

# 1. THE CHALLENGE

Church membership has declined in Great Britain from 10.6 million in 1930 to 5.5 million in 2010. As a percentage of the population this represents a fall from about 30% to 11.2%. By 2013, this had declined further to 5.4 million (10.3%). If current trends continue, membership will fall to 8.4% of the population by 2025.<sup>1</sup> The churches that have bucked this trend have been those describing themselves as evangelical or charismatic. Surveys have shown that up to 97% of English people are disillusioned with church. Church attendance has been dropping since 1851 when 60% of those over fifteen years of age attended church. Since the 1960s this fall has become more rapid. Religious education in schools is now at a low ebb. Between 1998 and 2005 there was a 15% drop in those attending church each week, from 7.5% to 6.3% of adults. A survey in 2018 disclosed that 70% of those aged between eighteen and twenty-four said they had no religion.<sup>2</sup>

This has all resulted in a spiritual vacuum. Today few people believe in a cause that they would be willing to die for. Yet when I ask my patients with cancer if they have a faith that helps them, all too often they reply, 'I wish I had.'

A group of senior Christians met in London to plan a book on the subject of 'Caring Christians'. One member of the committee noted that evangelism, the sharing of the Christian faith, was not included in the list of caring activities. The comments of two ordained people were striking:

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1 <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html> Last accessed March 2020.

2 <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2018/september/church-of-england-numbers-at-record-low/> Last accessed March 2020.

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‘Evangelism is divisive, not caring!’

‘God is a God of love – everyone in the end will be with God, won’t they?’

In contrast, Jesus and His apostles certainly taught that sharing the Christian good news is one of the most caring things we can do for other people. Jesus taught, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life’ (John 3:16).

It is because God loves and cares for us that Jesus came, so how can it be unloving to share this news with others? This is particularly true when we realise the eternal consequences that the decision about Jesus brings. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, recognised that there were too few people who are passionate to serve Christ:

Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.<sup>3</sup>

When Paul was on his second missionary journey, he had travelled across what is now Turkey and had arrived in the city of Troas that used to be called Troy. The night they arrived there, Paul had a vivid dream. He saw a man from Macedonia standing up and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ The reaction of that small Christian band was striking. They concluded that God had called them ‘to preach the gospel to them’. It really is of the greatest help for people to understand the Christian gospel, and it is this that has motivated Christians to keep sharing the facts about Jesus so that others can learn about Him and come to put their trust in Him.

Jesus taught that one effect of being a Christian will be a desire to share the good news of forgiveness with others. “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive’ (John 7:38-39). Archbishop William Temple commented that no one can possess (or rather, be indwelt by the Spirit

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3 W. I. Duewel, *Ablaze for God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), p. 107.

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of God) and keep that Spirit to himself. Where the Spirit is, He flows forth; if there is no flowing forth, He is not there.

This work is urgent. Jesus told His disciples, just before He miraculously healed a blind man, 'As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work' (John 9:4).

C. T. Studd was a brilliant cricketer who played for England against Australia in 1882. He became one of the Cambridge Seven who went as missionaries to China. He enjoyed writing short poignant poems such as:

Some want to live within the sound  
Of church or chapel bell;  
I want to run a rescue shop  
Within a yard of hell.

or

Only one life, will soon be past.  
Only what's done for Christ will last.

It was the following article, written by an atheist, that spurred C. T. Studd on to an all-out commitment to serve Jesus Christ.

If I firmly believed, as millions say they do, that the knowledge and practice of religion in this life influences destiny in another, then religion would mean to me everything. I would cast away earthly enjoyments as dross, earthly cares as follies, and earthly thoughts and feelings as vanity. Religion would be my first waking thought, and my last image before sleep sank me into unconsciousness. I should labour in its cause alone. I would take thought for the morrow of eternity alone. I would esteem one soul gained for heaven worth a life of suffering. Earthly consequences would never stay my hand, or seal my lips. I would strive to look upon eternity alone, and on the immortal souls around me, soon to be everlastingly happy or everlastingly miserable. I would go forth to the world and preach to it in season and out of season, and my

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text would be, 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul.'<sup>4</sup>

The demise of the Christian faith in the West has been compared to the sinking of the *Titanic* when it struck an iceberg and sank in 1912, with the resulting death of 1,500 lives.<sup>5</sup> There were four factors that increased the extent of that tragedy, these are closely related to the problems of the church.

1. The desperate shortage of lifeboats. Many more gospel teaching churches caring for different communities are needed.
2. A woeful lack of lifeboat training for the crew. We desperately need to train Christians how to share their faith more effectively.
3. A wicked neglect of the needs of the less privileged who were locked in the lower decks while the rich boarded the lifeboats. We need churches and groups for all communities.
4. A shocking lack of compassion among the passengers in the half-empty lifeboats. These hovered around the mass of desperate people drowning in the icy waters, unwilling to go back for fear of being overwhelmed. They waited until the screaming stopped and returned to collect the bodies. Similarly, too many half-empty satisfied churches are neglecting to meet the desperate spiritual needs of those around them.

The Lord Jesus was very concerned for the spiritual need of people and His priority was to train His disciples so that they could address these needs. He calls His people to be both faithful and fruitful, they cannot be separated.

Although the sinking of the *Titanic* was a massive disaster there was at least one triumph. The Rev. John Harper, a Scottish minister, had been asked to become the minister of the famous Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. He travelled on the maiden voyage of this supposedly unsinkable ship. When the *Titanic* struck an iceberg, Harper was one of the many who found themselves in the icy Atlantic

4 Norman Grubb, *C. T. Studd*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957) p. 36.

5 Told by Richard Coekin in *The Reluctant Evangelist* (London: The Good Book Company, 2018) p. 14.

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waters. What happened next was recounted later by another young Scotsman who also found himself in the water.

Four years ago I left England on board the Titanic. I was a careless, godless sinner. I was in this condition on the night when the terrible catastrophe took place. Very soon, with hundreds more, I found myself struggling in the cold, dark waters of the Atlantic. I caught hold of something and clung to it for dear life.

The wail of awful distress from the perishing all around us was ringing in my ears, when there floated near me a man who, too, seemed to be clinging to something. He called to me:

‘Is your soul saved?’

I replied: ‘No, it is not.’

‘Then,’ said he, ‘believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.’

We drifted apart for a few minutes, then we seemed to be driven together once more.

‘Is your soul saved?’ again he cried out.

‘I fear it is not.’ I replied.

‘Then if you will but believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, your soul will be saved,’ was his further message of intense appeal to me.

But again we were separated by the rolling currents. I heard him call out the message to others as they sank beneath the waters.

There and then, with two miles of water beneath me, in my desperation I cried unto Christ to save me. I believed upon him and I was saved. In a few minutes I heard this man of God say: ‘I’m going down, I’m going down,’ then: ‘No, no, I’m going up.’ That man was John Harper.<sup>6</sup>

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6 <http://koenig.lutheranmissions.org/gain-win-save-from-the-field-august-16-2017/>  
Last accessed March 2020.