



A long obedience in the same direction: A response to Malcolm Round

Jim Purves

Baptist Union of Scotland

Malcolm Round's seminar presents the man as he is: an enthusiastic and charismatic personality, full of passion and vision for reaching out to others that they might come to know Jesus. His emphasis lies on unashamedly expositional preaching, the practice of evangelism and encouraging people into a direct, experiential awareness and experience of the 'Father heart' of God. So, what can we learn from Malcolm?

Firstly, there is undoubtedly a prioritising of preaching, as a means of expounding the contextual message of the Scriptures and applying this into the lives of the congregation. Here, we are speaking of more than homilies on moral and ethical propriety, or propositional certitudes. Rather, a confidence in the canonical integrity of the text of the Bible and the propriety of translating its message into a local, pastoral context. Confidence in preaching and its place at the centre of ecclesial life is a feature of Malcolm Round's ministry.

Secondly, Malcolm expresses a prioritising of evangelism as a plain sharing of the message of Jesus with people. In telling of how a new church-plant extension is presently being pursued in nearby Livingston, he stressed the importance of door-to-door visitation and other means of directly meeting people with the message of Jesus. At a time when 'holistic' and 'integrated' mission are commonly cited as a proper and more effective way of carrying the good news of Jesus and the kingdom of God to people, it was refreshing to be reminded that church growth is more commonly experienced where there is no embarrassment or reticence in carrying the message of Jesus to others.

The third, highly significant, emphasis that Malcolm brought was a stress on ‘right feeling’ in our relationship with God: that is, a direct, unmediated experience and assurance of the love and life of God, met with us, in person. Here, we need to see that this is a man who emphasises *orthopathos* – a ‘right feeling’ – in terms of relationship to God, as much as he would stress a faith that expresses *orthodoxy*. In Malcolm, we evidenced a clarity of focus in ministry that has been energised by rediscovering, during a period of weariness, direct experiential encounter with God. The importance of this emphasis and stress on an experiential faith cannot be over-stressed. A vitality, understood as flowing from the present action and activity of the Holy Spirit in the person who looks to Jesus Christ as Lord, is understood as the means whereby a Christian might demonstrate and express, through interpersonal relationships with others, the love of God.

As the results of the most recent church census undertaken by Brierley Consultancy demonstrate, it is when this message is conveyed to people in a Pentecostal or charismatic context that the church experiences the most significant growth. In this regard, it is important to recognise that, for Malcolm and many others like him, an open, experimental approach to ministry and its constructive development is centred not on academic reading but on an openness towards an experiential spirituality; one that would motivate Malcolm to fly to Toronto, in Canada, to enjoy annual times of refreshing, experiential meetings with God.

Malcolm’s honest confession that he engages in very little reading of current theology underscores that where Pentecostalism – in all its many, variegated forms – is identifiably the driving force in much world mission (as well as in Scotland), there is a need to encourage further development of indigenous theologies that can better express how *orthopathos*, together with *orthopraxis*, might complement or even challenge our more traditional emphases on orthodox doctrine, sacramental and liturgical practices. Malcolm’s address offered two other areas of challenge.

Firstly, Malcolm did not give much mention to the multifaceted challenges of ‘church and culture’. There was no reflection, or thought given, to the challenges of post-modernity, or of relating to a ‘post-Christendom’ Scotland. Why not? Perhaps because, when it comes

to the essence of sharing faith and inviting people to enter into a personal, experiential faith, there is in Malcolm a confidence that this is the basis for everything else, leading to appropriate cultural and contextual expression. ‘Horse and cart’ thinking: get the proper things in place and all else will follow.

Secondly, Malcolm reminded us that good management practices, in the building and developing of personnel whose ministries can be coordinated as part of a church team, are a vital part of church development, as is a readiness to address structural modifications to the organisation of the local congregation, to manage and facilitate healthy and disciple-developing growth. Such skills, either latent or developed by trial and error in church leaders like Malcolm, might usefully be reflected on by those responsible for the training of ministerial candidates to see if these skills can and should be taught and be part of the formation of future leaders.