

## **LOOK OUTWARD AT LENT**

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‘Write an article about Lent’, wrote the Editor. But I confess that I am in difficulties. For Lent has no meaning for me. Christmas, Easter and Pentecost – all these festivals I gladly celebrate. But Lent is not a festival – it’s a period of forty days running up to Easter, when almost as a form of penance people who don’t normally study the Bible get together in small groups to do precisely that. As a minister whose church runs small groups throughout the year, this custom of Lent just gets in the way. As far as I am concerned, Lent is a thorough nuisance.

If anything, as far as Baptists are concerned, I sometimes wonder whether we would be better advised to give up Bible study for Lent, and instead put more time and effort into winning others for Jesus. Because that is what the essence of discipleship is all about. When Jesus called Simon and Andrew, and James and John, to follow him, he didn’t invite them to become members of a Lent Bible study group, but rather to go out and win others for him. “Follow me”, he said, “and I will make you fish for people”.

Unfortunately, to my mind too many churches at Lent engage in spiritual navel-gazing. Lent has become associated with the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness following his baptism. It’s become a time for self-examination and for deepening one’s devotional life. But the call to Christian discipleship is actually to look away from oneself. I find it significant that when Jesus called his first disciples, he didn’t say “follow me and save your soul”, but rather “follow me and save the souls of others”.

The call to discipleship is a call to fish. If self-examination is indeed called for at Lent, then perhaps we need to examine the way in which we as churches go about our fishing. For the kind of fishing which Jesus encourages is adventurous fishing. Jesus calls us to ‘push the boat out’ (see Luke 5.4). You will remember, no doubt, that when his disciples did push the boat out, they were overwhelmed by their catch. Unfortunately, too much of the fishing we engage in as churches involves standing at the edge tickling minnows, and then we wonder why are not successful.

In this respect my mind goes to an incident when my children were young. We were on holiday in North Wales. As I was walking along the beach, I saw a group of men who had just landed an enormous catch – they had done so because they had been out to sea in a boat. My children that afternoon had also been out fishing – we had in fact bought some cheap fishing nets for them – but they had caught nothing, for they had stayed on the seashore.

If Jesus is to be believed, Christian discipleship is about adventurous fishing. There’s a thought for Lent!

### **An experiment in fishing**

This Lent we as a church are going to ‘push the boat out’ and engage in some adventurous fishing. To be precise, we are creating a missionary congregation, which will meet on Sunday afternoons at 4 pm.

The vision behind this missionary congregation is to reach people who find it difficult to attend the main morning service. Over the last year or so we have realised that an increasing number of the children in our church are having to choose between sport and church. If an eight year-old wants to play football, for instance, then he has to play football on a Sunday morning. And it's not only football. Gym classes, dance classes, drama classes, and all kind of other interest groups now meet on a Sunday morning. As a result, we have been finding that when our Brigades 'parade' once a month on a Sunday morning, they are at half strength – there are too many other things going on at the time.

The fact is that the pattern of Sunday is changing. And here I refer not just to sport. Sunday has become 'the' shopping day for many families. Our hope is that by holding a service at 4 pm – when sport has finished and when the shops are closing – we will attract a new clientele. The fact is that by keeping to a morning service, we will be increasingly excluding people from worship.

In many ways the afternoon service will parallel the morning service. We don't envisage people - other than the ministers – attending both services, for the sermon will be the same at both. Likewise the Sunday School lessons for the afternoon will be the same as the morning. True, the worship may develop a life of its own, but from the beginning we have conceived the afternoon as an alternative to the morning.

We will retain our evening service. However, since we probably be farewelling the last of the afternoon worshippers at 6pm, we are moving the evening service half an hour later to a 7 pm spot. Youth activities which meet after the evening service will not be unduly affected by the change. Nor are older people affected – as long as they can get back home to see the main film on the TV at 9 pm, they don't mind.

At this stage I don't know what the Brigades will do. Will they continue to parade at the morning service, or will they opt for the afternoon? Or maybe they will alternate between the two.

With the creation of the afternoon missionary congregation, the other challenge will be encourage the present morning service to take on the character of a 'missionary congregation'. We want both services to be missionary in nature – in the sense that we want both services to be means of reaching out to the unchurched in our community.

It was in this light that we have adopted as one of our aims for the year: "Grow as a church by – encouraging everybody to bring at least one friend to our new congregations". We want both congregations to grow – we want people attending the morning service to be equally bold in inviting their friends as people attending the afternoon service. But for this to happen, it will involve all of us committing ourselves to the concept of the missionary congregation: this means that it won't be simply the afternoon 'shift' committing themselves, but the morning shift too. In other words, we won't simply attend a service – we will be committed to a missionary congregation.