

INCLUDE ME – BUT DON'T OVERDO IT!

Mike Jackson

MIKE JACKSON PRESENTS THE CASE OF THE INTROVERTED EVANGELICAL AND ASKS FOR MORE UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIFFERENT NEEDS WITHIN THE LIFE AND WORSHIP OF OUR CHURCHES.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'

Mark 1:35-37

Jesus went to a solitary place. Did he need to? We know he went to pray, but did he have to be so alone when he did? Couldn't he have told the disciples where he was going so that they wouldn't have to look for him?

The beginning of retirement is a good time to evaluate who you really are. We are all shaped, to a certain extent, by the work we do. When that job no longer exists, we can begin to consider what type of person we can become without the constraints that employment enforces. So, recently I have asked myself some questions. 'Why is it that I don't like parties?' 'Why must I carefully consider an invitation to a marriage even though I wish the happy couple all the best in

the world?' 'Why is an opportunity to network so unappealing?'

The answer is that I am an introvert. Unfortunately, that answer doesn't make sense to many of my friends. They know me as someone who worked as a university lecturer giving talks at conferences around the world. Or else, they have encountered me in my capacity as a Local Preacher with thirty-five years of experience of standing up in churches and giving sermons. How can someone so clearly capable of making public appearances be so afraid of a simple social gathering?

FAITH AND THE INTROVERT

In trying to puzzle through this question I have been helped by a book called 'Quiet,' by Susan Cain ('Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking,' 2013, Penguin Books). Whilst trying to simplify what are often contradictory academic views of the psychology of introversion and extraversion, it offers an explanation of introversion which I find satisfactory. All human beings enjoy stimulation. They find the company of other human beings very stimulating. Each individual, however, has a limitation on just how much stimulation they can take. In the passage from Mark, quoted at the beginning of this article, it looks as though Jesus had reached his limit and just had to be alone for some time. The difference between an introvert and an extrovert is that the amount of stimulation needed to reach the limit is much lower for an introvert than an

extrovert. The need to find a solitary place comes much sooner for those of us with an introverted personality.

Intriguingly, the book includes a short section entitled 'Does God love Introverts? An Evangelical's Dilemma.' We know the answer to the question – God loves every individual. Do we accept that there may be a dilemma, in which introverts whose theology is soundly evangelical, may find a



difficulty in belonging to an evangelical church? In evangelical circles, we often value a number of characteristics that the introverted personality might find challenging. There is often an understanding that the declaration of faith should be a very public affair. A rally is viewed as successful if the congregation bubble over with enthusiasm and begin to share freely with one another. Either of these expectations could be more than an introvert can bear. Introversion is not shyness in the sense that someone who is shy can 'be brought out of their shell'. An attempt to change someone who is introverted to become more outgoing will simply cause them to seek solitude sooner rather than later.

MAKING SPACES FOR EVERYONE

The world is not, however, divided into two classes of people: one group called extroverts and the other called introverts, who can never meet. Instead, there is an introvert-extrovert spectrum with some individuals being very introverted and others being very extroverted, with most people somewhere in between. It is, nonetheless, important to recognise that differences related to an individual's position on the spectrum exist. If you do, you will understand that some people will find Messy Church very challenging, that others will hate shaking hands after saying the peace and that others will find the offer of coffee after Sunday worship a daunting prospect. None of these

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feelings are related to a theological position but instead are just part of an individual's personality.

So, is there a dilemma that evangelicals need to address? Not really, as long as we are prepared to accept the obvious truth that everyone is different. The problem is not caused by introversion – whilst this article concentrates on the view an extrovert takes of an introvert, it would be just as easy to write one which switches the roles round – there is a need, however, to be thoughtful. It is important to understand a person who cannot take part in an activity because it is simply in their nature not to. Just because we like an activity and believe it is helpful to us does not mean we

should be offended if someone else doesn't join in. When an individual has been stimulated beyond a level they find comfortable, they will experience stress and tension and we need to be sensitive to this. Thought should also be given to planning events that will encompass both extroverts and introverts. The secular world is currently tied to the idea that people should be constantly encouraged to collaborate in groups (in contrast to the past where a modicum of British reserve deserved respect). Whilst accommodating these attitudes in church activities, it is also sensible to consider other ways of eliciting responses, such as individual written contributions. Perhaps it might be even more modern to encourage the use of social media. People who would never consider expressing themselves in a spoken discussion are often more than happy to air their views electronically. At any rate, it is important to balance activities which demand a more outgoing character with those that require more introspection.

In short, we need to avoid the trap that many extroverts fall into of denying the complexity of the situation, devising a one size fits all solution and ignoring any evidence that it isn't working. Rather we should recognise our different needs and capabilities. God has created each of us as unique individuals and it is only through accommodating and building upon our unique abilities that we can move forward as his Church.

Mike Jackson is a Church Treasurer and Local Preacher in the Shropshire and Marches circuit. Prior to retirement, he was a University Lecturer specialising in Computer Science.

