

Lessons In Life (August 2023)

August 9, 2023

by Rev Paul Graham

I like to think of myself as having been a fairly normal child. Normal, that is, within the broad parameters of normality that most of us would probably subscribe to. If you accept that, and even better if you yourself would have classed yourself as normal as well, then you will probably recognise something of the disheartening sensation that accompanied normal children like me when seeing, on the first day of the summer holiday, when six weeks of academia-less life stretched before me like a vast empty page, signs in the shops advertising “Back to School”.

There is nothing more guaranteed to send a young heart plunging to the soles of their shoes than the realisation that the freedom of the Summer Holidays wasn’t eternal, that the reality of a new school timetable would bite in only a few short weeks, and the promise of endless days would be shown to be the stuff of imaginations as August morphs into September and the leaves start to turn.

Of course, for the parent, who, when faced with the prospect of their offspring no longer under the scrutiny of the classroom for these six weeks, may blanch at the thought of all the shenanigans that could be undertaken during this extended bout of home leave, these shop signs offer a glimmer of hope, that in a few short weeks the school gates will clang shut and their lives will once again be child-free between the hours of 9:00am and 3:00pm (or thereabouts). Alternatively, for the parent who positively enjoys the experiences that these six weeks can offer and relishes the chance to be more of a family together, their feelings on spotting such a sign may well mirror those of their child.

For the teacher, these signs might also be greeted with emotions akin to their young charges. In my (admittedly limited) experience of people in the teaching profession, I have yet to encounter one for whom the sight of the “Back to School” sign elicits a whoop of unbridled joy. I imagine a dragging of the feet, a lowering of the head and a desire to rip up said sign to be more the response of the teachers who pass by. But I might be wrong.

Bringing us bang up to date, I was somewhat disquieted to see my first “Back to School” sign in the last few days, a clear week before the local schools have even started their summer holidays. No longer with the intention of bringing the already holidaying child and teacher back down to earth with a bump, the portent of academic doom was posted even before the final school bell had rung. My compassionate side felt for those poor souls who wouldn’t want to be reminded of the presence of that particular sword of Damocles hanging over them. My less empathetic side was grateful to no longer be part of that world.

But it also made me think about what the message of the sign “Back to School” is meant to convey. The intent of the shops is to lure in parents who want to be prepared when September arrives. It says that a bit of planning is helpful, and the temptation of becoming distracted by too much holiday enjoyment should be tempered by the drudgery of buying new shoes and geometry sets. And, judging by the queues that form in the various shoe shops during August, people pay heed to these signs.

The message behind the sign isn’t primarily to spoil a child’s holiday (nor a teacher’s one), but rather to remind parents that the future is set for them and there’s no stopping the march towards the new academic year. If you can’t beat them, join them (or at least buy enough shirts to see you through the worst of it).

However, it also made me think about the messages that are conveyed by the church. What is the message that people receive when they see, not just the posters and occasional inspirational quote on the notice

boards, but the very name “Church” that adorn so many of our buildings and form part of most of our names.

Church – what does this name convey to people beyond the community of the church? Does it, like “Back to School” for children and teachers, fill people with dread and fear, associated with unhappiness? Or, like me as I walk past that shop sign with nothing but memories of being both child and uniform-buying parent, a slight twinge that once it was relevant, but no longer. Or, like so many who have no children within their daily lives, total indifference, a name meaningful to someone else but not to them. Or, like parents, a place for them to prepare for the future, an eternal queue for new school shoes, as it were.

The Church, in many ways, has an image problem that is far beyond the scope of this short magazine article to even attempt to begin to address. It is seen as a place of misery, and that’s mostly a self-inflicted wound following years of not following in the footsteps and image of its founder. It’s seen as a place no longer relevant to today’s world or people, which may in part be a charge laid at the doors of the media and the portrayal of church in TV and film, but also in some of more arcane traditions that we still hold onto, such as meeting on Sunday mornings when there are car boot sales and football practices to attend.

And worst of all, it’s seen as a place that has no place in people’s lives. We’ve not helped in that impression, as it seems that we spend a lot of time trying to answer questions that no-one is asking (and falling out over these questions as well), and getting ourselves tied up in knots trying to raise enough money to keep our buildings open, even though fewer and fewer people are coming through the doors.

So, what do we do about the name and the problems associated with it? Let’s go back to the world of retail to give us a clue. Shops could be more positive in their signs. Instead of “Back to School”, how about “New Term, New Start!” as an alternative slogan? Rather than a sense of returning to the old ways, this is a way of looking forward, of turning the page and finding a fresh clean sheet on which the new school year can be written. Yesterday is gone, let’s look to tomorrow. For children dreading the end of the holidays, it reminds them that there is something about to begin. And, if they wait long enough, the term will also end, heralding the start of another holiday. Beginnings followed by endings; endings followed by beginnings; beginnings followed by endings. And always something new just around the corner.

So far, so good for any budding shop sign writers out there. But what about the church?

Is there a case to be made to do away with the name “Church” and replace it with something more meaningful, or less weighed down by the baggage of the past and present. Would a name like “Community” or “Family” be more appropriate to what we are intending to be? Personally, I like the idea of being on a pilgrimage, exploring what it means to share life and faith together, but “Clare Baptist Pilgrims” makes us sound like a football team from the lowest of leagues.

Or maybe because we’re limited on time and space, we just have to leave things as they are. Just like shops haven’t come up with anything better than “Back to School” after all these years, and, let’s face it, advertisers and slogan writers are paid far more than your average church minister, why worry about the name that’s seen us through the last nearly 2,000 years of chequered history? Instead, let’s spend our time working out who we are, what we do, and who and what we do it for and let the name sort itself out. And, if we need some inspiration or a better understanding of what it means to be the church that Jesus calls us to be, we might want to open the New Testament and reread the gospels and Acts. Our own “Back to School”, only with the best teacher the world has ever known and some very interesting classmates.