

## 202 *What shape is your church?*

Have you ever stopped to think what the Christian faith is all about, fundamentally, essentially? How would you sum it up for a Martian? How would you sum it up in a few words?

Would you write mainly about the Godhead, how God creates the universe, out of love, and humans make rather a mess of things (nothing new there!), but how God goes on loving us; then how God enters the world in person and shows us how we can transform the suffering in the world, how to live in love with one another?

Or would you concentrate more on how I, as an individual, have rebelled against God, but how I can be forgiven, and therefore how I can escape the suffering of this world and get to heaven? And maybe you'd stress how God miraculously takes away some of the suffering of this world?

Sure, I've overstated the difference in approach, but which more nearly describes what the Martian would see in your church life? A stress on personal salvation, how **I** relate to God, or a stress on who God is, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and therefore how **we** can relate to God?

Given the incredible growth the early church, what did they mainly focus on?

I've just done a page count, and *over half* of the New Testament consists of a telling of the story of Jesus (the good news, the gospel), and if you see the Acts as the continuing story of Jesus, then it's almost two-thirds.

If we add in the fact that the only 'Bible' the early church had was what we now call the Old Testament, what does that suggest was their focus?

Maybe they focused on the story of Jesus and how it is intimately tied in to the whole story and thread and direction of the (OT) Scriptures. The gospel story of Jesus as the Christ interlocks with the story of God in the Old Testament.

And in the early centuries, as the church mushroomed, how did they provide a framework to help keep the church focused on the important things, and to avoid error? They provided the creeds, which focus on the **nature of God**, and concentrate on the essentials elements of **the story of Jesus** (= the gospel), and they also briefly mention 'forgiveness of sins'.

So how does that relate to what I have spent hours and hours thinking and writing about for the past five years? What was my prime complaint, my prime concern? It was about whether penal substitution was the right/best/only way to understand personal salvation. Narrow, or what?!

As an exercise (which I haven't tried yet) if your church has a doctrinal statement why not hold it up against the prime concerns of the New Testament church?

If your church calls itself a "cross-centered church" is that because it focuses on how the cross transforms suffering, or because it focuses primarily on personal salvation?