



Men of Issachar

The 2001 Rendle Short Lecture



KEY POINTS

Arthur Rendle Short, like the Men of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, understood his times and knew what to do. Understanding our times involves seeing that the seismic changes in healthcare that we all struggle with are but symptoms of a deeper worldview shift. Postmodernism means spirituality without Christianity, words without meaning, individuality without belonging, image without reality and the present without a future. Christians who know what to do will recognise the importance of being established in prayer and the word, and take seriously the Bible's warnings about hypocrisy, greed and worry. May God help us to be Men of Issachar.

‘Men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do’.¹ We first hear of Issachar in Genesis 30:18 as the fifth son of Leah, the older of Laban's two daughters. She ‘had weak eyes’² and although Jacob preferred her younger sister Rachel who ‘was lovely in form, and beautiful’³ and thought he was earning the right to marry her, he was tricked into marrying Leah first instead.

The sons of Jacob were the ancestors of the tribes of Israel and this is the context in which we read this brief description of the men of Issachar who joined David as he took over Saul's kingdom.

There are two concepts concerning the men of Issachar, and they form my twin themes: understanding the times and knowing what to do.

Arthur Rendle Short: a man of Issachar

Dan Graves⁴ describes Arthur Rendle Short (1880-1953) as ‘The Surgeon Who Defended Christianity’:

...it would seem there was little danger that Rendle would lapse into secularism or Darwinism. However, as an intellectual among Christians who were not rigorous in their thinking, he craved reasonable grounds for his faith. This was the heady first era of the Darwinists and of German textual criticism, both of which attacked the Bible. Rendle had to know for himself what was true.

Becoming convinced of the authenticity of Scripture through an analysis of Luke's writing as a doctor in his Gospel and in Acts, Rendle Short went into medicine to live out his faith. Frustrated in his plan to become a missionary, he realised that the Lord intended him for work in England:

He undertook that work with vigour, speaking

regularly to groups about Christ, giving here a devotional and there a defence of faith in the living Lord. From his own early struggles to believe, he knew apologetics to be necessary, and he was eager to help others over the hurdles of faith.

Rendle Short coped with the twin threats to biblical Christianity of his time - with the medical/scientific threat of Modernity and with the liberal theological threat of Higher Criticism. He understood those times and knew what to do.

CMF members as men (and women) of Issachar

We need to understand our times and know what to do. On my first medical job, I remember my registrar saying: ‘There are two sorts of doctors – those who know things and those who know what to do’. Although these two categories are not mutually exclusive, I knew which sort of doctor I wanted to be. But to know what to do we have to understand the times.

The principles of medical practice are (largely) unchanging - history, examination, special tests, diagnosis. Likewise the principles of Christianity are entirely unchanging. If we understand the changing times, then we work out how to apply those principles in our culture and times. So, what are the times?

The ‘medical’ times

(This section was contributed by the audience and concepts called out included: pace of change, blame culture, revalidation, new consultant contract, loss of caring, guidelines and protocols, defensive medicine,

loss of control, fighting over the same slice of cake, lack of affirmation, no time for education and reflection, no time for students, giving more and more for less and less.)

The times for our culture

We are told the times are post-modern, and there are all sorts of intellectual explanations of what that means. Rather than 'Loss of an overarching meta-narrative' I prefer simpler accounts like 'No big picture that makes sense of all the little pictures' so let me quote from a *Christian Research* critique: Here are some of the characteristics of a post-modern world.

Spirituality without Christianity

Many search for meaning, but often look elsewhere than the Christian faith

Environment without a Creator

Caring about the natural world, but not recognising the hand of God in creation

Words without meaning

If you say something means this and I say it means that, it doesn't matter – we're both right!

And we don't disagree

Individuality without belonging

I'm my own person; I don't have to belong to you or any organisation or do what you say

The present without a future

It's what we do now that's important; never mind tomorrow – it may never come

Behaviour without consequences

I can do what I like, and I will; I'm not responsible for the results

Image without reality

What you think of me is more important than what I am really like

Single issues without the big picture

I'm focusing on what matters to me; I don't care how it fits in with everything else'⁵

This little poem sums it all up:

I find it hard
I'm hard to find
Oh, well, whatever
Never mind⁶

Cynicism is destructive. Men of Issachar are not cynical because they understand the times and know what to do.

Our response

My original letter of invitation to give this lecture talked about 'How to convey God's truth to a multicultural society' and I suspect there are hopes that I will offer some technical tips, handy hints and some pithy soundbites for particular problems. I could say, for example, 'always challenge relativism' or 'use stories whenever possible'.

Rather, I want to end by offering some principles that are about what we do, but even more importantly, who we are. Jesus himself once spoke to a crowd about the importance of interpreting the times⁷ but earlier in Luke 12 he had issued some specific warnings to the disciples. These leapt out of the page to me as being particularly relevant to doctors. My experience, pastorally through CMF, and punitively through sitting on the General Medical Council, is that doctors - Christians not excepted - do need to be warned about:

- Hypocrisy - 'There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known' (v2)
- Greed - 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (v15)
- Worry - 'Do not worry about your life' (v22)

Being is more important than doing. Post-modernity in its disregard for programmes and achievements may be acknowledging that. If we are the right people we are more likely to know what to do, and more likely then to do it. We need to be disciples of Christ and Rendle Short is an inspiration:

*Rendle spent much time in prayer and Bible reading. Did this make him self-righteous? Quite the contrary. It was probably with himself in mind that he wrote these words: 'The nearer you are to light, the darker is your shadow. Thus the one who has the greater light is often the most conscious of wrong in himself.'*⁸

And finally

The numbers recorded in the 1 Chronicles 12 passage 'are the numbers of men armed for battle who came to David at Hebron' (v23). Those from all the other tribes listed are in thousands or tens of thousands. How many men of Issachar were there? There were '200 chiefs, with all their relatives under their command' (v32).

Matthew Henry says 'The men of Issachar were the fewest of all, only 200, and yet as serviceable to David's interest as those that brought in the greatest numbers, these few being in effect the whole tribe. They were weather-wise. They understood public affairs, the temper of the nation, and the tendencies of the present events... They knew how to rule, and the rest knew how to obey.'⁹

A man of Issachar is worth ten ordinary disciples. May God help us to be men of Issachar.

Andrew Fergusson was CMF General Secretary from 1990-99 and now has a portfolio career at the interface of medicine and Christianity

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A MAN OF ISSACHAR IS WORTH TEN ORDINARY DISCIPLES

References

- 1 1 Chronicles 12:32
- 2 Genesis 29:17
- 3 *Ibid*
- 4 Graves D. *Doctors Who Followed Christ: Thirty-Two Biographies of Eminent Physicians and Their Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999: 185-189
- 5 Brierley P. *12 things about Society that impact the Church*. London: Christian Research, 2001
- 6 Anonymous
- 7 Luke 12:54-56
- 8 Graves D. *op cit*
- 9 Church LF (ed). *Matthew Henry's Commentary in One Volume*. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960: 441