

A Parentless Church in the Orphaned West?

We have an ongoing task of considering the culture around us for the sake of the gospel.

We “*live in the world*” but do not act like the world. Rather, we “*take every thought captive*”, which is not about our inner thought-life and has more to do with the task of simultaneously



participating in and pushing-back at our surrounding culture.

The task involves this: What are some of the defining characteristics of the West? Where is the church capitulating to or, alternatively, *subverting* our cultural narrative with the gospel? They are the rubbing points of our mission, our proclamation, our relevance.

One Western characteristic we have encountered is the prevalence of *fear*. The fear of falling, particularly in the middle classes, is a point of contact for the gospel of *trust* and *hope*.

A second characteristic is a peculiar individualism with an honour-shame shape. You're individually placed within a herd in which you are ranked by some descriptor such as school results, bank balance, or postcode. Honour and shame pertains to perceived movement in that rank. Perceptions as to where you stand matter as much as reality, and poor presentation can become self-fulfilling. This a point of contact for the gospel which honours individuals as image-bearers of God and values the body life of a renewed Jesus-shaped community.

A third characteristic is the subject of this post: It is a

collective sense of ***parentlessness***. Our society exhibits aspects of *orphanhood*. And the greatest concern is the extent to which the church which prays "Our Father..." readily adopts this same sense in thought and practice.

What do we mean by it?

In vague and limited terms, some observations that describe this characteristic are:

"You are on your own." The community spirit, that vague but certain sense that we each belong to a "team" of some sort has waned. This does not preclude interaction, or times and places where people can connect and share in anything from frivolities to more serious causes; but in the end I am not my brother's keeper, and my neighbour and I owe each other nothing. "Pulling together" is only of utilitarian value, and not an end in itself.

Cynical Leadership. Political leadership is a stark example. Here, leadership is not about inspiration, it is simply an algorithm, a feedback loop of wedge issues, focus groups, and the bartering of winners and losers in which principle is irrelevant. We have ideology but no ideals. We are called to self-interest but not to shared identity or purpose. Statesmanship has been deconstructed. Our debates and votes have become mechanical spins of a sloganeered poker machine.

Fearful Silence. Perhaps as an overreaction to bygone paternalism, we lurch between fear of ourselves (that we might impose and control) and fear of rejection (that our pearls will be treated as swill). And so we tend to simply stop saying anything, one generation to another and each to their own. No one is raised up to purpose or vocation. Rather than being covered and nurtured and raised up into their potential, all must fight for their place, seek their own sustenance, and justify their value. Elders are just old people, and young people have a divine right to not only "find

their way” but to do so from first principles, standing at the feet of fading giants. Withholding insight, we hold unthinking belligerence to be self-evident. The concept of “Founding Father” is extinct.

The end result has society bearing the hallmarks of orphanhood: An uncertain identity, an unanswered questioning of who we are; and a fear of rejection lingering as a subtle self-centredness that orbits the numbing false-comfort of entertainments. Our world is uncontrollable, and so we curl up into passivity, only bothering to be moved when there’s something that “they” should do.

Now this is social commentary, not an observation of how well or otherwise mothers and fathers raise their children. Nevertheless, it does inform how family-life is pressured by prevailing assumptions of how things should be.

And it also informs the church’s application of the gospel.

The gospel begins with a good good Father, who has *reconciled us to himself through Christ* and sends his Spirit by which we can respond with the rejuvenating childlike cry of “*Abba, Father.*” The gospel invites us to turn to Christ, and so enter into the spiritual family that he heads. There we have a certain identity, love that overcomes fear, and a call to purposeful action. Our heavenly Father knows us, takes risks for us, calls us into the fullness of ourselves in him, and so binds his people together with love, affection, mutual recognition and *godly provocation*.

The most inspiring Christian movements model this family.

Irish band *Rend Collective* grabs hold of the Great Commission, and as *family* they go. We’ve seen people try to emulate the energy of youth festival *Soul Survivor* – big music and loud lights – and fail to see that it only works because those who make it happen do it as *family*.

Families share life, spur one another on, and *know* one

another. Parents don't just instruct and teach, they *breathe life*, they feel the wellbeing of each member in their own bones. They pour themselves out and are wearied, for sure, but they *delight* and are rewarded by the family's growth. And all the while they hold their Father's hand.

Read Paul's letters and you see his apostolic *father* heart beating the whole time. He never goes alone. And he speaks of his people:

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 1 Thessalonians 2:19

Yet for so many, the loneliest place on earth is the church pew. Church can be many things – a product to buy, a message to contemplate, a program in which to participate. Our strategies can be clever, and our structures professional and proper. Our job descriptions can be precise, and our line management clear and fair. But without a sense of family, our Christianity is paint-layer thin, deep gets swallowed up by shallow, and we are yet another dusty bowl in the world's wilderness.

The recent re-attention on discipleship steps towards the deeps we need to recover and re-dig. Discipleship involves a recognition of "household", the sharing of life, and training through apprenticeship. It invokes the "band of brothers" family as the outward mission is pursued.

The next step perhaps, is deeper yet; it is towards an apostolic *adoptive* heart, which doesn't just *train*, but *calls* and *covers*. This next step can't be manufactured. Perhaps it's simply what happens when the Father heart of God stirs us anew. But we know we need it, this world and ourselves.

[Image by Olywyer used under CC BY-SA]