

Words of Encouragement, Sept 23rd 2015

An 'Encouragement' weekly email from Bill Armstrong. Anyone wishing to add their name to the distribution list needs to advise Bill on billdparmstrong@gmail.com of their email address. Or if you already receive it and wish to have your name removed from the distribution list, please let me know. Bill

Christians don't have to live their lives on the basis of 'might-have' or 'if-only' because 'living in Christ,' the best-we-can is more than adequate.

Involvement in God's concern for the world. Many who push hard for advancement in their chosen career have moments of misgivings. For while their chosen career probably brings with it rewards, it also brings frustrations and disappointments. And at a deeper level there lurks the question: *'Is there room for service to others in my life, or is this all just about me, my identity, and my needs?'* We are part of a society that puts great emphasis on what it calls 'success' and so our concern for our career tends to make us blind and deaf to the needs of 'others', even family 'others'.

The challenge, however, may not be to change our career into some vocation, but to change our career professionalism mindset into one of genuine service, support and encouragement of others. Why? Because at the heart of professionalism lies a rigid conformity to a particular ethos (usually selfishness) which dictates our mode of operation, our commitment to self-interest and personal privilege. However, if we are prepared to embrace a mindset that takes us beyond such narrow constricting boundaries and open ourselves to honest real concern for others, then our career can naturally lift us into what is generally referred to as a vocation. Living with such positive unselfish values, our career will become increasingly valuable, more meaningful and satisfying than mere career success can ever bring us. *"Let me live so I can praise you, and may your regulations help me."* Psalm 119:175

Who are we really? Any hope that nations will accept the ethics of Jesus, disarm and live like Christian 'family' are meant to live, is utterly unrealistic and naive. Why? Because, firstly, the teachings of Jesus were never intended for the nations of the world. Jesus Christ sent **his followers** out into the world to make and baptise 'disciples'. These 'disciples' were to be taught to know and live according to the commandments of Jesus Christ. However, in contrast to Christ's clear instructions, how much effort, in contrast to lip service, actually goes into encouraging Christians (disciples) to marinate themselves in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ so they clearly understand exactly what it was that Jesus Christ taught and lived? For what purpose? So that we would do likewise!

The sad reality is that in today's 'church', right across the spectrum, far more effort goes into producing 'good' 'church' followers than 'set free' disciples of Jesus Christ. A Lenny Bruce said recently that *'People are leaving the churches and returning to God.'* Ouch! Is that is one important reason for the drop-off in church attendance! Many a church's motivation for what they do comes from a hope of keeping 'bums on their seats', so they can be regarded as 'successful'! Many a churches claim to numerical 'growth' is actually transfer growth from multiple other small churches. More transparent honesty from 'successful' churches about this would be refreshing!

Jesus' ministry is to the 'all' of our suburb's/town/city/nation/world, a ministry that is the responsibility of **all** Christians. Yet a responsibility that at best, frequently comes a long way down a church's list of priorities! Could it be that our failure to be encouraging, training and setting free Christians to live as Christians in workplaces, schools, neighbourhoods, etc, is the #1 reason for today's shrinking Christian Church in Australia? So! Who gains from a church's short-sighted, futile attempt to keep its people corralled and within its control? I challenge you say the answer out loud for yourself and others to hear!

I recently visited the Brisbane Seafarers Centre operated by The Mission To Seafarers. What a genuine exciting Christ centred ministry they are involved in directly to ships crew from many different nations. They show the love of Christ in many different ways to people who come to them!! Yet, they struggle for funds, and maybe more importantly, for practical help from Christians. It struck me as ironic that in a city that has thousands of 'church-goers' they find it so difficult to find Christians with a heart to serve Jesus in reaching out with His love to 'others' from many nations, 'others' called seamen! And each one with a family back in a home country, one we would arrogantly refer to as a 'non-Christian nation'. But isn't reaching out to such people at the core of what living the Christian faith is meant to be all about? If we ignore such people isn't our claim to be 'Christians', comprising 'Christian' churches, in a 'Christian' nation somewhat hollow? The Brisbane Seafarers Centre even struggles to source appropriate copies of the New Testament for seamen who actually want one to read! Is there something fundamentally spiritually lacking in us if continue to ignore this need? If you agree and want to talk about what you might be able to help with, please contact the Brisbane Seafarers Centre on 07-3895 1181 or www.mtsbrisbane.org.au. Claiming to be 'Christian' never mind 'missionary' while ignoring those who visit our doorstep says something loud and clear about us! Yes?
Bill

.....
.....
.....
.....

Why pray? We pray because God loves us! Even if we feel that no one else does - God does! God not only loves us but acts on our behalf. Karl Barth wrote: 'He is not deaf, he listens; more than that, he acts. He does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. The fact that God yields to human petitions, changing his intentions in

response to human prayer, is not a sign of weakness. God himself, in the glory of his majesty and power, has so willed it.' *Father God, it sure is very good news that you love me. Help me, I pray, to sense You deep within my soul. Let the reality of Your love embrace me and empower me to do Your will.* Bill

Lewis Smedes wrote: 'Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then in that, you are like God.'

[Lewes Smedes, 'Keeping Promises,' *Preaching Today.com*, 2004]

Women in the History of Christianity: Generally, women have not fared well in the long history of Christianity. They have been, and in some cases, continue to be viewed by some men with eyes shaped by patriarchy, and seen as temptresses and seductresses in the light of a misreading of the biblical story. While in much of the modern world women have gained full equality, discrimination against them still continues, including in religions and tragically even in certain sections of the contemporary Christian church.

What has sadly been forgotten by many male Christians is the liberating attitude of Jesus towards women, the flashes of insight regarding women in the Pauline writings, the role of women in monasticism, and the Christian women in the Middle Ages who counselled emperors and popes. One such wise woman was Hildegard of Bingen. On the issue of women she makes an important theological point. She wrote, *'The Devil at first conquered Man through the woman, but God at last crushed the Devil through the woman who bore the Son of God.'*

Here lies a basis for a positive view of women in history and in the life of Christianity today. To this could be added that both women and men equally bear the image of God and that God's redemptive work in Christ has made men and women free in the grace of Christ beyond all the distinctions that create hierarchy and inequality. Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes the icon of all women who in Christ seek to be obedient to God's strange call and seek to be fruitful in love and service. Women bring forth not only new generations, but fruitfulness in family, church, and work. Maybe if all Christians openly lived this truth we would have a greater influence against the shocking prevalence of violence against women (and children) in society today! Yes, even found within Christian churches, and among some in leadership! Negative attitudes, and words, as well as physical violence against women have no place in a male Christians life! Absolutely NONE! I suggest that the failure of

Christian men to live this in every aspect of their lives is compromising their influence as Christians in society. And of particular contempt are those Christian males who publicly claim the high ground in this matter but who in practice, and often behind backs, denigrate and undermine others on the basis of their gender. Isn't it time to be building up all fellow Christians in ways the Scriptures command?

Adapted by Bill from the reading for 3rd Sept. in 'Hear the Ancient Wisdom' by Charles R. Ringma, Cascade Books, 2013 ISBN 13:978-1-62032-772-2

Please take the initiative and forward all or part of the above on to others you think may find it encouraging. Building others up 'in Christ' can never be overdone as we live in a generally negative dualistic society, even within the Christian Church. God bless you. Bill