

It matters what you believe

Two things happened in recent months to up the ante on some things that have been niggling at me. The first one was viewing sessions online from a conference held at a megachurch, and noting how much the junior speakers were copying the mannerisms either of the senior pastor or of an international speaker who visits every year or so. The second one was reading an obituary for Gerald Coates (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/april/died-gerald-coates-new-church-pioneer-charismatic.html>)

Even though imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, it really bothered me that these junior speakers were taking on these mannerisms, either unconsciously or consciously, instead of finding their unique authentic style. Hopefully it is only a phase these junior speakers are going through as they grow. God made each of us unique, according to His own specific purposes, therefore when we start looking and acting like clones or copies of each other we are obscuring His plans for us.

As I read through the obituary I was astounded at how far the ripples of Gerald Coates' ideas had gone, and by how uncritically these ideas had been swallowed, and by how much they are still guiding principles - especially in the modern day prophetic movements. Yet, even by the obituary account, he did some very disturbing things e.g. preparing for a communion service and then part way through the meeting deciding not to complete it.

Because it does matter what you believe. Believing and acting on erroneous teaching is going to be far less fruitful than believing and acting according to true teaching. Erroneous teaching does not please God, Who is the source of all truth, and erroneous teaching leads many people astray. Indeed it is the 10% error mixed in with 90% truth which is the most dangerous combination of all due to that combination's power to deceive the greatest number of good people.

The way Jennifer Eivaz explains this is useful:

Jennifer Eivaz, Prophetic Secrets, Chapter 7,

"One of the signatures of God's prophets is that they love the truth and embrace the plumb line of the Word. They demand an adherence to the Scriptures from themselves and others, especially from other prophets and prophetically anointed people. When a lie gets into the foundation, however, then all the biblical boundary lines become altered through the lens of the lie. I like to point out Proverbs 22:28: "Do not move the ancient boundary which your fathers have set" (NASB). The context of this verse is an instruction to leave ancient geographical and property boundaries in place, but in principle it is an instruction for handling God's Word. We also read, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32), and several other Scriptures warn us not to add or take away from His words..."

The undercurrents of hyper-grace thinking in the modern prophetic movement have neutered much of true prophetic ministry, as far as I am concerned. Many prophetic words now carry the vagueness of the typical horoscope, are lacking in scriptural precedent and then get delivered in a passive communication style with no edge or perceptible anointing. Furthermore, such instructors have drilled into their prophetic communities that personal prophecy is strictly for edification, exhortation and comfort, which is scripturally true, (1 Corinthians 14:3) yet neglects other New Testament Scriptures that clearly stretch prophetic ministry beyond that criteria*. Again, if there is a lie in the foundation, then everything comes under that distortion, and so prophetic words are often adjusted or neglected to fit the hyper-grace paradigm rather than reflect the heartbeat of the Holy Spirit."

(*) References weren't given for this, but I assume the prophet Agabus whom God used to warn His people that a time of famine was coming (Acts 11:28), and that Paul would be delivered as a prisoner to

the Gentiles (Acts 21:10-12) was in Jennifer's mind. The first was news like Joseph decoded from Pharaoh's dreams, which led to effective preparations to combat famine conditions. The second was news indicating that God's hand was in this seemingly alarming prediction, as it was in Simeon's prophecy to Mary the mother of Jesus about a sword piercing her soul. Effectively it was a message saying, don't resist this, it is part of My plan, trust Me even though it currently doesn't make sense to you.

Therefore it is important to remove lies from the foundation.

So I am going to take each part of the precis of Gerald Coates' teaching as given in the obituary and see how it stacks up against Scripture and Tradition. I admit that I have no idea whether the precis as given is a faithful and accurate representation of his teaching. But much of that precis has become generally accepted in Christian communities and it needs to be critically examined.

The first part of the precis is

"God will not be tied to 17th century language, 18th century hymns, 19th century buildings, and 20th century religious inflexibility,"

God's word says, *'But when the Spirit of truth comes, He will lead you to the complete truth'* (John 16:13a). That means God was leading our 17th century brothers and sisters into all truth, our 18th century brothers and sisters into all truth, our 19th century brothers and sisters into all truth and our 20th century brothers and sisters into all truth. If we ignore what God taught previous generations then we are denying ourselves aspects of God's truth that can only be unfolded over lengthy periods of time. *'Test all things, hold on to what is good'* (1 Thess 5:21) applies to this. Usually the test of time is sufficient. If multiple generations of believers have considered something worthwhile enough to be handed down and preserved, then it should be held onto and not discarded.

The Gospel message doesn't change: Jesus, Son of God, was born in our flesh, to suffer and die to redeem mankind from sin. Vindicated by God through His resurrection from the dead, He has become the Saviour of all who believe in Him. He has been appointed to judge the living and the dead.

However how we present that Gospel message will change. How we present the Gospel message to a mother's group in central London will be different to how we present the Gospel message to nursing home residents in western Canada, and how we present the Gospel message to native tribes in Indonesia will be different again. When St Paul went to Athens he studied what that culture considered important and used that scrupulosity in religious matters as his starting point for presenting the Gospel. Acts 17:23-34.

So while we'll translate the very best of 17th century language expressed in liturgical prose, prayers, biblical commentary and theological treatises into modern idiom, we will keep using any 18th century hymns and lyrics if they have been in more or less continuous use, we will treasure our 19th century church buildings as a proclamation from one era to another of the faithfulness of God. The pains caused by sectarian divides between denominations we'll happily leave in the past, because no one considers them good nor worth holding on to.

There will certainly be 21st century expressions of faith that haven't been seen in human history before since we are to live by *'one age shall praise Your doings to another'* Psalm 144(145):4b just as much as *'sing to the Lord a new song'* Psalm 96(95):1a. It's a 'both-and', not an 'either-or' way of living out our faith in the living God. As Jesus Himself said, a wise scribe brings out both new and old treasures from his storeroom, cf Matt 13:52

The second part of that precis is “God is changing His church. We are part of that change!”

God is the author of the church, and it is very clear that God doesn’t change. It is also very clear that when God decrees something, it is for all time; both the good (eg the promise of royal succession to David) and the bad (land that remains uninhabited).

James 1:17 It is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given us from above; it comes down from that Father of all light; with Him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of a change.

2 Cor 3:18 And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit.

‘Abide with me’ hymn: O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

Eph 2:20-22 You are part of a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundations, and Christ Jesus Himself for its main cornerstone. As every structure is aligned on Him, all grow into one holy temple in the Lord; and you too, in Him, are being built into a house where God lives, in the Spirit.

Recall that the blueprint for the post-exilic temple given to Ezekiel was complete in every detail. It was the temple finished to perfection that God showed him. In that blueprint were no plans for change, alteration or expansion.

But the temple still needs many workers and lots of time for it to be built to completion. So God’s plan for the church takes time and effort too, and that plan is perfect. The plan doesn’t need to change, but the members of the church do need to be aligned with that plan, and to allow God’s work of transformation to occur in us so that we look more and more like Him.

We cannot say that God is changing the blueprint for his church. We can say that God is calling each member of His church to grow in greater holiness and in greater alignment to His will. That growth and alignment requires repentance and our co-operation with the grace of God.

Whenever sin disfigures holiness and whenever sin dislodges us from alignment, then we need repentance, restoration and healing. When this happens on a large scale, then there is a corporate need for repentance and realignment. The church is always in need of reform, because all her members on earth are sinners, but God’s blueprint for the church remains constant and unchanging.

How can we tell if we are in alignment? Study the foundations laid by the prophets and apostles. There are many documents written in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. from Christian communities founded by the apostles. Clement, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, and the Didache, are some of them.

Each generation is called to do their part in maintaining the parts of God’s blueprint for the church that have already been built and to do their part in the ongoing building works. There are things that this generation is called to do that are only possible because previous generations have done their part. Likewise there are things the next generation is called to do which depend on our generation fulfilling its part of the building plan.

The third part of the precis is attributed to him: “Coates continued to live up to the name of the network he founded to the end, “clearing the ground of unnecessary religious baggage and making a way for what God was doing.”” The group he inspired believed that “a whole new style of church is

being born,” as they stripped away traditions and dogmas and returned to the authentic New Testament way of doing church.

All generations of the church look to the New Testament church, and in particular The Acts of the Apostles, for ongoing inspiration and renewed motivation for how to live out the call to holiness and the call to mission, for how to love God and for how to love neighbour according to the model of Jesus.

But since the promise of Jesus remains true, that the Holy Spirit will lead us to the complete truth, it is an error to ignore what the Holy Spirit has taught His church between Apostolic times and now.

That’s like saying to the best Teacher ever, we want to go back to the basics of addition and only addition; we think all this subtraction, multiplication, division, logarithms and matrices and stuff are unnecessary add-ons to addition, we don’t need anything else, we can judge for ourselves what we absolutely need and what is superfluous.

Yet anything organic of sufficient age, like a tree, has dead branches that need to be removed on a periodic basis, or new shoots in odd places that need to be pruned. None of us are immune from picking up purely human traditions along the way and giving them higher value than we ought to. However, that kind of necessary periodic trimming is very different to cutting the whole tree down to the roots and beginning again. Even God Himself promised not to ever destroy and begin again after Noah and the Flood.

Those dogmas might seem superfluous, but they represent understandings that had been wrestled out over centuries over matters of exceeding importance. They are boundary lines within which we can safely continue to theologise about our experiences, and beyond which are heresies which destroy faith.

We can even look back now on the traditions which eschewed movies, make-up and modern fashion and see a wisdom designed to assist young people to found marriages with realistic expectations and for deeper reasons than how attractive the prospective spouse was.

What if that re-emergence of the charismatic dimension of faith experience was initiated by God to re-invigorate existing churches from within, and to so draw them into the unity that only the Holy Spirit can do -and what if further splintering of faith communities was not His plan at all?

Yet every tree of sufficient age also needs new shoots, some of which will be vigorous enough to eventually become new branches. But they do need to be produced from the whole tree and not poking out through the heavy bark near the roots. To grow properly as God intends, the church needs both the old and the new, and the old needs the new as much as the new needs the old. We are back to both/and thinking, not the ‘new without the old’ as espoused by the third part of the precis.

The fourth part of the precis is attributed to this ‘new church’ movement, and therefore to Coates as well: “They preached that the Holy Spirit was moving in the last days before Christ’s second coming to restore the church to her original purity. God would erase denominational divisions and bring new unity.”

Many minds have pondered the question of how unity could be possible given the huge number of denomination and non-denominational Christian communities. This is one of those answers. But their vision of unity is with no rules and no structure, just moving together under the Holy Spirit. Would the

God who laid down very precise laws for temple worship and dispute resolution, the same God who appointed kings, priests, levites and elders of tribes, not want rules and structure?

The answers come in three general forms,
unity according to the highest denominator,
unity according to the lowest denominator,
and unity among the charismatic/Pentecostal leaving the non-charismatic to decay and disappear.

This third general form of answer seems to be prevalent in the megachurch movement which places high value on the manifestation of charisms and in those Christian communities that are still Pentecostal in name and in fact.

The second general form of answer is the most widespread. It goes something like this, if you believe in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour and accept the authority of the bible, if we can agree on the essentials and leave the other stuff in God's hands, then we do have a unity, albeit imperfect, but the best we can hope to achieve this side of eternity.

This kind of thinking has given rise to so many 'non-denominational' Christian communities. It is thinking along the lines of David Wilkerson: "I am not preaching some denominational doctrine; this church does not belong to any denomination. We are not Assemblies of God, we are not Baptist, we're not Methodist, and we're not Catholic. We're just Holy Ghost people believing the Bible."

The first general form of answer is normally overlooked. It knows that true unity cannot be achieved unless it is unity in both love and unity in truth. Our differences in belief about God are a barrier to unity. It also knows that the original design of God matters, no matter how unpopular that may be. True unity is only to be found in the church that can trace its origin back to Jesus Christ and His apostles. The only church with that claim is the Catholic Church, all the rest have a founding date later than 33A.D. and a founding leader who is not Jesus Christ (Luther, Henry VIII, Wesley, Smyth etc). It also has rules, structure, and visible unity through the pope, the current successor of St Peter.

Can the Holy Spirit accomplish the first form of unity? Given the number of conversion stories I have read where God grants infused knowledge, and the people I personally know who have experienced this gift of infused knowledge, yes, it is quite possible. If God can arrange an army of 5000 men to travel to a remote spot on the shores of Lake Galilee to witness the multiplication of loaves by Jesus, He can do anything.

The fifth and final part of the precis is this: "The Holy Spirit is on a collision course with all forms of inflexible Christianity," Coates said. "Denominationalism is sin! It is heresy! There is no way round it."

There are some things that Christians are supposed to be inflexible about, for example: the ten commandments, protection of life from conception until natural death, belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, marriage being a permanent, faithful and fruitful commitment between one man and one woman.

He may be referring to the inflexibility of a pastor preaching on God's favour instead of what the Holy Spirit had been prompting: repentance. He may be referring to the inflexibility of the leadership of a conference who changed nothing in the lineup after a profound prophetic word asking that we beg Him from the bottom of our hearts for an outpouring of the holy spirit; the music team continued to sing worship songs too instead of songs of supplication. He may be referring to an invitation to

generosity that was ignored. He may even have been referring to how territorial about where we sit in church.

But I suspect he was talking about liturgy, and particularly about the rituals of liturgy. Yet there is room even in ritual liturgy for responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, knowing that God is a God of order and not of chaos. It is having the sensitivity to let the Holy Spirit work in the post Communion time and not ruin everything with mundane announcements. It is inviting the people to recommit themselves to God by praying the creed more mindfully. It is inviting people towards the end of the homily to raise their hands if they want God to be more active in this part of their lives, to let the hush linger, and to promise to pray for anyone when the liturgy is over who wants extra help from God in this area of his/her life.

But the Holy Spirit is a gentleman. He always invites, He never forces His will. After a long time of prompting without positive response the Holy Spirit just departs quietly and leaves the person. The worst thing of all is to be left in your error without the Holy Spirit to nudge you out of it, because if you don't know you are in error you can't get onto the right path.

Yes sometimes the Holy Spirit takes drastic action like knocking Saul off his horse on the road to Damascus. However this would have been buttressed with many prayers from Christians for Saul to be saved, forgiven, converted, and this action of mercy was aligned with God's amazing plan for Saul's life.

Is denominationalism sin? If it prevents someone from receiving all that God has for them in the Christian life, yes. Anything that splinters the body of Christ into more parts is against God's express will That They All Be One. Taking refuge from accusations of denominationalism by being in a non-denominational church is just being in a nameless denomination.

Is it heresy? Well if you are not where God has placed – and guaranteed - the fulness of truththen you are in error. If that error is about serious enough matters, then it is heresy.

If God established one church which from the beginning was united in Jesus Christ and recognised as the pillar and bulwark of truth, with rules and structures and visible unity, aligned to the perfect blueprint given from above, then Yes you do have to do something about it and there's no way round it.

Jesus said, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life'.

Therefore the truth matters.

Truth is something you can either accept or reject.

Truth is something you can't change.

It does matter what you believe.