

Views from the Pews: The Church as a bicycle

Belonging to the contemporary church is rather like riding a bicycle. As any cyclist knows, the main characteristics of a bike are, first, that (at least up until recently) it has always been a device powered by human muscles, although it also needs oil for its wheels and chain; and second, that it stays upright only when it is moving forward. The institutional church is like a bike: it takes a lot of human effort to make it move; it needs lots of the oil of loving kindness to ease its internal frictions; and it sometimes seizes up altogether, stops moving, and falls over flat.

A bike runs on two equal wheels. The back wheel drives and the front wheel steers. It simply isn't possible to make them work the other way round - have you ever tried to find the reverse gear on a bike? Moreover, the two wheels have to be the same size - the very earliest pennyfarthings tried having unequal wheels, but they were not practical. The church is the same. One wheel is called revealed truth, which has to be understood in its own original context; and the other, equally important, is called interpretation, which means understanding that truth in our own context. The question for our age is, which wheel should drive and which should steer?

It could be argued that revealed truth and faith must turn the back wheel, because that is what powers the love and fellowship commitment of the people. On the other hand, interpretation, prayer, study and tradition need to turn the front wheel, because they steer that power to do good in the world. It is helpful to recognise that neither outranks the other, but they must be in the right order. Both also need a lot of careful maintenance, and updating when important bits get too much stressed, like the brake blocks and tyres (read: vestry meetings and AGMs). Yes, the institutional bike might occasionally fall in the ditch, and need expensive repairs, or even component replacements (think of the painful processes surrounding the Abuse in Care enquiries), but ultimately we can call on a patient

and experienced Mechanic who has seen it all before. Mounted on a well maintained, smoothly running bicycle, well lubricated with love, the church has the power, the forward motion, and the steering to carry its members to do God's work far and wide.

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