

Cracking under the strain? 4 Paths Forward

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If there was one positive to come out of Covid, it was that our Global Leadership Team in Langham (from Bolivia to New Zealand via Ghana, UK and Indonesia) started meeting weekly on Zoom. We had never been together anything like as much before and so wonderfully, it brought us all much closer together.

At our 1st meeting in January 2021, each of us had to sum 2020 up in one word. There was a fascinating range of options, as you'd expect. But the word I couldn't get out of my head was one I'd pondered since 2016 post Brexit and Trump: **winnowing**.

It seemed to me that the west was under a divine winnowing - especially the Anglophone west. Our assumptions and pride were being shaken. Politically of course. But also in the church. Chickens were coming home to roost. Corruption in our whitewashed tombs was getting exposed. For our churches—the sound churches, the leading churches, the growing churches—we realised that all was not well.

There seems a generational thing here. To over-simplify, people under 40 in conservative evangelical churches are genuinely fearful they'd backed the wrong horse. And to be honest, few public responses have done much to reassure. Not even close. Instead, they have tended to provoke the unnerving suspicion of further obfuscation. Not everyone, of course. I know there are honourable actors at work. And yet... We know about the high-profile abuse cases. And I'm aware of many more that are brewing or emerging. I don't think we've seen the end of it by any means. But I don't want to focus on that here. Instead I will attempt to draw together the threads from the countless interactions from recent years. It is clearly impressionistic; and probably quite niche to one or two very particular subcultures. All I can say is, 'if the cap fits, wear it.'

I sense some deep fissures, some hairline cracks that threaten the future health of the English church. And I'm not even going to touch on the bigger picture, cultural pressures or the progressive assaults on traditional theology and ethics. Those are real enough and can hardly be ignored. Instead, I'm talking about stuff closer to home. So what has caused these cracks? To mix my metaphors horribly, I think we are beset by 3 Plagues which I'll touch on very briefly. Then will go onto 4 paths through, and they'll be discussion time after each path. I'll close with a handful of traps to avoid.

Three Plagues

Generalisations of course - and there are plenty of wonderful and inspiring exceptions. But as I say, 'if the cap fits...'

1. *Narcissists*

We seem aware of the problem narcissism far more now than when I was ordained 25 years ago. And with good reason. I'm not just talking about the headline-grabbers. It is much more

prevalent than we realised. But note - this is not people who like looking in the mirror like Narcissus. I'm using it in the clinical sense.

We're talking about those, deep down, are nursing profound insecurities, fears and shame, which they medicate by attempts to prove themselves superior or in control. One writer Jim Wilder puts it like this:

Narcissists will not accept a healthy reminder when their character is flawed, but they are skilled in using toxic shame against others.

If you have narcissists in your community, sharing weakness gives them ammunition. Narcissists pounce on the weaknesses of others to advance their own interests.

Unfortunately, the narcissistic "I must win" strategy can spill over into Christian communities, which explains why we see narcissistic behavior in leaders of organizations and churches. They manage shame by winning instead of [working through their] shame through *hesed* relationships.¹

Or take this from Henri Nouwen, who wasn't trying to define narcissism. But here he articulates why power gets abused and he is effectively describing the outworking of narcissism

The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints. One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.²

I needn't say more - you can find further analysis in the reading list.

2. *Elitists*

Now again, there's been a lot of analysis of this. I merely want to flag up the issue. I did Iwerne camps for 6 years after I left school - I never went as a kid because I'd never heard of it. I would say that under God, I owe it a huge amount. God used it to teach me and to give me my theological grounding. I think I was always a bit too much of an arty-farty muso to completely fit in - but I still have treasured friends from it. Great good has come from it.

It is a built on a strategy of elitism to reach the elite. Now again, it's a tricky one. As Philip Jensen once said (and he's not someone I find myself quoting often), you can't expect someone to be sanctified before they're justified. I was a snob before my conversion. I wasn't readily going to listen to someone not like me.

But let's be clear - it is primarily a sociological rather than Kingdom-minded strategy and one that makes flawed assumptions. One of the hidden absurdities looking back, is the idea that you needed different types of camps for the different types of boarding schools. So you needed Iwerne for the supposedly top 30 schools, and another camp for others in the south. An elite within the elite - I remember even thinking, well *I* do Iwerne not one of the others! Now this is a fraction of the wider issue. Class is such a deeply embedded British problem - and I am in little doubt that it is far more insidious than we appreciate. It is certainly one

¹ Wilder, 105, 159-160.

² Nouwen, 60

contributory factor in evangelicals becoming Anglican rather than Free church, for example. I suspect unconscious class consciousness lies behind the old *Best Boat to Fish from* mantra so beloved of Evangelical Anglicans. The best boat because it gave us greater status in the past? That's evaporating now of course - which muddies the waters even more.

Because class and race are such embedded divisions in the UK, it is not enough to give them lip service. They run deep. And I think some of this causes the cracks. I'm so glad Jason Roach and Jessamin Birdsall touch on Class questions in the brief book on racism *Healing the Divides*.

Our assumptions about what makes a good leader often equate to "middle-class-ness" But this is not what the Bible says qualifies someone for ministry.³

3. *Rationalists*

The first two are serious problems. And they need tackling. But this 3rd is the most serious I think. Because I think too much of Evangelicalism owes more to Enlightenment rationalism and modernism than it does to our Christian heritage.

We can see it in so many different ways:

- ◆ Our preference of mind over heart; the idea that discipleship is essentially a matter of filling minds with Christian truth which in turn leads to a Christian lifestyle.
- ◆ Our bemusement, if not hostility, to non-verbal communication (like images, music and the stage). Of course we say it's because we're people of the word. But isn't it striking how often the Word contains examples of people who reveal God through the non-verbal!
- ◆ Our fascination with technique - I think we're often sniffy in UK about the latest fad from the USA, whether it's the big crusades of previous generations or the Purpose Driven Life of Rick Warren, or some new programme etc. But we fail to see how enthralled we are to the same things. We assume the kingdom grows when people figure out new ways of reaching the world. Technique and strategy are profoundly modernist - part of the Enlightenment humanist programme for subduing the world and nations.

I could go on for too long on this - it is a matter close to my heart. But I won't!

Four Paths Forward

In essence, I think the charge has to be to believe our beliefs. Because the thing that keeps striking me is how often and deeply the Bible anticipates our flaws and failings. This is surely why the reformers were so determined to keep us on our knees and scouring the word. How else could '*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*'. God is always so many steps ahead of us.

So here our just 4 things we need to revisit at depths. This requires meditation, reading, listening to others, prayerfulness and humility. To that extent it probably simply requires dumb silence - as we recognise the impossibility of our solving the problems and curing the malaise ourselves.

³ Roach & Birdsall, 94.

1. *Worship the Sovereign God*

Wow! It's really not rocket science is it?! Basic theology 101.

One of the first sermons I ever preached on was Psalm 50. It was certainly a challenge - and I still remember quaking in my boots in front of Mark Ashton. But what a psalm. I sometimes wonder if we've forgotten some of its core truths.

¹ *The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to where it sets.*

He is on his throne. He has power and sovereign authority over everything.

But after introductory descriptions of that sovereignty, for he is the God of justice (v6), we discover that he has accusations to make against his people. For he says I am your God, your God (v7). This means he doesn't need anything from us.

⁹ *I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens,*
¹⁰ *for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.*

Who do we think we are? As if our worship and sacrifices for him did him a favour?

Perhaps the most chilling accusation for our contexts is here:

¹⁶ *'What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips?*
¹⁷ *You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you.*

Now, there's a lot more going on in the psalm than we have time for now. I come back to this because I think it is essential for putting us in our place.

These truths profoundly subvert our humanism and rationalism. We are NOT the masters of our fate, we are NOT the captains of our souls.

- ◆ So who do we think we are when we have our great schemes and our strategies?
- ◆ What do our ministry strategies reveal about our mindset deep down?
- ◆ What do our strategies reveal about who counts or matters in the God's kingdom economy?

You see, ministry is not about a technique to master or skills to learn (although they undoubtedly have a part). It's not a matter of a programme to follow.

During his 3rd Missionary journey Paul planned to go to Bithynia - essentially Asian side of Istanbul and east. But for some reason God wasn't having it. So they traveled south west through Mysia to Troas - because of the Man from Macedonia. I think that's a great model. He made his plans. But was content to let them go when it was clear God had other ideas.

What matters — indeed, the ONLY thing in the end to matter— is the God we worship and serve. He is a God we depend on, to whom we seek to be faithful. Of course we make our plans, and attempt to make best use of our time, gifts and resources. But in the end, we must sit loose to all of that. We go where God takes us, with those God sends us, for purposes God has for us. And that's that. That is why we worship him. And in fact, that is why we love him.

I'm just not sure I hear that very much. Is it because we're scared of sentimentality or something? Doesn't sound very British? But in the end all of this needs to grow out of the fat that we love the lord Jesus. And please note. We obey him because we love him. But our obedience of him is not the totality of our love. We worship and adore and enjoy and relish him - we love him with our affections as well as our lives.

DISCUSS - resonate or recognise? What might do about it?

2. *Be liberated by Union with Christ*

Wonder if you ever find yourself envying the Catholics - at least the church is clear, with its structures and solidity. You know where you are! But with Evangelicalism, it's all so fluid and ephemeral. We have no pope or council or clarity. John Stott hated the tongue in cheek comment that David Brooks repeated in the *New York Times* that if evangelicalism elected a pope it would be him. We don't do that stuff.

Instead - well, we have the gospel, the good deposit passed down, apostolic not because it's always apostles who carry it but because it conforms to the apostles' original teaching.

So, we put great store by having a common confession - a doctrinal basis. And there is great wisdom in that. I'm certainly not advocating abolishing confessional statements!

BUT I do think we get things topsy-turvy.

If someone signs up to our DB, then we are prepared to accept them as siblings in the faith. It might be grudging - there's still a nagging suspicion too often if they are somehow different from us. So we find ever more arcane and narrowed shibboleths.

And the problem is, it's incredibly hard to distinguish these dividing lines from cultural familiarities and comforts.

Isn't it striking how often we find that those who subscribe to the same minutiae LOOK like us, SOUND like us, VALUE the same things as us? Might it not just possibly be a sign that we are simply preserving our cultural comfort zones beneath the mask of Christian faithfulness.

Whereas our union with Christ should surely turn that upside down. Hugely helped by Grant Macaskill's book (in notes)

But Paul is now Paul-in-Christ; Paul-in-himself is a thing of the past. We might even translate Gal. 2:20 as 'I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me.'⁴

This is about identity.

fostering Christian moral identity is not principally about instilling good habits or establishing norms that mark our community but about fostering a person's sense of who Christ is in them and who they are in Christ. This, I think, is one of the reasons why the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are so important within the NT and are frequently appealed to by Paul for moral purposes.⁵

Now this means someone is NOT their confessional position (important though that is). We're not saved by our sound doctrine any more than we are by our good works. So to name Christ as Lord means claiming rights to be taken as a brother or sister - and should subvert our suspicions of those who are different. For sure we need to be wary of false teachers and shepherds - but that's a LONG way down the track.

If we lose sight of union with Christ as the basis for all Christian identity, then we lose sight of the real significance of Paul's statements concerning our unity in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Once we have done that, we will lose sight of the fact that Christian unity is an essential function of our collective participation in

⁴ Macaskill, 53

⁵ Macaskill, 57

Christ, and we will begin to redefine unity as something that emerges from our doctrinal agreement or ecclesial practices.⁶

This is far greater than intellectual assent to a truth. This is my entire identity. When I look in the mirror I am not Mark Meynell. I am Mark-Meynell-in-Christ. And these others in Christ are my people - whether or not I like them, whether or not I disagree with them, whether or not I've been wronged or hurt by them, even. They are a given - just as I didn't choose my biological brother but am forever connected. I have no right to be suspicious without drawing suspicion on myself.

So we should give the benefit of the doubt to others who name Christ as Lord. ESPECIALLY when they are different from us by virtue of gender, class, race, education, context.

- Otherwise our criteria narrow and distort kingdom values. And we have seen that time and time again.

DISCUSS - what difference should our Union with Christ make to how we treat others both in and out of our circles?

3. Be reconciled to our weakness

I have often felt haunted by Paul's words in 2 Corinthians.

2 Cor 12:10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Are these words that our Evangelical Anglican subculture has taken to heart?

My fear is that if there is one preoccupation that is characteristic of us evangelicals it has been our obsession with power. Now in the USA, we see it at its most raw in the ways in which people rallied to Trump's bandwagon - the way to protect the American church and those most vulnerable was to get our guys in power and they can put the right people onto the supreme court etc. Power is the key. And powerful people are the vehicle.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not advocating a withdrawal from the corrupting world of politics. We want to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. That cannot mean being so innocent as to be uninvolved, while so wise as to be worldly in our scheming.

But I am concerned about a willingness to sacrifice integrity and virtue for the sake of certain ends, for which any means become justified. In the UK - we might congratulate ourselves for not being as crude or brazen or fallen as our American cousins. But there is a darkness to some of the leadership patterns we value. We want a strong leader, one we trust to lead us.

It is into his framework that I think we need to place the abuse of power scandals in our churches. Some will deride this as a woke bandwagon - as if people don't like strong leaders out of an independent-mindedness. They just don't like being told what to do because they're sinful. They just need to get with the programme.

I just don't see that attitude in the NT. Jesus NEVER treated people like that. And for all the challenges working with Paul must have brought, he was never like that either.

But if the definitions of narcissism mentioned earlier are right, then a root cause is the failure to face our weakness and finitude. The narcissist is terrified of exposure and discovery - as if the world had NO IDEA that they were flawed and fallible! Am reminded of that wonderful

⁶ Macaskill, 140

shock-horror moment in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* when he describes the discovery of a real life sinner in the fellowship!

The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we *are* sinners!⁷

And to this, for our purposes, I want to add 'The fact is that we *are* weak!' In the church we need to embrace this. We all need help with this. But it is liberating when we do. We are strong when we are bound together to our strong God.

- We must always factor in finitude, limited perspectives, sinfulness. For ourselves; for our churches; for our leaders. Hence need for plurality. We're in it together.
- Tangential point: Accept our minority status and lack of respectability. Why should we expect privileged status? Anglicans need to be prepared for dissenters's integrity and courage
- Stop your power games. Just stop it.

Discuss: What might a ministry of weakness look like?

4. *Be characterised by Grace in everything*

We know we've been saved by Grace. We rejoice in it. We preach it. It is the heart of what makes us evangelical.

- Grace is uniquely Christian - no other creed comes close — but that's Christ for you!
- Grace is the opposite of justice, thank God — but that's forgiveness for you!
- As Bono sang,

Grace, she takes the blame
She covers the same
Removes the stain
It could be her name

Grace: it's the name for a girl
It's also a thought that changed the world

She's got the time to talk
she travels outside of Karma,

...and when she goes to work,
you can hear her strings,
for Grace finds beauty in everything.
Grace finds beauty in ugly things.
Grace finds goodness in everything.

- But here is the rub: is Grace what people know us for?

⁷ Bonhoeffer, 86

Rom 15:5-7 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Is this who we are? With people in our churches? With people in leadership over us? With people we disagree with? With people we interact with online? With people we feel wronged by? With people we have a grievance with, however legitimate?

If not, then we have to go back to first principles.

- ◆ Get on our knees before our sovereign God and throw ourselves on his mercy.
- ◆ We need to find our ultimate identity in being united with Christ
- ◆ We need to have the courage to face our weakness and failure, safe in Christ
- ◆ We need to seek his help to be who we have become in Christ, those who have known grace and therefore show grace.

5 Traps to avoid

So let me draw threads together with these 5 traps to avoid

- ◆ Don't fight others' power games with our own power games. Jesus never did that.
- ◆ Don't play the victim card as if we can justify ourselves that way. Jesus never did that.
- ◆ Don't descend into cynicism about everything (if honest, that's my own deepest battle). Jesus never did that
- ◆ Don't withdraw and just give up trying publicly to stand for God. Jesus never did.
- ◆ Don't descend into further tribalism or an inverted elitism. Jesus never did.

Further Reading

On Leadership, Narcissism & Power Abuse

| | | |
|------------------------------|--|---------------------|
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| Eswine, Zack | The Imperfect Pastor | Crossway, 2015 |
| Goggin, Jamin & Kyle Strobel | The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb (2nd ed) | Thomas Nelson, 2021 |
| Honeysett, Marcus | Powerful Leaders? When Church leadership goes wrong and how to prevent it | IVP, 2022 |
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| Pieper, Josef | Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power | Ignatius, 1992 |
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On Elitism & Diversity

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| Lindsay, Ben | We Need To Talk About Race | SPCK, 2019 |
| Roach, Jason & Jessamin Birdsall | Healing the Divides: How every Christian can advance God's Vision for Racial Unity & Justice | Good Book, 2022 |
| Smith, David I. & Pennylyn Dykstra-Pruim | Christians and Cultural Difference | Calvin Press, 2016 |
| Williams, Natalie & Paul Brown | Invisible Divides: Class, culture and barriers to belonging in the Church | SPCK, 2022 |

On Rationalism and Modernity

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| Wilson, Andrew | God of All Things: <i>Rediscovering the Sacred in the Everyday World</i> | Zondervan, 2021 |
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On Healthy Church Cultures

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| Goheen, Michael W. | The Church and Its Vocation: <i>Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology</i> | Baker, 2018 |
| Keyes, Dick | Chameleon or Tribe: <i>Recovering Authentic Christian Community</i> | IVP, 1999 |
| McKnight, Scot & Laura Barringer | A Church Called Tov: <i>Forming a Goodness Culture</i> | Tyndale, 2020 |
| Wilder, Jim & Michel Hendricks | The Other Half of Church: <i>Christian Community, Brain Science and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation</i> | Moody Press, 2020 |

On Living Under God's Sovereignty

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| Miller, Paul E. | A Praying Life | NavPress, 2013 |
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On Grace, Shame & Weakness

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