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Editorial

Reading the newspapers over the past few months, it has been hard not to think that, at last, the chickens are coming home to roost. A generation has now gone by in which it was generally assumed that the Church would have to make itself 'relevant' to the younger generation if it was going to survive into the next century. In practice, this meant abandoning most of what could be called traditional styles of worship and exchanging long, expository sermons for short, snappy presentations whose appeal would not be lost on the lazy and uneducated.

The purveyors of this approach were never quite trendy enough to match the secular media, which always seemed to be just that much glitzier than their Christian imitators. Nevertheless, it was almost accepted as dogma in certain circles that, without jeans and a guitar, no-one would be won for the Lord. The seriousness which marked so much evangelistic work in the 1950s has all but disappeared, and it is now extremely difficult to find a church which consistently offers meaty sermons for mature Christians to digest.

Critics of these developments have long hinted that all the froth and bubble would evaporate one day, leaving precious little behind. We have perhaps not reached that point yet, but recent incidents may be highlighting the essential emptiness of this approach. The image of the trendy clergyman being accused of professional misconduct is not a pleasant one, and we must all sympathize with those who have been innocently caught up in media horrors of that kind. But at the same time, we ought to recognise that there is no smoke without fire, and that behind the various allegations and misjudgments there lies a fundamentally wrongheaded approach to evangelism.

Of course we must agree that the Church ought to be 'relevant' to the people to whom it is trying to speak. But relevance, in this context, is to be judged not by conformity to the charts, but by faithfulness to the Word of God – a very different matter. Relevance means talking about sin, about righteousness, and about judgment. It means facing human beings with the awful reality of what they are when they have rebelled against God, and where they are headed. It means pointing them to a Saviour who has taken our place on the Cross and offered up himself for us. Finally, it means challenging people to be serious about themselves and about the world in which they are called to live. We are not here to play games, or to indulge in dubious forms of entertainment. We are here to offer men and women

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the Gospel of salvation, praying that the Holy Spirit will use our feeble efforts to win them for Christ.

Too often the cult of youth means the cult of what is superficial, iconoclastic and temporary. Young people have a lot of enthusiasm, and are free to commit themselves in ways which are often much harder for their elders. But when the cost is small, the commitment is liable to be weak. Few young people are given to serious meditation on the weightier issues of life and death, even though they are as much affected by these as anyone else. Yet older people have too often allowed themselves to be persuaded that these basic realities need not be presented to a world which is dying for want of the Gospel. Rather, they seem to think that some good can be achieved by responding to every fad as it comes along, and by making the Church as user-friendly as possible. Hugging parishioners seems preferable to challenging them, with the result that the real problems may never even be mentioned, let alone tackled and dealt with.

Of course, we cannot simply go to the other extreme. It is true that people have sometimes been put off by what they perceive as unfriendliness and as lack of concern. It is also true that, as Christians, we are called to welcome everyone who comes into our midst. We must try to understand them as they are, and meet them in the needs that they have. Much of this may appear to be tedious or trivial to those who are highly focused on the need to win souls, and yet it is important, because it shows a genuine love and concern for others. All that is true, and we must never forget or even minimise it. Likewise, we must not ignore the needs of young people, and of those who are far removed from any kind of organised religion.

But when all is said and done, the essential thing is that we should not lose our grip on the Gospel itself. Christians bear the name of Christ, and it is he whom we are called to represent in the world. Salvation is free – but it is also very costly. That side of the message has not received its due in recent years, and the Church has been weakened as a result. Let us pray that our evangelists will remember what their primary duty is, and be prepared to be truly relevant – to the plight of a sinful and dying generation in desperate need of the Saviour.

GERALD BRAY

Irina Levinskaya, whose article The Autocracy of the Spirit appeared in our last issue, tells us it was translated by the Rev Malcolm Rogers and asks us to express her thanks for his help.