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## RESPONSE TO ANDREW ROLLINSON'S PAPER

JENNY STIRLING

Our congregation recently started Sunday evening Communion Services and we have been given the use of a beautiful sanctuary in the town, (the Town Hall where we usually gather being out of operation). One evening I shared a short Reflection from Luke 4:16-21 where Christ, in his hometown synagogue, reads the prophetic words from the scroll of Isaiah and then sits down and declares 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' As I was preparing the Reflection, I was struck anew by the significance of this Sacrament we were anticipating. Firstly, because we would be reading this scripture in the sanctuary, Christ was also present with us; one aspect of the Lord's Supper is the reminder of the Lord's presence with us. Secondly, that these same prophetic words of Good News and freedom were equally true for us today and, finally, that the mechanical action of going forward for Communion, in this strange season of pandemic, was reinforcing the posture with which each one of us comes to partake of the elements; before receiving the symbols of Christ's once-and-for-all death on the cross, people would be asked to *clean their hands* and *remove their masks* as they approached the Communion Table one-by-one.

Posture is a word which I have been dwelling on. Physiotherapists are forever reminding us to 'watch our posture' or we'll develop physical aches and pains or even mechanical misalignment. In the same way I believe we must guard our spiritual posture. The imaginary thread that holds us up from our sternal notch is akin to our spiritual alignment, never allowing us to forget for one moment what Proverbs 1 reminds us: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. As soon as we forget this, our posture slumps and we rely on our own power.

A Pastor friend of mine recently had to counsel a young student who had decided that the culture of the church she had been attending the previous year was one where she felt the power of the leadership in an unhealthy way. For transparency she approached the leadership to inform them of her decision and leaving was made difficult. Having been in student ministry for over 20 years, I've had to renounce my own tendency to think of people as 'my people'. I've had to guard against inappropriate jealousy of someone seeking counsel elsewhere, wrought out of my own insecurities... 'why didn't they come to me?'. Or counter the opposite, when undiscerning young minds have flattered and praised, and me having to be so aware of being a servant, God's ambassador, not a 'successful' ministry leader. These are just a few of the power-fuelled tempta-

tions the Devil's arrows have tried to penetrate my armour with. But how do we guard against these arrows?

One of the maxims my husband and I have adopted is that 'it's better for someone we're pastoring to make their own *bad* decision rather than our *good* decision'. Andrew talks about the need for an asymmetrical balance between human and divine agency and I think this is one practical example of how to guard against subtly diminishing divine agency.

In my early days of ministry I became aware that I was living to please the expectations of a ministry leader above me. When I wouldn't 'slow down' and found myself over-stretched, marital and parenting responsibilities being resented, I was asked the question 'who are you trying to please?'. Sadly I had fallen into the trap of pleasing man and not God – the ministry leader had no insight (I trust) into just how powerful he was – and my freedom in Christ was hindered and entangled and I was no longer fixing my eyes on Jesus, running the race He had marked out for me, but had gone off-track when listening to a different voice. Anyone observing from the outside might have still seen fruit and commended my diligence but I had unknowingly abandoned the First Commandment. And this leads me to another practical 'agency' check; the body of believers. A couple of people loved me enough to gently challenge me and expose my misalignment. How can each one of us have a posture of submission to our brethren, no matter our age and experience?

Ecclesial suffocation is not a pleasant term. Heavenly Father, please keep me from ever stifling your Spirit or quenching life. At the inception of the church I serve, we sought to emphasise that we existed to help people grow in their knowledge of God so that they could flourish in their day to day environments; in their homes, families, work place, communities. We did not want to create tiers of busyness designed to build up our empire. Our aim was never to have a large church as evidence of our own success. No. We simply want to be faithful in being image-bearers of the Creator God, bringing Shalom. Jesus says 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light'. Father, please forgive us for the times when we have inflicted a grating yoke and a heavy burden on those you have asked us to gently shepherd; instead, let us daily learn from you.

We cannot pass on Living Water if we are stagnant. Have we become so entrenched in our routines of Church that we no longer expect to see the Holy Spirit at work? Do we recognise that as we go through the motions of church services, leading home groups and prayer meetings, or individual pastoral meetings, we have as much to learn about our Lord as the people we are seeking to serve? Do we model Sabbath-taking? When did we last actively take a step of faith? Instead of encountering communities marked

by drivenness, competitiveness, judgmentalism and faux joy, we want to lead by example to create environments of Shalom. The leader sets the culture so we must be the first to experience the cleansing of repentance, remove our masks of performance and savour the incredible grace of the body of Christ, broken for us, and the blood of Christ shed for us. And live in the freedom that Christ has set us free for.