm which is the complete contrast to the old realm” (p. 222). And because of that, we have a great deal of learning and growing to do.

Spiritual infants, he goes on to show, have **much the same characteristics and tendencies as infant children**. For one thing, they don’t have much knowledge, and still less wisdom and understanding. They are typically unstable (fickle and changeable), lack self-control, are liable to extremes, and are easily misled and deceived. And finally, he adds that there is nothing more characteristic of a child than the way it loves novelty, change and excitement. A child quickly becomes bored and distracted, and has to be constantly entertained or it gets angry and causes trouble.

“Unfortunately,” he says, “all this tends to be true of us as Christians. I have sometimes thought that one of the first problems and trials a young pastor has to meet is due to this very thing, that he has to accommodate himself to the fact that so many Christian people display this characteristic of childhood. They like change; anything as long as it is different; change and novelty and newness, and especially the craving for the element of entertainment and excitement” (*Christian Unity*, p. 229). As discouraging as that may sound, Lloyd-Jones believed that Christians needed to appreciate it, otherwise they would never grow out of it.

But spiritual infancy is not the only reason the church needs to grow in Christ. As individual Christians, **we are also marred and corrupted by sin**. We are not yet what the Lord intends us to be. As a result of that, Paul can speak of the members of the body of Christ needing to be healed and mended and put back into working order. Commenting on the word “perfecting” in Ephesians 4:12, (see KJV), Lloyd-Jones says, “The original idea at the back of this word is that of ‘fitting together into one body’. Actually, it was a term used for the setting of bones which had become dislocated... So the idea in the word used by the Apostle is that all these different parts and portions of the body of Christ should be put into the right alignment, should be properly adjusted, and that each one should be fully developed” (*Christian Unity*, p. 199).

Here, then, is a second reason why the church needs to grow in its relationship with Christ. It needs to “grow up into Him” so that it becomes properly adjusted to his design and intention for each part. Only then will the individual members of the church fulfil their function, and the body as a whole “grow and build itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16).

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PROTECTING AGAINST ERROR

Last week we noted that Martyn Lloyd-Jones believed that the church needed to make a priority of building itself up. We considered two of his reasons for taking this position – that we all start the Christian life as children and have much growing to do, and that we are all marred by sin and need to be mended and made whole. Today we consider a third reason, namely, the danger we face from false doctrine and its unscrupulous teachers.

The apostle Paul was well aware that false teachers would pose a serious threat to the church. One of the reasons teachers were given to the church, he said, was to prevent immature Christians being “blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and the cunning craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). He saw Christians facing two related threats – error and false teachers – and he believed that the only antidote to them was solid teaching.

There can be no question that **the church today still faces the threat of false doctrine and deceptive teachers.** “The modern Christian Church,” writes Lloyd-Jones, “is surrounded by cults and false teachings” (*Christian Unity*, p. 234). Whatever their human source, all of these, he says, are traceable to the devil. “According to the Scriptures,” he writes, “all false teaching is the result of the work of the Serpent, and it has the mark of the character of the Serpent upon it (*Christian Unity*, p. 233).

That’s what makes error so deadly, and why Christians must hate it and be on their guard against it. We mustn’t think that heresy is harmless, and to be tolerated as legitimate alternative opinion. On the contrary, in the service of the devil it is a positive evil. “Do we realize as we should,” asks Lloyd-Jones, “that error is not merely negative, but that it can be very active and very positive? Error is not merely the absence of full truth or of full teaching; it is positive evil” (*Christian Unity*, pp. 236-7). That’s why we mustn’t subscribe, he

insists, to the modern dislike of warnings and criticism when it comes to error. We are dealing with something that the Bible speaks against in the strongest terms, and we mustn’t hesitate to expose it and warn people – and especially young Christians – against it.

Furthermore, we need to appreciate, Lloyd-Jones says, that **the proponents of error are well organized and dedicated to their cause.** We are not dealing with harmless and well-meaning people when it comes to error, he says, but to cunning and deceitful liars. Commenting on Paul’s description of such teachers in Ephesians 4:14, Lloyd-Jones notes that the apostle “likens them to men who are experts at the games that depend upon the throwing of the dice and the element of chance. They know how to manipulate, they are quick and subtle, and while in your innocence you are not watching carefully, they deceive you and mislead you” (*Christian Unity*, p. 235). While this may not be true of every individual propagator of error – some are simply blind and misled pawns – it is nevertheless true of the masterminds behind false teaching.

That’s why it is so important that the church pay attention to building itself up and becoming strong in its understanding of the gospel. If it doesn’t, its weaker members in particular will be misled. “There can be no doubt,” says Lloyd-Jones, “that the Church is as she is today because we do not follow the New Testament teaching and its exhortations, and confine ourselves to the positive and so-called ‘simple Gospel’, and fail to stress the negatives and the criticisms. The result is that people do not recognize error when they meet it” (*Christian Unity*, p. 240).

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MINISTERS OF CHRIST

Given that the church needs to grow in its relationship to Christ, and all of its members become mature and perfected in Christ, how is this to happen?

Again, this is something Lloyd-Jones finds an answer to in Ephesians 4. According to the Apostle Paul, he says, the Lord Jesus provided for the need of his church by gifting particular members within it. As a result of his death and triumph over his enemies, the Lord has the right to give gifts to the members of his body. And in doing so, he gave “some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...” (Eph. 4:11,12). In other words, he gave the church a ministry. “The way in which the saints are to be perfected is through the gift of the ministry, the function of which is to edify the body of Christ” (*Christian Unity*, p. 198).

In introducing the idea of a special “ministry” in the church, Lloyd-Jones hastens to say that it is not only a special class of people who have received gifts from the Lord. The Lord gifts every member of his body (Eph. 4:7). Nevertheless, he insists that the Lord has provided for the growth and perfecting of his church by giving it special ministers or officers, apart from which the church cannot grow. “The ‘perfecting of the saints’,” he says, “cannot happen apart from the work of the ministry” (*Christian Unity*, p. 200).

And what is this work of “the ministry” that Paul is talking about? It is, Lloyd-Jones says, the ministry of the Word of God. The apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers that Jesus gives his church all have on thing in common, namely that they preach and teach the Word of God. The way to build up the body of Christ, Lloyd-Jones says, “is to ‘preach the Word’ – ‘the Word of His grace which is able to build you up’. The work of the ministry does not

consist in talking about current affairs or events, the minister is not to find his message in the newspapers, he is not be entertaining the people by telling them stories, or provoking laughter. He is to ‘preach the Word’. This is the only Word which can build up the Church, and build up every member of the body of Christ” (*Christian Unity*, p. 203).

It is the Lord who gives this ministry and these ministers to the church. “The ministry” is not a human institution that men can control, and that men can prepare for and enter simply by personal choice. “The risen Lord Jesus Christ in all his glory has sent down these gifts into the Church,” Lloyd-Jones says. “They are not a human institution, He Himself has ordained them and appointed them, He has decided the nature of the offices, and He has decided on the men who are to occupy these offices” (*Christian Unity*, p. 200).

Lloyd-Jones is insistent upon this. While almost anyone can read and explain the Word of God, the ability to build up the church through that Word is something that is a gift of Christ. It is not simply intelligible ministry that matters, but preaching and teaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. And that only occurs through those who have been gifted and called by the Lord for such a ministry. “We are not to decide to do this or that in the Church, as has often been done,” Lloyd-Jones declares. “According to the Apostle’s teaching a man does not call himself; still less, of course, does he enter the ministry, or any other office in the Church, as a profession... This explains why the Church is so often weak and ineffective. Men have forgotten that it is Christ who calls, and that we ourselves do not decide what we do in the Church in any capacity” (*Christian Unity*, p. 172).

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AN EDIFYING MINISTRY (1)

The church will only be built up (edified), Lloyd-Jones argued, if the Word of God is preached and taught by men called to that task. But even then, “edification” is not guaranteed. It isn’t ministry of any kind that encourages and strengthens members of the body. It is ministry of the Word marked by certain features.

The first of these, according to Lloyd-Jones, is **purity**. The church will only be edified if it is fed the “pure milk” of the Word (1 Peter 2:1). That is to say, it must receive God’s Word without addition, subtraction, dilution or mixture. “Nothing builds up the Church,” Lloyd-Jones says, “but the unadulterated Word of God. There is no authority apart from this; it must not be modified, or trimmed to suit the fashion of modern science, or ‘some assured results of criticism’ which are always changing... It is because this has been so largely forgotten in the last hundred years that things are as they are today” (*Christian Unity*, p. 204).

Secondly, a ministry will only be edifying if it is **appropriate**. This can be understood in at least two ways. If the preaching and teaching of God’s Word is to help people, it must be presented at an appropriate *level*. The New Testament speaks of spiritual “milk” and “meat.” The former is for spiritual babes, the latter for those who are more mature in the faith. A skilled minister of the Word will always give people truth in forms suited to their spiritual capacity. “He must vary the diet,” Lloyd-Jones says, “according to the people’s need – not only milk, and not only strong meat – otherwise his preaching will not be edifying” (*Ibid*, p. 204).

An edifying minister will also feed people with the Word in ways appropriate to their *circumstances*. Christians don’t live in a bubble. They experience life in the rawness of everyday experience. Ministers of the Word need to understand what is happening to their fellow Christians and bring God’s Word to them at their point of

need. “Some of the listeners are happy, and some are sad; there are those who may be enduring persecution and tribulation; some may be celebrating a victory. There is a word for all; and a full ministry of the Word will meet every condition and every conceivable circumstance” (*Ibid*, p. 204). This is not pandering to people, or “scratching where it itches.” Ministry of this latter kind simply seeks to please. An edifying ministry, however, brings the Word into close contact with true need.

Third, an edifying ministry will be **comprehensive**. For one thing, it will contain an element of *teaching* – indeed, it will be built on a foundation of teaching. “The history of the Christian Church shows clearly,” says Lloyd-Jones, “that the great and glorious periods, such as during and after the Protestant Reformation, always follow the mighty preaching of doctrine... This is the protein and iron which give strength. The great doctrines of the faith must be the basis of Christian diet” (*Ibid*, p. 205).

But it takes more than teaching to make a ministry comprehensive. It takes *warning*, and *reproof* (correction), and *training in righteousness* (2 Tim. 3:16). As negative as it may sound to talk about “warning” and “correcting” people, this aspect of ministry is essential. So too is practical instruction in godly living. “We need to be told how to live a godly and pure and holy life... This means that the truth has to be applied. A ministry which merely states the truth without applying it has failed. The true preacher of righteousness urges people to put it into practice” (*Ibid*, pp. 205-6). (To be continued).

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AN EDIFYING MINISTRY (2)

In this article we continue to explore the kind of ministry of the Word that edifies people. The church today needs to be very clear about this. There has been a general decline in the priority of preaching and teaching in recent years, and along with this, a loss of understanding of the kind of ministry that helps people to grow to maturity in Christ.

An edifying ministry, according to Martyn Lloyd-Jones, needs to be pure, appropriate and comprehensive. It also needs to be **balanced**. By this Lloyd-Jones means that it must include *all the various aspects of biblical truth* – doctrine, exhortation, warning, correction, instruction – in their proper place and proportion. “A balanced ministry,” he says, “does not confine itself to doctrine only, or to exhortation only, but combines both and places them in the right order” (*Christian Unity*, p. 206).

A balanced ministry also recognizes the need to *address the whole person* – mind heart and will. “There must always be something for the mind, for the heart, and for the will,” writes Lloyd-Jones. “The Word is God’s Word, it is holy truth, and it is meant to move the heart, and to move and influence the will. So the one who ministers the Gospel must preach in a lively and warm manner under the power of the Holy Spirit. In a sense nothing is more devastating than a ministry which is only intellectual, and which never disturbs” (*Ibid.*, p. 206).

Imbalance can easily distort a ministry. A minister’s personality and preferences can induce it. So too can an over-reaction to circumstances. It has been common during times of conflict in the church for individual preachers and whole denominations to become absorbed with a limited number of doctrines to the neglect of the rest. And such imbalance invariably produces distorted Christians.

Fifthly, an edifying ministry needs to be an **attractive ministry**. By this Lloyd-Jones means a ministry that people will find digestible, and suited to their particular needs at any given time. “When a person is ill and has lost his appetite,” he notes, “his food must be presented to him in an attractive manner” (*Ibid.*, pp. 206-7). People can be spiritually unwell and have little appetite for God’s Word. When that is the case, a minister of the Word must present the truth with sensitivity, and in a way that makes it helpful to people and suited to their need. “If a minister does not have a concern about people’s souls,” Lloyd-Jones says, “if he is not troubled about them, and if he is not careful to observe whether they are growing and developing, he is not exercising an edifying ministry” (*Ibid.*, p. 207). It is not that preachers and teachers should try to entertain, or give people only what they *want* to hear. Rather, it’s a matter of presenting God’s Word in a way that best ministers to their true spiritual need.

Finally, Lloyd-Jones insisted that an edifying ministry must be one that is **backed up by a consistent life**. A minister of the Word is “to show himself a pattern in his life and ministry. He himself is to manifest spiritual growth, understanding of the doctrine, and concern about it, in his own life, and in the whole of his demeanour” (*Ibid.*, p. 207). He must be the first one to profit from the Word he preaches to others.

It’s not hard to see why the church in every age needs ministers of the Word who can edify people. While – as stated earlier – they are not the only members of the body, nor are they the only ones who are instrumental in its growth, their ministry is nevertheless foundational. Without them, churches invariably wander and wilt. We need to pray for an army of edifying ministers for the church today.

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KNOWING CHRIST

The church will only be healthy if its members are deeply rooted in Christ. That's the position of Martyn Lloyd-Jones – as indeed it is of the Apostle Paul and the rest of the Scriptures. The church can never self-generate its life, it receives it from the Lord Jesus. And in order to do that, we have seen, it must grow up into him through the ministry of his Word.

But what does a mature Christian – or one deeply rooted in Christ – look like?

One thing we can say about a mature Christian is that they will **know a considerable amount about Christ** – they will have a thorough (yet growing) grasp of the doctrine or teaching of Christ. Doctrine is not everything, but it is essential nevertheless. Our relationship with God is based on faith. And faith requires knowledge; it is based on an understanding of the one we trust. So mature Christians are those who know much about the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is more, a mature Christian will be **like Christ in many respects**. They will not only know things about the Lord Jesus, but by his Spirit working in them, they will actually come to be like him. They will “put off” ways of living that belong to their sinful past, and increasingly “put on” the true way of life, the way Jesus lived. The Apostle John put it well when he wrote, “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands... Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 Jn. 2:4-6). Mature Christians will reflect the character of Christ in their daily life.

But there is another mark of a mature Christian as well. A mature Christian will not only know about Christ, and be like Christ; they will also **actually know him in a vital, personal, spiritual way**. Lloyd-Jones called this knowledge of Christ a “full” knowledge of Christ “over and above that other kind of intellectual knowledge and

apprehension. This is something deeper, something profounder ... something experimental” (*Christian Unity*, p. 217).

He describes this “experimental” knowledge of Christ in this way: “It means knowing him directly, and having communion and fellowship with him personally... It means receiving something of his strength and power and grace; and literally knowing that we are receiving it, knowing that we are in him as a branch in the vine, and receiving of his life” (*Ibid*, p. 218).

This knowledge of Christ is personal and full of life. The Lord Jesus must be more than an idea, a theoretical abstract figure to us. He is a real, living person with whom we can talk and share out hearts. And what is more, in the intimacy of a living, personal relationship with him, we are able to receive from him. He pours his love and grace and power into our hearts through his Spirit. There is a real communication of life from Christ the Head to us as members of his body.

Here, then, is the real source of life and strength for the individual Christian and the church. It is the life of Christ communicated to the hearts of people by the Holy Spirit. It is not something we can command. But it is something Christ gives freely and richly to those who know him – who have received and believed his words, and who have given themselves to keep his commands. As such people walk with him, and live in intimate personal fellowship with him, he fills them with his fullness. They can say with the Apostle Paul, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

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ACTIVITY AND LIFE

In our opening insights in this series, I mentioned that Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones opposed the trend to activism in the church – the move towards frenetic activity at the expense of teaching and spiritual experience. It could easily be taken from this that he was against the church being an active force in the world at all – that it should rather concern itself with itself, and concentrate solely on its relationship with God.

But this, of course, is not what he meant. What Lloyd-Jones protested against was **activity as mere activity**. A church could be very busy, he argued, and yet be quite lifeless. There might be multiplied social programmes, fellowship activities, and even evangelistic outreaches, yet little spiritual life and joy among the members. There might be little love for Christ, little desire to worship, and little reality in prayer. And when this was the case, he said, the activity of the church was ultimately self-generated, and would be useless in terms of achieving anything of spiritual value.

What he insisted upon was the need for **activity to flow out of life**. The two things had to go together. If there was no life, there could never be any valid spiritual activity. But where there was life, he argued there was bound to be activity. Indeed, he went so far as to say that he believed that the man or woman of God who was filled with the love of Christ could do more in half an hour than the busy type of person could do in a century.

It is worth quoting again some of his statements on this theme. They are basic to his understanding of what the church needs to be a dynamic, living force for Christ in the world. “Christ is the life of the Church,” he says, “and if there is no vital relationship with Him, there will be no life, and the Church will be dead... When will the churches realize the truth? When will they realize that apart from his activity all our activities lead to nothing? Life is the one thing that

matters; and the life is in Him. Our first concern, therefore, should be to know that we are vitally connected to Him, and that the channels, the bands of supply, are open, and that His power, strength, life and sustenance are flowing into us” (*Christian Unity*, pp. 272-3).

We might well ask ourselves **what this means in terms of practice**. Does it mean that we are to do nothing at all until we are conscious of the life and power of God flowing through us? Does it mean that we should spend our time worshipping and waiting upon God until we get a clear message from him to do something? No. Waiting in this way is not the proper response.

As one man has put it, God has given us our “standing orders” in his Word, the Bible. There are certain things that we are bound to do – both as individuals and as a corporate group of believers in the church. We don’t have to wait for God to tell us to do them, nor delay the doing of them until our spiritual pulse reaches a certain temperature. They are our duty to do now, whether or not we feel particularly spiritual.

But what we must remember as we seek to do the things God asks us to do is that we cannot do them in our own strength. Passive waiting is not the answer; deep dependence is. As we take up any task, we must empty ourselves of self-confidence, and pray earnestly for the Lord’s enabling help. As Charles Spurgeon the great Baptist preacher once put it, “We work as though it all depends on us, but we pray as though it all depends on God.”

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SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

To finish our series of Insights on the spiritual vitality of the church, let's consider Martyn Lloyd-Jones' thoughts on what a church needs to do when it loses its vigour.

Typically, Lloyd-Jones addressed this issue by stating firstly what the church **should not do**. He believed it was a mistake for a declining church to react to its situation by arranging an evangelistic campaign – or by looking to some new evangelistic or church growth strategy. This is what he saw happening so often in his day. “Men begin to realise that the Church is in a lifeless condition, and that little has been happening. So they decide together to have an evangelistic campaign... They put up big posters outside the church, advertise in the Press, and use other media, and perhaps get the local mayor to attend the opening meeting” (*Christian Unity*, p. 274). They respond to the church's lack of life, in other words, by becoming active and doing things. They set up committees, develop action plans, and secure “prayer back-up” to ask God's blessing upon their proposals and efforts.

This, Lloyd-Jones, believed, was the wrong way to go about dealing with a state of lifelessness in the church. Rather, the church had **to look at itself honestly, and begin to address the root of its problems**. That, he insisted, is the way the church in history had responded when it got into trouble. The church would meet together and ask the question, “Why are we in this position?” “The first question,” Lloyd-Jones comments, “should never be, What shall we do? but, Why are things as they are?” (*Ibid*, p. 275).

“Our first task,” he continues, “is to examine ourselves; our first business is to make sure that the life of the Head is flowing through us. This will cause us to fall on our knees to repent and confess our sins, and acknowledge with shame our transgressions, and then cry

for mercy and compassion. Then we will plead with the Lord to send his Spirit upon us in mighty reviving power” (*Ibid.*, p. 275).

Put another way, Lloyd-Jones says that that this matter of spiritual vitality is all **about being usable to the Lord**. It's not about our programmes and techniques, our activity, our prayer backing. It's about being the right kind of people, in the right posture before the Lord. “The call of the New Testament,” he says, “is primarily not to do something, but to be something. The one thing that is absolutely necessary is that we should be usable. The main hindrance to his working is that we are not usable as we should be” (*Ibid.*, p. 276).

And what is it that makes us not as usable as we should be? It is our lack of dependence upon Christ – our reliance on our own schemes, our own strategies and plans, our own resources. We put our trust in these, and ask the Lord to bless them, but all the time, we are relying upon them rather than upon him. On the other hand, “The lives of all the men who have been used of God in the most mighty and signal manner all reveal the same striking truth. Their first intense struggle was always the struggle with themselves, and with their own abilities and powers. A point came when they were driven to their knees, realizing their impotence. Then they submitted themselves wholly to the Lord, and were filled with the power of His Holy Spirit” (*Ibid*, p. 276).

Here, then, is Lloyd-Jones understanding of what makes a vital church. It is a church that is vitally connected with Christ and filled with his life. Nothing less than his life filling each of its members will do. And if a church is less than that, it should go to the root of its problem and deal with it there – not through plans, schemes and activities, but through heartfelt repentance and faith.

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