

Tuckingmill Baptist Church, Camborne



October 2020

I know it might sound awfully big-headed, but over the last 20 years I've kept a list (and copies, all electronic, of course) of pretty much every sermon or study I've prepared.

Not that I think someone needs these superb masterpieces to be collated, edited and published by some dotting disciple after I'm no longer around, but simply so that I have these as a resource to draw on if ever something gets sprung on me at short notice.

Just occasionally I will need to trawl back through my Master Table of titles and Bible passages - most usually for school assembly talks that can be safely recycled every four years. But I am reminded, at such times, of sermon series now long gone in the past. Some of them long gone, nearly totally (and possibly even best) forgotten, I have to say. But there are a few that have particularly lingered in the mind. One that Jenny and I quite often

remind one another of is a series a decade back from Ecclesiastes.

Not that we can really remember much in the way of details, even so. But one of those key themes of the book has very definitely lodged in our memories. That word *vanity*. "Vanity of vanities", you might remember, the Preacher's opening (and repeated) salvo.

A tricky word to translate. It goes beyond our single English word "meaningless" or "empty". The original probably includes nuances of "brief" and "frustrating". And that last meaning, the "frustration" as-



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pect, has been such a useful principle to factor into our thinking - and to remind each other of.

In this world (“under the sun”), we must always be prepared for frustrations.

There will be very few perfect moments.

The “perfect sunset” over the sea may not just be spoiled by that low bank of cloud on the distant horizon, but by plastic bottles washed up on the beach ahead of you, or the unmentionable deposit of a vagrant seagull that just happened to fly overhead.

The best-decorated room will slowly succumb to the knocks and bumps of everyday life, or the fading of the paint.



The finally perfectly weeded garden will sprout them again.

The snazzy new car on your drive, the envy of your neighbours, eventually becomes just another old jalopy.

But that’s not the worst of it. It is not just inevitable decay, but things going wrong when, we feel, they just *shouldn’t*. Is there ever a good time for the car, the washing machine or the central heating to break down? The traffic jam on the A30? The rain on the barbecue?

The Virus that puts every 2020 holiday plan, and probably a good few well into 2021, on hold?

It’s not as if we ourselves at home don’t feel the frustration of such events. But we really have, surprisingly often, just looked at each other and spoken the name of that Old Testament book. *It’s just Ecclesiastes again, Pete!*

It does inject a bit of British wry humour into the moment, but I think it goes a whole lot further than that. I think it injects a bit of Biblical realism into everyday life. If we read our Bibles with care, we can see it clearly there. If we listen, we can hear this dark chord underlying the whole symphony of life:

For the creation was subjected to futility, ... its bondage to corruption ... For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

(Romans 8:20-22)

There’s far worse afoot than simply our day-to-day annoyances. There is something far more profoundly out of kilter than trains running late and engineers not turning up for appointments.

So we would be fools to rant about how terribly unfair it is that so many of our plans for this year have been booted into the long grass, many, undoubtedly, never to return. “That’s life”, we could just say. Life “under the sun”: exactly what we are told to expect by the Word of God .

But there is one more arena in which we really should apply this truth, too: the church.

People have such ridiculously high ideals about what to expect from a church.

Of course, believers in Jesus are called upon to live exemplary lives. It's not just a higher-level lifestyle for the super-spiritual. It's for every one of us. Things like

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ...
(Colossians 3:8-9)

And yet we've probably all seen times when Christians have fallen well short of those standards.



We might even have done so ourselves.

And yet, if we are on the receiving end of such misbehaviour, it is all too easy for us to run off complaining that we have been so hurt, so let down by those so-called Christians!!

I wonder how many houses in this land are occupied by people

who harbour some kind of grudge because of how *they* (or someone they know of) were treated by someone in *that church*.

Yes, of course, we sin. We do hurt one another. Tempers fray, and words are spoken. Promises are forgotten. We are not always treated as we would like to be treated. It's not right. And I'm not trying to say that we should too easily tolerate a lifestyle that falls way beyond the Scriptural expectations.

But ... but also, the other side of the coin. We should go into church (into *membership* of a church, even) *expecting* to be treated in these ways. We are *all* equally fallen human beings, still *in the process of* being changed into the likeness of Christ. You are not there yet. I am not there yet. Nor is anybody else in this church. So what are we to expect? Perfect treatment?

One thing we *do* get from this is practice in the grace of forgiving. Perhaps people who go off in a huff of self-righteous *I shouldn't be treated this way!!* are dodging a difficult but important lesson in Christ-likeness. *He* didn't deserve to be treated that way, either. Was there ever a person who *less* deserved ill-treatment? Yet *he* did not storm off in fury.

And ... *Ecclesiastes*. Expect a fair old dose of frustration, rather than everything running perfectly smoothly, and everything perfectly to our taste.

We are probably due another dose of Ecclesiastes soon, as we try to start getting back into church after six months of settling into a now reasonably comfortable pattern of online church.

It's going to be no fun at all sitting wearing masks, muttering songs under our breath, being sent home in order (dismissed a row at a time, like school children leaving Assembly) ... having to wipe our seats down before we leave ... and not even a hot drink or a single biscuit to the



good before we exit, socially distanced, to the car park.

Folks, it's 2020. And it will probably be a good chunk of 2021, too. It's life. It's Ecclesiastes.

But haven't we always been promised that the best - the perfect, the incorruptible, *the Ecclesiastes-proof* ... that the best is yet to come, wherever and whenever that place is that our Lord Jesus Christ has gone on ahead to prepare.

Peter Ham

You can contact Peter Ham, TRBC's pastor, by phone on (01209) 212442 or (07818) 078135. You can also e-mail peter.ham@live.co.uk,

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Hybrid Zoom meetings - "online church":
 maintaining the times we have become used to over the previous months,
 but hopefully with *some* people able to meet at the chapel
 Sundays: 10.30 and 6.30
 Thursdays 7.00 ... or possibly back to 7.30

	10.30 a.m.	6.30 p.m. (cafe church)
11 th October	Matthew 17:14-27 <i>at the chapel?</i>	following on from a.m.
18 th October	Matthew 18:1-14	following on from a.m.
25 th October	Matthew 18:15-20	following on from a.m.
1 st November	Matthew 18:21-35	following on from a.m.

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When They Ask “Does Christianity Work?”

one of Lee Strobel's contributions at the *Bible Gateway*

I was talking with a Christian leader from a large Midwestern university, and he was telling me about how students have changed in the last few decades. “Kids these days aren’t asking ‘What’s true?’” he said. “That’s what college kids asked in the ‘60s. Today, kids are asking, ‘What can help me deal with my pain?’ It seems as though every kid I disciple comes from a dysfunctional family, and he’s trying to process his pain.”

The nature of these questions is evolving over time. For many, especially the younger generation, truth isn’t an issue because they have become convinced that all religious viewpoints are equally valid. It’s the old, “You have your truth and I have mine.”



We need to help unchurched friends understand the absolute and unchanging truth of Christ, but we should also explain how Christ is available to help them in practical ways to heal their hurts and help them deal with everyday living. We need to communicate that Christianity isn’t just for the tomorrow of their eternity but also for the today of their lives.

I’ve discussed this at length with Martin Robinson, an astute observer of the British religious scene. He recently made this observation about Britain, although it’s certainly germane to the U.S.:

At one time the most important question in our society was, “Is this true?” That is the question that most Christian apologetics are designed to cover. “Is it true that Jesus rose from the dead?” “Is the Bible accurate?” and so on. However, the impact of secularism is such that many no longer ask that question in the field of morals and faith.

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It is assumed that since all faith and morality are firmly in the area of opinion and that all opinions are equally valid, the only thing that really matters is whether or not they work: “Does it work?” is the question that arises again and again. Never mind if the suggested formula is derived from Hinduism, Buddhism, the occult, or Christianity — the main question asked is, “Does it work?”

Our challenge, then, is to help this new generation of unchurched friends understand that Christianity does work, that is, that the God of the Bible offers us supernatural wisdom and assistance in our struggles, difficulties, and recovery from past hurts.

But we need to communicate that the reason it works is because it's true. Because Christ, at a point in history, had the power to overcome the grave, we can have access to that same kind of supernatural power to cope with the difficulties that face us day to day. And because the Bible is God's revelation to His people, it contains a kind of practical and effective help that's unmatched by mere human philosophers.



So Christians need to continue to marshal the historic, archaeological, prophetic, and other evidence that Jesus is the one and only Son of God. But we shouldn't stop there. We should be ready to go the next step and tell our unchurched friends that because that's true, there are meaningful implications for their lives today — for their marriages, their friendships, their careers, their recovery from past pain, and so on.

Does it matter who wrote the songs we sing? What makes a song source “questionable?”

Bob Kauflin, in his blog *Worship Matters*

Songs can be from “questionable” sources in at least three ways:

1. It's recently come to light publicly that the composer of a song is living or has been living in unrepentant sin.
2. A composer is part of a denomination that teaches what you consider a distortion of the gospel.
3. The song springs from a church or ministry that has theology or practices you think are unbiblical.

Interestingly, I've visited websites and blogs that view Sovereign Grace Music as one of those “questionable sources,” usually because we're continuationist, Reformed, or use contemporary music styles.

So whatever your reasons for questioning the origins of a song, here are some thoughts.

Let me start with some general observations.

First, to dismiss this conversation as irrelevant, petty, or unnecessary (e.g., “Who are you to question my sincerity?”), fails to appreciate the diverse and deep ways songs affect our thoughts and emotions. It also minimizes the importance Scripture gives to singing (Ephesians 5:18-20; Colossians 3:16-17). To say, “It doesn’t matter who writes the songs we sing,” isn’t helpful, because it does matter to many people. In fact, I’m asked this question more than any other. By a long shot.

Second, exercising discernment isn’t the same thing as sinful judgment. Our culture often wrongly equates disagreement with disdain and insists that to make distinctions is to be condescending. But God tells us in Scripture to judge rightly, distinguish between those who should hear our message and who shouldn’t, be able to discern who a fool is, avoid people who cause divisions, and know the difference between sheep and wolves in sheep’s clothing (John 7:24; Matthew 7:6,15; Proverbs 13:20; Romans 16:17).

Third, singing a song from a questionable source doesn’t mean your church is racing down a path of heresy, worldliness, or sin. We want to avoid “demonizing” songs or composers, expecting Satan himself to be unleashed in our congregation if we sing that song. God can bring forth biblically faithful songs from a variety of sources, and he can work through them in spite of their origins.

Fourth, choosing not to use songs from a particular church, ministry, or individual doesn’t give us the right to unilaterally criticize everything that is associated with those songs or other churches who sing them. Song choices should be the result of pastoral choices made within the context of a local church. God has often glorified his name and worked in people’s lives through songs whose origins we might find suspect or disagree with. Jesus is too great, glorious, and generous to give the best songs only to people who look and think exactly like us.

Fifth, I’m not calling out ministries and people by name nor trying to establish universal rules that everyone should follow. I’m suggesting ways to think through this issue biblically to serve our local churches and honor God.

With those caveats, here are some thoughts about using songs from questionable sources.

1. Edification involves minimizing distractions.

1 Corinthians 14 makes it clear that when we gather as the church God wants us to do what edifies, or builds up, those around us (1 Corinthians 14:1, 3, 5, 12, 17, 26). Mutual edification brings God glory. If I lead a song that tempts a large part of my congregation to be distracted by the sins of the person who wrote it or the theology of the ministry it originates from, that’s not edifying. So if a songwriter/artist publicly announces they’re living in unrepentant sin or it’s discovered that they have been, it might be wise to set their songs aside for a season. Yes, God is gracious and we’re all imperfect people, but he also calls us to live holy lives (Hebrews 12:14; Titus 2:11-12). And if removing one artist’s or church’s songs from your repertoire for a time leaves you with only a handful of songs, it’s a great opportunity to start drawing from more sources.



2. Choose songs to teach theology, not simply avoid heresy.

At the recent Together for the Gospel conference Al Mohler encouraged us to aim for a higher standard in our songs than “avoiding heresy.” Our songs should help people think and act biblically. A song from a questionable source might seem “pretty good,” but that’s a low bar. The practices, emphases, or teachings of churches are often reflected in the songs that emerge from them. If your church sings 4-5 songs each week, that’s only 200-250 songs in a year, and many of these are repeated. Choose them wisely.

3. Using only one song from a ministry/writer also makes a statement.

When a ministry puts out dozens, if not hundreds, of songs, and you only sing one or two of them, you’re communicating intentionality. You’re saying you’ve chosen this song for its content and not for its associations. You’re expressing gratefulness for any solid, biblically faithful song that enables the word of Christ to dwell in people richly.

4. Develop a culture that appreciates lyrical content over a brand name.

Leaders are often concerned that singing one song will lead people in their congregation to YouTube or a website to hear more songs from the ministry/person. But if the people in your church know you choose songs based on their theology and not their popularity, it won’t be as much of an issue. Doing one song by an artist or ministry doesn’t necessarily mean you endorse everything about them, just as using a quote from a writer you don’t completely agree with doesn’t mean you commend their entire theological perspective.

5. Incorporate more old songs into your repertoire.



We can minimize the problem of who writes our songs by singing songs that have stood the test of time and are known more for their content than their composers. By the end of his life, Horatio Spafford had come to deny hell, affirm purgatory, and teach universalism. Yet God has used his song, *It is Well with My Soul*, to encourage hundreds of thousands of Christians in the midst of suffering. The same can be said of William Cowper, author of *God Moves in a*

Mysterious Way, who endured severe bouts of depression and tried to commit suicide at least three times. Since the composers are no longer living, older songs don’t run the risk of suddenly becoming questionable.

Bottom line, if you find a song that communicates biblical truth in a clear, uncompromising, beautiful, singable way, and your congregation is trained to value truth over popularity, you’re probably in a position to benefit from it. If you’re unsure, you’ve got plenty of other songs to choose from.

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