

Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Evangelism / Discipleship



Paul's letters express his ministry focus - to incorporate new believers into the Church fellowship, equipping them to live holy lives in a hostile environment while enabling them to reach out in love to their family, friends, and neighbours. By emphasising discipleship Paul ensured the on-going life of the church.

This commitment to instructional discipleship needs to become alongside personal evangelism a priority in the Church again.

A brief history of everything (almost)

‘the church’

Where does the church fit into the scheme of life and the eternal purposes of God? Prior to the birth of Jesus, God worked through the Jewish nation to reach the world. Their election had to do with their calling to be God’s ambassadors in the world.

Now, new people in a new covenant relationship with God through Christ are God’s people (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). The church has been grafted into the people of God; the church continues the work of Israel as God’s representatives on earth (Romans 11:1-36).

We live in a world in turmoil. The foundations of contemporary society are constantly changing. Modern philosophy, which is essentially non-Christian, is challenging the priority of Christianity as the educator of society’s values and ideals. We live in a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial society. The church is increasingly being challenged to melt into this hotchpot, to blend in with other faiths, rather than stand out as distinct and different. After all aren’t we all on the same path?

Many people, even Christians are perplexed.



WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

For many a sense of purpose is missing because they have no understanding of the forces that shaped them and created the society they inhabit. No real sense of belonging or identity. To mature we need to know where we come from and how we got here. This way we can better make sense of our culture, appreciate the events that shaped our environment, find our identity and where we fit.

History is a record of events and experiences as they have affected humanity. As we are affected and shaped by life experiences, so also has society been influenced by its history. It's important for us to know that history, to understand why people believe and act the way they do.

More so for us who belong to the church. What is the church? What is its history? Why does it exist?



For me 'church' is the key to history!
Church is the people of God. Church is God's vehicle for reaching the world. This is its distinction, its mission, its purpose.

This, I think, is important! So, there you have it – this is why, I believe, an awareness of church history is essential, so we don't lose track of what it is that we're about, what we stand for, and our eternal destiny.

CHURCH STARTED WITH JESUS

John's baptism initiated his ministry
The baptism of the Spirit initiated the ministry of the church Acts 1:1-8

The Church is . . .

the people of God

The church is the people of God. Men and woman from all walks of life who have trusted Christ as their Saviour. People who are seeking to live their lives to the glory of God. The word 'church' can have many applications, i.e. Local congregation, a specific denomination or in its wider sense: the world-wide body of believers who from among all the individual denominations make up the body of Christ in the world. The church can constitute millions and yet can be as small as two or three when Jesus is in the midst (Matt 18:20).

While all who believe in the Lord Jesus are members of his church each of us finds ourselves linked with one branch of it. So later, if our interest is sparked, we could trace the background history of the church to which we belong.

JESUS - PALESTINIAN JEW

The church was born into a world very like our own. The Roman Empire was a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial hot house. Christianity faced hostile forces and opposition from the start.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus the disciples of Jesus were in disarray, they still did not get it. Their focus was on the restoration of the kingdom rather than starting a new movement: *"So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* (Acts 1:6-8). A new era was being initiated, the era of the church. And crucially, this radically new era, would be initiated and empowered by the Spirit of God.

BREAKING BARRIERS

Alternative society

The church began in Jerusalem. The first Christians were Jews, yet within a relatively short period, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, motivated by the resurrection of Jesus, that changed.

Breaking down the cultural and racial barriers the early Christians took the message of Jesus across the Empire. No longer was the church exclusively Jewish, now it embraced peoples of all races, backgrounds and intellects. The barriers of hostility between peoples (Galatians 3:28) were swept aside in the church.

The Believers were known for their love even towards those who persecuted them. They were identified by their joyful willingness to endure difficulties. God was among them and the world knew the difference!

Here was an alternative society whose Holy Spirit empowered life-style challenged the accepted behaviour of the surrounding world.

The Emerging Church

THE PATRISTIC ERA
70AD - 561AD

OFFICIAL ACCEPTANCE

This period saw the growth of Christianity from a small (apparently Jewish) sect into a world-wide religion despite all opposition.

In 306AD with the enthronement of Constantine as Emperor Christianity was declared a permitted religion. This was a mixed blessing! From being a beleaguered group operating outside of the state, Christians suddenly found themselves in a favoured position. The temptation to compromise and to wrongly use the new positions of power would increasingly become a problem.

ESTABLISHING ESSENTIALS

Establish essential beliefs
'Nicene Creed/Apostles Creed'
(325AD and 381AD)

Establish the foundation
for those beliefs
'Canon' of Scripture.

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God, begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.*

*For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.*

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

*On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*

*He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.*

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

*We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

FOSILISED

‘ESTABLISHMENT’

A POLITICAL ECONOMIC
INSTITUTION

A WOUNDED CHURCH
A SPLIT CHURCH

*Spiritually - Something
was not quite right*

At the end of this patristic period Christianity's missionary impact ran out of steam. Christianity settled down to become the leading social/religious force across the countries which made up the Empire.

the priority of the church was to hold onto ground won, to maintain the status quo. Lacking the early dynamism of its mission to present Jesus as the risen Saviour, God's answer to the turmoil of life - the church fossilised!

In the ‘Middle Ages’ or medieval period which lasted from the 5th to the 15th century, the church became more bureaucratic, its leadership focus more political. This happened to such an extent, that instead of being essentially a spiritual movement, the church became a political/economic institution and a corrupt one at that. A rise in political involvement heralded a decline in personal spirituality.

This situation was recognised by many, within and without the church, to be wrong. Periodically this prompted a movement for reform to return the focus of the church to its prime purpose;

God's Ambassadors

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. "
(2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

In Western Europe, during that period known as the middle ages, the stresses for, political, social and spiritual change, were kept in check. Within the church, spiritual enthusiasm was generally channelled into the different religious orders that arose in this period, such as: the Franciscans founded in 1209 by Francis of Assisi. Or, as with the movement founded by Czech reformer Jan Hus in early 15th century Bohemia, if it opposed the existing practices and doctrines of church it was put down. Then it was that, at the start of the 16th century, the urgent need for internal reform in the church alongside the external political pressures combined, in Central Europe to provide the kindling for a fire.

This flammable mix found its spark in Wittenberg, Germany, when on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, (a German priest and professor of theology) nailed his 95 Theses (points for discussion) to the door of the Castle Church with the intention of opening a debate.

The Reformation – began!

THE REFORMATION

In Luther, with his emphasis on a return of the church to a Bible based faith and life, the religious and political forces for change found their focal point. From his teachings, the church in Europe underwent a reformation which sought to renew the spiritual life of the people and clergy. As could be expected, those entrenched in the existing system, holding different views, resisted change, thus the church split.

Europe Transformed

Meanwhile, political and nationalistic movements were arising to bring about decentralisation in Europe. These movements for governmental reform linked themselves with the movement for religious reform intermingling the two to such an extent that today looking back, it is hard to differentiate between them. Thus, the political/religious movement which we call the Reformation resulted in a divided Europe. Northern Europe was mainly Protestant, while Southern Europe remained predominantly Roman Catholic.

LUTHERANISM

In this period of religious and political ferment many great religious movements and men arose. In Germany and the Scandinavian countries, Martin Luther was regarded as the leading light. Those who followed his structure of biblical thinking and church government united under the banner of Lutheranism.

CALVINISM

Meanwhile, in Geneva, John Calvin, a French exile, established his system of church governance and theology known as Calvinism which has generally been followed in the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches in the Netherlands and Scotland. While these two outstanding movements were predominant, many independent movements also arose, and in this period the independent Congregational, and Baptist movements emerged, howbeit in a limited way.

RETURN TO ESSENTIALS

Western history has demonstrated that the church has, by divine energy, the ability to revive after periods of stagnation, despite all the attacks upon it from without and within. This is simply because God is committed to his church as his means of reaching humanity.

Rule of faith and life

Three central issues in the reformation period arose. First: 'a return to the Scriptures as the rule of faith and life,' with all church practices coming under their scrutiny.

Justification by faith

Then most vital of all: By faith a person is put right with God through the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Salvation is, by the free and undeserved goodness of God.

Priesthood of believers

Finally, the third issue is, 'The priesthood of believers.' This issue centres on personal responsibility before God. Anyone can come to God without the mediation of a priest. *"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus"* (1 Timothy 2:5). This issue, linked with the understanding that Christianity level's all people before God, paved the way for responsible participation in church and government of all peoples. It contributed to the thinking which led, in Western Europe, to democratic, enfranchised, representative government.

British Isles

ANGLICAN CHURCH

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

UNITED KINGDOMS

— UNITED CREED

Westminster confession

This political/religious move cut off the church in England from the direct influence of Rome. But unlike most of Europe, including Scotland, where the rejection of Rome was due to spiritual decline and corruption, within the Anglican Church the change was only political, and the church continued as it was. Thus, it was not until 1551 after gradual influence from Europe that the church in England adopted a Creed, 'the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion' that reflected the biblical thinking of the European reformers.

John Knox, pioneered the reformed protestant movement in Scotland that by the end of the 16th century, had developed into the Presbyterian Church. With a strong emphasis on preaching, the authority of the Scriptures, the sovereignty of God and the necessity of grace through faith in Christ; the Presbyterian Church emerged as a powerful force in the spiritual and political life of Scotland which in time had a wide-reaching impact in America and Africa.

The reformation movement had less impact in Ireland with most of the church continuing in allegiance to Rome. Politically this had significant historical implications for that Island.

PURITANS

In England, from 1660-1760, strong influence was brought to bear on the Anglican Church by those who advocated a return to biblical living based upon those thirty-nine articles.

These people were called, 'Puritans' and the reformation they brought about altered the spiritual temper of the church and nation paving the way for the clash between the Monarchy and Parliament that brought about the English Civil War.

After the fall of the Parliamentarians under Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan reformation halted. With the restoration of the Monarchy, those who had been part of that movement in the Anglican Church were put out.

The oppression of the Puritans encouraged the development of churches independent from the established church. It also promoted relocation to less hostile locations for those seeking religious freedom. Thus, the consequent Puritan emigration to North America by the 'Pilgrim Fathers' which influenced greatly the character of that nation.

Meantime in England, personal piety declined, morals degenerated and corruption developed until God brought about a spiritual revival of life through the 'Methodists' under the leadership of John Wesley.

METHODIST REVIVAL

While the church has experienced many small resurgences of faith the one with the greatest long-term impact upon the English-speaking church has been the 18th century Methodist revival which had its origins in the Anglican Church. The mighty revival of spiritual life and witness under the Methodists that swept across Britain altered the spiritual temper of the population. God used men and woman whose influence and contributions to our understanding of the Christian faith and ministry of the church is still being felt today.

While the result of this revival was the establishment of the Methodist Church which sought to continue this work of God using the principals learned by the Wesley's. The resultant spin-off for the broader body of Christianity was a re-emphasis upon evangelism, personal spirituality (holiness) and practical service.

The church re-discovered the necessity of reaching ordinary people in ways that are relevant and appropriate. New emphasis was placed upon maturing those won through evangelism by providing caring fellowship and proper teaching.

Renewed prominence was given to practical love (charity) which was put into practice by the establishment of hospitals, schools and orphanages, following Christ's command to spread the gospel and reach all people. In doing so, the church discovered the gospel's inherent ability to change individuals and to make an impact upon the social structures of a nation.

RENEWED MISSION

This revival movement that spread throughout the British Empire, the United States and beyond, linked with the upsurge of spiritual life in Central and Northern Europe and stimulated spiritual renewal across the world. Christians re-awakened to the responsibility of Mission. Thus, **the 18th century saw the birth of the modern missionary movement** and the spread of evangelistic endeavours as people re-examined their faith and sought to bring it into line with the greater purposes of God for his world.

Christian conscience

Social and political reform with the steady growth of evangelical Christianity (Independent, Congregational and Baptist churches) modelled on the pattern of the early church characterised the early part of the 19th century.

Mirroring the para-church religious orders that arose within the church in the middle ages, Christian compassion and spiritual enthusiasm found practical outlet in challenging the social injustices of the day. Thus, the rise of anti-slavery movements and the organisation of outreach mission to the poor.

The Social and political movement to free slaves in the European Empires and in the Americas, was sponsored by leading Evangelicals. In the United States, it culminated in a Civil War (1861-65).

As a church movement, the Salvation Army, started by Catherine and William Booth aimed to bring God's salvation to societies outcasts by meeting both their 'physical and spiritual needs'.

Colonization

On the political front, this period witnessed the emergence of imperialistic advances by the European nations as they sought by militant colonisation to extend their political and economic powers. This Imperialism sowed the seeds for most of the conflicts of the twentieth-century as peoples and nations fought for the right to self-determinism and self-rule.

Liberal Theology

The later part of the 19th century was characterised, within the church, by a polarisation of theological views. The theological liberals who adopted the new 'scientific' thinking and were influenced by Darwin's 'Evolution' thesis took a sceptical approach to Scripture. The evangelical theological conservatives maintained a traditional view of the Bible as a reliable basis for faith and life.

The liberals adopted a rational approach to the Scriptures subjecting them to critical scientific analysis. An analysis based upon their own views as to what could or could not happen. The result was a Christianity devoid of the miraculous and a Bible considered to be untrustworthy. God was dead. Humanity was on the throne. Societies morals would no longer be directed by biblical ethics.

PERVERTED IDEOLOGY

By the beginning of the 20th century the influence of liberal theology with its consequent undermining of biblical truth robbed Christianity of its vitality, its intellectual basis and social influence. Free from the constraints of Christian dictates, humanity could, once again, choose their own gods, their own ideology. And this they did.

God was dead, secular humanity reigned. Imperialistic nationalism in Europe led to a cataclysmic World War and the rise of two totalitarian systems enthusiastically followed by millions. Paradise could be found on earth; the ideal people would populate an ideal world.

The Russian revolution, based on an idealised view of humanity, saw the emergence of Joseph Stalin. It introduced a class based communist heaven: 'Workers of the world unite!' In Germany, Hitler, with an idealised nationalist view, founded on race, promoted a national socialist homeland at one in thought and action with its god like leader: Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer!

As quasi-religious systems, they were the product of the intellectual and cultural forces of the societies they emerged from. They were true anti-Christ systems. Both ideologies thought they had found the true future of humanity, its true meaning; the key to history! Both so alike in a willingness to sacrifice anyone to achieve the greater good as they defined it. Both spawned catastrophe, both flash lit the darkness of the human heart in rejection of God!

So, what a century the 20th proved to be! The dominant humanistic philosophy of rational scepticism divorced many in Central and Eastern Europe (the heartland of the Reformation) from Christian faith and ethics. Adrift philosophically they accepted anything persuasively presented and so adopted destructive class/race based ideologies that brought unscrupulous men to power to preside over the most destructive and lethal regimes in history.

Yet, as the century progressed, within the church, the earlier predominance of the liberal view receded as it's sterility was recognised for what it is. Biblical scholars responded to the challenge of liberal criticism with intellectual rigour to demonstrate the soundness of the long-established view of the Bible as a rational belief. This heartened the church which saw the re-assurgency of evangelical faith in the face of Western societies adoption of humanistic secularism.

REJUVENATED

Alongside this, at the start of the century, the spectacular growth of the Pentecostal movement from its beginnings among the Wesleyan Holiness movement brought more sharply into focus the ministry and leadership of the Holy Spirit. Thus, this revived awareness of the gifts, graces and work of God's Holy Spirit sparked the Charismatic movement which touched both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches thereby re-vitalising the enduring message of Christ in these historically mainstream congregations.

With vigorous growth, in Africa, the Americas and Asia, the international impact of Christianity in the later part of the 20th century was awesome. It can be attributed to no less than a work of God. For essentially that is exactly what Christianity is, the reaching out of God to a lost world. Far from diminishing, Christianity is advancing despite opposition, persecution, or attacks from its friends or foes. Not because it is a more reasoned or intellectual faith than any other, true as this is; but because it meets the deepest needs of the human heart.

REVIVED

MESSAGE & MISSION

Over the millenniums the experience of the church has demonstrated the centrality and reliability of the bible. Its gospel message is: the power of God for salvation (1 Corinthians 1:17-25) It has proven itself to have world-wide relevance.

The Gospel reaches people in the turmoil and uncertainties of life. It offers a realistic view of humanity and a point of reference for ethics and lifestyle. It gives a universal standard. It brings identity, equality and cohesion to the table. It introduces a Sovereign God who defines history. It explains life now and in the future. It brings us to a living Saviour. This is its enduring power.

Jesus Christ the founder of the church is alive. He is at the Father's right hand reaching out in love through his people, his church, to a lost world offering forgiveness, pardon and welcome into the kingdom of God! Welcome into his church!

God's Ambassadors

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. "
(2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

God's Purposes have not changed

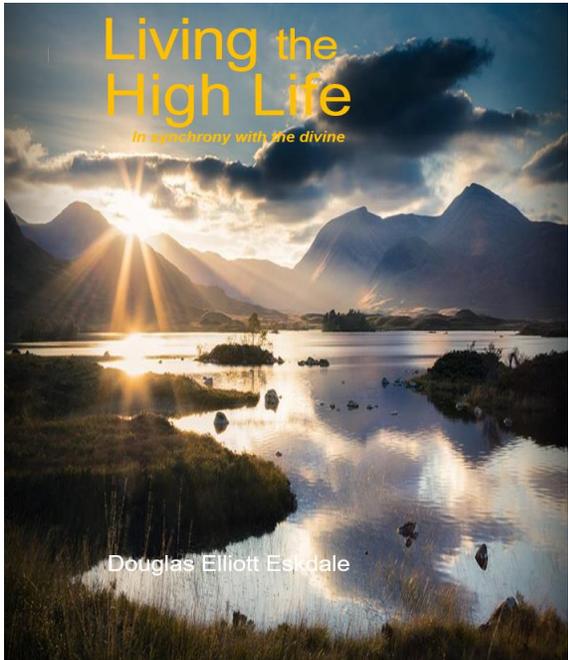
The church is important

It is empowered by God's Spirit

His Word is still true

You can be made right with God

What we believe is important



Douglas Elliott Eskdale

An Associate Minister in the Church of Scotland and BizSpark creator of 'WorkSAAS' a 'Compliance Management' software system.

Douglas has been schools' chaplain, Free Methodist church planter, pastor, teacher, conference speaker and University lecturer in Civil Engineering.

The material in this presentation is part of a book 'Born for Better Things' has been sharpened through feedback from many 'wee group' study sessions and preaching assignments. His goal is that you be, encouraged, enriched and equipped to live effectively as a Christian in today's spiritually challenging environment.

Currently a new book 'Living the High Life' is in progress.