

Methodists or Members of the Kingdom? Where does our loyalty lie?

Billy Graham is in a restaurant when a hold up man comes in waving a gun. Everyone has to go up to him and hand over their wallet. When the evangelist arrives in front of the robber the man recognises him and says “Put that away, Billy. We Baptists have to stick together!” We love that sort of story don’t we – that sort of friendly banter between the denominations. It does no harm and maybe it stops us taking ourselves too seriously.

It’s a fine line, though, between harmless leg pulling on the one hand and denominational pride and rivalry on the other. The problem arises when we see ourselves in competition rather than in cooperation with other churches. I’m talking about the sort of mindset that counts it success to see one’s own congregation grow while others in the neighbourhood struggle and decline. Recently I was handed a leaflet advertising a brand new church in the Newtownabbey area. It was just across the road from an existing evangelical church that is doing excellent work. I couldn’t help but feel that somehow the enthusiasm and good intentions of one small group was actually damaging Christian witness in the area. Being seen to set up in competition to another church is most definitely not Kingdom thinking and it is surely not the approach that Jesus taught us.

As we read the Gospels we see how Jesus spoke over and over again about the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven). It means God’s rule in the hearts and minds of men and women. Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom when He was here on earth and one day He will return to establish it in all its fullness when the perfect will of God will be done “on earth as it is in heaven”. That is what we anticipate every time we say the Lord’s Prayer. In the meantime, as Christians, we are called to live here and now by the values and norms of that future state. We are to demonstrate to a fallen world that God’s way really works. Every time we go the extra mile, forgive our brother, love our enemy, feed the hungry and refuse to pay back evil for evil we are bearing witness to Kingdom values. What an agenda for living! What a cause for which to work!

By contrast, every time we try to score points over other Christian groups or promote ourselves by criticising fellow believers from whom we differ we are, albeit unintentionally, demeaning and damaging the credibility of our Kingdom witness. After all Jesus did say “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another”.

Kingdom thinking rather than denominational pride was very much at the heart of John Wesley’s ministry. In a sermon entitled “A Caution against Bigotry” he encouraged Methodists to see past church boundaries and to recognise God at work among people in other groups. Regarding such gospel preachers he wrote “*Speak well of them wherever you are, defend their characters and their mission. Enlarge their sphere of activity if you have the opportunity, show them every kindness in word and deed, and cease not to pray for them.*”

A few years later, in 1755, Wesley published one of his most famous sermons entitled “Catholic Spirit”. Based on a rather obscure text in 2 Kings 10:15, Jehu asks

Jehonadab “Is your heart right as my heart is with your heart?” Jehonadab answers “It is” and Jehu responds “If so give me your hand.” What was important between the two men was not that they could agree on everything but that they had the right spirit and the right attitude to one another. That is kingdom thinking. Against a background of theological and ecclesiastical issues which threatened to separate him from other dedicated servants of God, Wesley pleaded “*Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike?*”

That sermon has come to shape so much of what it means to be a Methodist. We are clear as to our beliefs and traditions but we recognise that we do not have a monopoly on truth or on the Holy Spirit. John Wesley taught us to have a bigger picture of God and of His activity in the world. He taught us to be willing to join hands in co-operation with all who love and serve Christ as members of His Kingdom. That message is as important and relevant today as when Wesley first preached it.

So, Methodists or members of the Kingdom? The answer is that we’re both, of course. We love our Methodist heritage and yet we know that one day in the New Creation such a label will be discarded as obsolete. The only thing that will matter then will be the rule of Christ as King. In the meantime we find Methodism to be the place where God has put us and where we may best serve and work for the good of His Kingdom.

Maybe the recent Olympic Games leave us with a fleeting image of what it will be like on that Day. Those Olympic athletes came into the stadium marching proudly under their national banners and yet every one of them was united in the spirit of friendship that permeated the Games. By the closing ceremony the athletes themselves experienced what it was to be part of something far bigger that transcended nationality – they were part of a vast international fraternity of sportsmen and women throughout the world. Now if that sight brought a tear to your eye, think what it will be like One Day when the King comes to reign and all human labels will be consigned to oblivion.