

Pastoral Letter April 2013

Zeal

On two separate occasions during his earthly ministry the Lord Jesus Christ cleansed the temple (John 2 and Matthew 21). The Lord's house, intended to be 'a house of prayer', had been turned into 'a den of robbers' by the money-changers and pigeon sellers. In reference to this 'cleansing' event the Old Testament prophecy of Psalm 69:9 is ascribed to Jesus: 'Zeal for your house will consume me' (John 2:17).

Zeal is a marked characteristic of Jesus: to maintain the honour of his Father, to accomplish the work the Father had given him to do, to secure eternal salvation for his people and to uphold truth and righteousness. Yet zeal is not to be a characteristic of Jesus alone. If we truly are Christians, if we belong to Christ and are found 'in him', then it is to be characteristic of us also. But what exactly is zeal?

The basic dictionary definition of zeal is as follows: 'great energy or enthusiasm for a cause or objective'. So far, so good; but much more needs to be said than that. For there can be misplaced zeal, zeal in ignorance, uncontrolled zeal and such like, none of which is ever commended in Scripture. The word itself speaks not of something thin, half-hearted or superficial. Rather it implies passion, fervency, ardour. It is born out of conviction and persuasion. It carries the sense of priority and urgency. So that is why it always needs to be channelled in the right direction, for the right cause, to the right end. And there is no such direction, cause or end to compare with the honour and glory of God.

How should true zeal manifest itself in the lives of Christians and churches? What will be some of its chief marks? Consider these. We must have:

- *zeal for God himself*: to know him – to worship him, glorify him, exalt him - to fear him, trust him, love him - to honour him, serve him, obey him – to please him in all things whatever the cost. He is our God, by grace and adoption, and our first and abiding responsibility in consequence is to be taken up with him, and long that everyone else would be taken up with him as well. This is a holy zeal which should 'consume' us!
- *zeal for truth*: believing, upholding, proclaiming and defending God's Word, the Bible, 'the Scripture of truth'. Both in private (in our hearts and homes) and in public (through preaching and living) this is to be so. This is a holy zeal which should 'consume' us!
- *zeal for holiness*: what a priority this should have with us, for our fundamental calling and obligation is to be holy, even as God is holy – set apart for him (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), daily becoming more like him, mortifying the flesh, sowing to the Spirit. This is a holy zeal which should 'consume' us!
- *zeal for prayer*: for this is the key way in which our relationship with God grows and is nourished – and zeal for prayer will be shown, not least, in zeal for the prayer meeting. No Christian can prosper without prayer; and neither can any church. This is a holy zeal which should 'consume' us!
- *zeal for the gospel*: this must be so! The gospel is good news of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners, supremely by his life, death and resurrection. God invites sinners – Christ welcomes sinners – the Holy Spirit draws sinners. But they need to be told! This is a holy zeal which should 'consume' us!
- *zeal for heaven*: for heaven is our home, where Jesus waits to welcome us. This, certainly, is a zeal which should 'consume' us!