

The Great Divide - The Greatest Cultural Challenge Facing the Church

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A couple of months ago I was asked to do a twenty minute presentation on the three greatest cultural challenges facing the Church in the 21st Century. What made it worse was that I had to present my response to the consultative board of a serious US University. Which three challenges should I choose? And whatever I chose, wouldn't there be a gaggle of geniuses to contradict me? This looked to me like what rugby players used to call a hospital pass - that moment when one of your teammates gives you the ball a millisecond before three opposition forwards the size of Godzilla and the texture of granite arrive on your ribs. You're going to get crunched.

Well, if you're going to get crunched, get crunched on your own terms so I decided to choose just one challenge. Which we'll get to.

But first here are some questions to consider:

1. Why is this a common statement?

"I teach Sunday School 45 minutes a week and they haul me up to the front and the whole church prays for me. I teach school 45 hours a week and no one ever prays for me."

Would that be true for you and your job?

2. Why have many church leaders and most Christian magazines expressed their opinion about the Harry Potter novels but completely ignored the literary content of the entire GCSE and A level syllabuses?

3. Why have 50% of evangelicals never heard a sermon on work?

4. Why is this statement from a former senior leader in a large student ministry true?

"I could practically guarantee that you could go into any Christian Union in Britain and not find a single student who could give you a Biblical perspective on the subject they are studying to degree level."

5. Why do we set a lower educational standard for the way we teach kids in our churches than the standard set in the school room?

The answer to all these questions is SSD Syndrome. And it is, I believe, the greatest cultural challenge facing the church.

SSD Syndrome pervades the whole church. And pretty much everyone I know has had it and is a carrier. I've had it. And I struggle against it all the time.

SSD is the sacred-secular divide: the pervasive belief that some parts of our life are not really important to God - work, school, leisure - but anything to do with prayer, church services, church-based activities is.

It is because of the sacred-secular divide that over 50% of evangelicals have never heard a sermon on work. It is because of the sacred-secular divide that the vast majority of Christians in every denomination do not feel they get any significant support for their work from the teaching, preaching, prayer, worship, pastoral, group aspects of local church life. No support for how they spend 60 - 70% of their lives. Work is part of the secular world - not really part of what God intended for every human on the planet. The real 'work' gets done at church or in the neighbourhood.

It is because of the sacred-secular divide that there's hardly a child or adult or youth-worker who could give you a Biblical perspective on Maths, even though every child in the land spends an hour a day on Maths for at least 11 years.

Doesn't Maths teach us something about the rationality of God, about a God for whom truth and accuracy are important? You can't just treat that equals sign as a relativist conjuring trick. "Well," you hear the relativist intone, "If your belief that $2+2 = 4$ works for you, that's great. As long as it makes you happy. But it's not for me. As for me and my house, we think it equals 2.175."

Doesn't Maths give us a window into concepts like infinity and even the Trinity? 1 plus 1 plus 1 equals 3 . It's impossible to explain the Trinity using addition. But use multiplication - $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 3$ - and we can begin to glimpse how three entities might relate to each another and be One while still being three. And if it's true that there's hardly a child or a youth-worker in Britain who could begin to think Christianly about Maths, it's probably also true for history and geography and pretty much every subject, except creation. Now contrast that with the brilliant work that so many youth-workers do on 'culture' - films, songs, ads, etc. Of course, that's positive but it reflects a primary focus on leisure-time activities. And that's why Christian leaders have thought long and hard about the Harry Potter novels. It's entirely appropriate to consider whether this is literature that is or is not beneficial to our children, (If you're interested see www.licc.org.uk under Articles), but not about the literature our kids study at GCSE? What about its values? And GCSE material is, of course, not just stuff they read briskly and voraciously with torches under their bedclothes. This is material that they have to study and write essays about, and learn quotes from. Are our kids at all equipped to think Christianly about DH Lawrence's view of free love? Or to deal with Samuel Beckett's atheism, or Camus' pessimistic humanism/existentialism?

Of course, there are several Christian agencies encouraging us to do just that but there is hardly a book on the market - and our researcher has examined almost all of them - that helps youth-workers deal with the national curriculum. Or better still, encourages them to find Christian teachers who can help them do so.

In sum, we teach our kids very young that what they do between 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, is not important to God. And we also teach them that their minds don't really matter to God either. So it was that the national leader of an evangelistic ministry said, "We teach gentle Jesus, meek and mild to teenagers in church. Meanwhile in

the world they're studying nuclear physics." That's SSD - setting a lower standard of educational expectation for church teaching than for school, treating adolescents like kids, communicating to them that thinking matters in the world but not in the church. That's SSD, treating church time as if it we are primarily in an entertainment environment, rather than in a vigorous, worshipful, learning environment?

Sacred-Secular Divide Syndrome leads us to believe that really holy people become missionaries, moderately holy people become ministers and people who are not much use to God get a job. Bah humbug.

Sacred-Secular Divide Syndrome leads to people in home groups praying through the prayer letters of overseas missionaries and lifting the names of potential converts to the throne of grace but not knowing the name of the boss of anyone in their home group, never mind praying for them.

A while back I did some research on preaching. I asked people in congregations what they thought about the sermons. Interestingly, no such research had ever been published. (You can find the report on www.licc.org.uk under Articles) The results were sobering. 47% of evangelicals said that the preaching they received week by week was totally irrelevant to their daily lives. And they also said that the teaching and preaching was less relevant to home and work issues than church and personal spirituality:

Helpfulness by area (0-4 scale)

Personal/Spiritual 2.57

Church 2.12

Home 1.83

Work 1.68

Another way of looking at the data is to say that the preaching and teaching was least relevant where people spent most time - at work and at home.

How can it be that the people of the Book, the people of the God of all creation are actually least well equipped to live Christianly where they spend most of their time?

Sociological analyses abound - our communities are more fragmented, we spend less time together, we work far away from where we live, most people don't know the names of their neighbours - we simply know each other less well. And the same applies to the pastoral ministry. It is very much harder to pick up on the texture of people's everyday lives than it used to be.

But we can't simply blame the dynamics of everyday life. Isn't our theology strong enough and agile enough to respond to changing trends? In reality, the church has for most of its history, and certainly since Augustine, been beset by a Greek-influenced view of the world. For the Greeks, the world of matter didn't matter. What mattered was 'spirit.' So work, labour, business, wealth creation, food, sex and so on were irrelevant compared to the world of the Spirit. This view ignored the thrust of Biblical thinking which affirms the material world as God-created, affirms the body as

God-created, affirms haute cuisine as a gift from God, and the pleasure of sex as a joy from him, reminds us that Jesus had a body and does still, and promises that eternal life includes a new body, and involves a new earth, as well as a new heaven. Holiness, far from being something ethereal and otherworldly, manifest itself in just weights and measures, in taking reasonable precautions that people do not fall off your roof, in feeding the poor - in doing all to the glory of God.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the majority of Christians in the West do not know that their work and school could be a context for fruitful witness and ministry. It is not an exaggeration to say that the majority of people in the West do not know that their workplace is the key to social transformation, as well as to the conversion of the lost. If we want better schools, we will have to look to educationalists to help us; if we want justice, we will have to look to lawyers and the police; if we want trust in business, we had better start where we work. The reason most people do not live this and have not been taught it is SSD Syndrome. It applies to most of us and to the thrust of much theological education in Britain in the 20th Century. And in some cases still does. Theological educators teach what they can teach. They teach what they know, not what they don't know. And certainly this doesn't undercut the enormous contribution Colleges have been made but it is true that for the most part, the leaders that were trained in the 20th were, for the most part, beset by the sacred secular divide and were not given a model of pastoral ministry that included supporting the workers at work, or the schoolkids at school, or releasing people into their ministry wherever they found themselves.

This is why SSD is the greatest cultural challenge facing the Church.

SSD blinds us to the deep consideration of the implications of where we actually spend our time. And with whom. It blinds us from seeing our co-workers the way God does - from recognising that a manager may 'pastor' more people in a day than a pastor, that a doctor may face more ethical decisions in a day than a minister, that a 14 year-old school kid may have more opportunities to share Jesus in a day than a YFC evangelist. It blinkers us into believing that the place to please God and minister to and for Him is only in the local body of Christ.

God is the God of all of life. And Christ claims all of our lives - our life at work and our life in the neighbourhood.

If we want to know the joy of whole life Christianity the powerful addictive hallucinogen of SSD must be purged from our bloodstream.

If we want to see the West won for Christ, SSD must be expunged from every thought and prayer. After all, most of our interactions with the 92.5% of people who don't know Jesus occur on the secular side of the great divide - the side that we and our communities rarely pray for, or consider vital to God.

These are not original ideas, but history shows that they are very difficult to live out. SSD is easier to diagnose than to cure. History suggests we will fail. Let's prove history wrong. To the glory of the Lord of all of life.