THE PROBLEM WITH CHRISTIANS

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Category: Observations

I believe that Christianity is good for individuals and good for society; wherever those individuals and societiesÂ are found in the world. It's not the outward forms and rituals of the religion; the buildings, services and such like that are the key (though they are important) but the message of reconciliation with God and each other in Christ and the power of the Spirit to make effective changes. I'd actually argue that life in Europe demonstrates that the outward forms of Christianity lose their power and relevance when the message of reconciliation through the cross of Christ is lost.

However, though I thoroughly believe that Christianity is a good thing, there is one big problem when trying to make that case in the public square: Christians.

It is relatively easy to find cases of Christians doing good stuff for society. As far back as Roman times, they were famous for helping others during the plague, Wilberforce's role in the abolition of slavery is rightly feted and today a large percentage of food banks and toddlers clubs in the UK are run by churches. However, the other side of the leger stacks up too: the Crusades, centuries of using the Bible to justify slavery, church support for Apartheid and the way in which some "Evangelicals" support white nationalism in the US today.

The problem is, that for most people in the street, the negative side of the balance outweighs the positive. Religion in general, including Christianity, is increasingly being seen as a negative influence on the world. In many ways, it is futile to try and convince people that Christianity is positive. The narrative of negativity is so strong that it is hard to gainsay. Equally trying to say that some people are not really Christians, or (at least) not Christians like us doesn't help much either. Most people don't have the time or the interest to distinguish between the various groups who call themselves churches; as far as they are concerned, they are all the same.

So, what can we do? I think there are two responses that are appropriate.

Firstly, we have to own the negative side of Christianity, admit that it happened and, if necessary apologise. In our current climate of spin and self-promotion actually owning up to the fact that things have gone wrong is a real value. At the heart of our message is the fact that we are forgiven sinners, so admitting to the church's failings should not be too difficult.

Secondly, we have to demonstrate that we - as individuals and fellowships - are good for society. People are perfectly happy to live with a level of cognitive dissonance; Christianity, in general, is bad, but your church does some amazing work. We can't make up for all of the perceived failings of the church through time and across the globe, but we can try to demonstrate that a group of Christians can make a positive contribution to their local society.

This doesn't mean that we have to adopt all of our society's views and concerns; we are called to be counter-cultural. Authentic Christianity will always be spikey and uncomfortable because it should confront the wrong things in society - even those that people are comfortable with. However, it does mean that the message that Christianity is good for people and societies that we preach from our

pulpits should be demonstrated in our lives as individuals and congregations. This almost certainly means that we will need to get out of our buildings and get involved in the life of our communities in some way, rather than just inviting people in to hear what we have to say.

Would your local community suffer in a concrete way if your church shut up shop? Would they even notice?

It is possible that some might be offended by the picture at the top of this post. To be honest, I find it pretty offensive, myself. However, this is the sort of image that comes to mind when many people think about conservative Christianity and we need to face up to that. We have to demonstrate a better story if we are to get a hearing.Â