



FREE THINKING

A series of occasional papers to stimulate theological reflection on the implementation of *Setting God's People Free*

June 2018 // no 01

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Can things really change?

A transformative vision of the Kingdom by the Rev Dr Neil Hudson

Is it possible that in ten years, there will be multiple

'stories of parishes and dioceses, of nurses and postmen, of paramedics and sales assistants, chefs and farmers, electricians, plumbers, florists and accountants, caretakers and politicians who are more confident in their faith, more confident in Christ, more confident in their gifts, and more confident in their vocation, as lay people, to join God in his mission to transform our nation and our world?' (1)

Setting God's People Free stands in line with many similar reports presented over the last century that ultimately failed in their hopes to see people equipped for their whole lives. In each case, the culture of a gathered-church emphasis overwhelmed the intention of 'setting people free'.

What will stop this one ending the same way: failing despite the best intentions? The funded strategy

will help. A determination to change the practices of gathered church to reflect the whole lives of worshippers will help. But if change is going to happen it needs to be deep change, and it needs to be developed over a long time. This is not an emphasis that can be taken on for a year with the hope of moving onto the next good idea. It will take stamina and determination. It will need people to grasp the significance of the whole gospel for their whole lives.

And so we end in the place where too many have lived, believing that their work, their hobbies, their leisure is incidental to God's purposes rather than fully embraced by God.

On the other hand, if we can encourage one another to keep a sense of the wholeness of the gospel, then that should lead to a different set of consequences.



People will never be more confident in their faith, more confident in Christ, more confident in their gifts, and more confident in their vocations, as lay people, to join God in his mission to transform our nation and our world, if they have not experienced this life-transforming gospel.

The Whole Gospel and the Whole Story

We know that being a follower of Jesus in New Testament times led to all sorts of difficulties, but they had one advantage over us today. They had no concept of Christianity being about 'religion'. Tom Wright nails the difference well:

'In Paul's day, "religion" consisted of God-related activities that, along with politics and community life, held a culture together and bound members of that culture to its divinities and to one another. In the modern Western world, "religion" tends to mean God-related individual beliefs and practices that are supposedly separable from culture, politics, and community life. For Paul, "religion" was woven in with all of life; for the modern Western world, it is separated from it.'⁽²⁾

This may offer one reason why so many Christians have accepted a sacred-secular divide. If Christianity is primarily about our 'spiritual' lives, it's a short move to think that the only activities that are ultimately important are those that deal with 'spiritual' matters.

The Whole-Life-Transforming Gospel

For Paul and the first Christians, all that Christ accomplished on the cross shaped their whole lives.

In Ephesians, it's hard not to feel slightly overwhelmed by the waterfall of words Paul uses in his first two chapters. It's as though he grabs at every metaphor he can bring to mind to help the churches understand all that has happened to them. At one time, he reminds them, they had been:

dead, (2:1,5), rebellious (2:2), disobedient (2:2), hedonistic (2:3), guilty (2:3), separated from Christ, without hope and without God in the world (2:12), far away (2:17).

Any offence they may have felt at being described in these ways paled into insignificance as they heard the description of all that God had done for them. They had been:

blessed (1:3), chosen (1:4,11), predestined for adoption (1:5, 11), redeemed (1:7), forgiven (1:7), lavished with God's grace (1:8), let in on the mystery of God's plan (1:9), included in Christ (1:13), sealed (1:13), guaranteed an inheritance (1:14), loved (2:4), made alive (2:5), saved (2:5,8), raised (2:6), seated in the heavenly realms (2:6), shown kindness (2:7), given the gift of faith (2:8), created to do good works (2:10), brought near (2:13), united with natural enemies (2:14), reconciled to God (2:16), given peace (2:17), given access to the Father (2:18), made fellow-citizens (2:19), brought into God's household (2:19), built as a temple in which God dwells (2:22).

Paul reminds them that their inclusion into this rich story began when 'you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed...' (1:13).

We too need to understand the fabulous richness of our own salvation. The people who may find this most difficult to grasp are those of us who have been in church circles the longest. It's hard for us to know, or remember, how it feels to be without Christ, without hope, without God. So we lose sight of the brilliance of it all. We assume that accepting that we are loved by God sits naturally with a coolness in worship, as though God is simply doing his job and we are doing ours.

The truth is that people will never be 'more confident in their faith, more confident in Christ, more confident in their gifts, and more confident in their vocation, as lay people, to join God in his mission to transform our nation and our world', if they have not experienced this life-transforming gospel.



Our whole lives get caught up in his story, his plans. So our everyday relationships, everyday plans, everyday actions matter. 'Whatever you do' - accountancy, changing nappies, baking bread, clinching the deal, teaching the class, writing the new software code, policing, rehousing the immigrants, interviewing the prospective student - 'whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Colossians 3:17).

It's a Whole-World-Transforming Gospel

However, the danger of only seeing it as personally and privately transforming can leave people with a vibrantly personal faith that is disconnected from public life. It leads us to live a Christian half-life. We need to help one another see the implications of the Lordship of Jesus for the whole of life. This has always been part of the work that we have had to offer to one another as Christians.

If it had not been needed in the earliest church, we probably would not have had epistles such as Colossians. That imagination-awakening text helped those Christians see the implications of the Lordship of Christ for the whole of life.

The poem-hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 offers them a picture of Jesus as being in the centre of God's plans for the whole world, overseeing every detail of the universe, holding it all together. This Jesus, this saviour, could never be limited to their private lives, he is simply too big and his actions too wide for that to be the case. The message of the whole New Testament is that, amazingly, God is concerned about our whole lives; but far more than that, he wraps us into his plans for the future of everything. It is, of course, either preposterous nonsense, or the most astounding news ever shared. To settle for a private faith is, simply, to settle for too little.

This took faith to believe then. It still does.

'He [Paul] is invoking and celebrating a world in which Jesus, the one through whom all things were made, is now the one through whom, by means of his crucifixion, all things are reconciled. This is not, of course, the world that he and his friends can see with the naked eye. They see local officials giving allegiance to Caesar. They see bullying magistrates, threatening officers. They see prisons and torture. But they are now invited to see, with the eyes of faith, the eye that has learned to look through the lens of scripture and see Jesus.

Like an apocalyptic vision, this mystery-revealing poem offers a glimpse of another world, a truer world than the violent and brutish world of paganism then and now.'⁽³⁾

I cannot imagine it was any easier for Paul to help the Colossians see this than it is for us in Lichfield, Luton or Lancaster. The challenge is not to compartmentalise our lives. The opportunity, though, is that everything becomes important, everything can be offered to God.

This is our task together: to help one another see that it all counts, that being a follower of Jesus means we bring everything under his lordship.



How can we help people see these bigger truths?

For this to become a reality for people we need to address some of our church practices. But there are foundations that all the actions and practices need to rest on. They are significant: they remind us that we are not just trying to change our behaviour by our best intentions or by clever management techniques.

Our work is reliant on the one whose church this is, so we must work in ways that reflect this primary relationship. Ultimately we rely on the empowering of the Spirit, prayer and the encounter with God in worship.

1. Words matter

I am helped by remembering that Paul's inspiring words were written precisely because he wanted to remind the churches of who they were in Christ and all that God had done for them. Church leaders have always needed to do this. We preach, but on our worst days fear that our words are simply falling to the ground. We write pieces for church newsletters we fear no one reads. We have conversations that seem incidental for many people. These may be our fears, but the reality can be very different. Over time

preaching can help people see things differently, writing can catch people by surprise, conversations can be illuminating. But it takes time and I have to give myself to these tasks carefully. And for that, I need help.

2. Prayer matters

Prayer lies at the beginning, middle and end of the whole process of developing communities of disciples. It's an obvious but essential reminder. In all his epistles, Paul is keen to assure his readers that he prays for them. And that is very different than praying about them. When I pray to God about my congregation I am setting myself apart from them, often praying about them not because I am very grateful, but because I am exasperated by something that has happened. Inevitably, on days like this I come to God accusing the congregation of being less than I hoped they might be. Paul never seemed to do this. Or maybe he did and he just didn't say. Or maybe he realised that asking God to do the positive things would make the difference that he wanted to see.

This work of developing disciples is slow work. There are no short cuts, no interventions that will automatically make people see life differently. But there is God - it's why praying for people 'that you may know him better...that you will know the hope to which he has called you...that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened' (Ephesians 1:17-19) - may be the best work we engage in.

3. Worship matters

By connecting spiritual formation to a context of worship, James Smith ⁽⁴⁾ has emphasised that we are shaped by what we love. And that love is shaped by our worship.

'Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behaviour; rather, it's a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly - who loves God and neighbour and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love. We are made to be such people by our immersion in the material practices of Christian worship - through affective impact, over time, of sights and smells in water and wine.' ⁽⁵⁾

Disciple-making is not about going into a different mode from worship; worship is part of that shaping process in itself.

But there is a nagging question here: why doesn't this happen more often? Why, in some cases, does it simply lead to a form of Christian nominalism? Could it be that when worship is disconnected from whole life and any sense of a whole-life gospel, we are left with something so neutered that our worship liturgies simply wash over us, leaving us unchanged? We need to help people be captured by the amazing nature of what they are doing, praying, hearing, saying and singing.

The Whole View

How will the report become a living reality? It will happen as we are all gripped once more by the life and world changing nature of the gospel that changed everything.

References

(1) <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2017/24-february/news/uk/law-people-need-confidence-to-thrive>

(2) Tom wright, *Paul: A Biography*, (London: SPCK: 2018), 3

(3) Tom wright, *Paul: A Biography*, (London: SPCK: 2018), 290-291

(4) See James K. A Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Culture Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009)

(5) Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 32-33

About Setting God's People Free

Setting God's People Free (SGPF) is a programme of change across the Church of England to enable the whole people of God to live out the Good News of Jesus confidently in all of life. The programme seeks to implement proposals from the report of the same name presented to General Synod in 2017; to find effective ways to affirm the calling of all Christians, with a confident faith and vision for the Kingdom of God, which is lived out in homes, schools, communities and places of work.

- SGPF looks beyond and outside Church structures to the whole people of God at work in communities and wider society
- SGPF challenges a culture that over-emphasises a distinction between sacred and secular to a fuller vision of calling within the all-encompassing scope of the Gospel
- SGPF seeks to affirm and enable the complementary roles and vocations of clergy and of lay people, grounded in our common baptism
- SGPF proposes imaginative steps to nourish, illuminate and connect what is working already in and through parishes and communities of faith