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The Christian Faith in a Post-Christian Society

Brian Carrell

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Abridged.*

*In this address to the graduating class of 1991 of the Bible College of New Zealand, Bishop Carrell redraws the battle lines for the gospel of the 21st century. In the first part of the address (not reprinted) he compares the year of 1991 with the critical year of 1963 when C. S. Lewis and Aldous Huxley died, John F. Kennedy was assassinated and John Robinson launched his best seller *Honest to God*. He asked, 'Would the graduating students of that year (1963) feel adequately equipped and confident enough in the Spirit to minister in the secular Aotearoa New Zealand of 1991? Personally I doubt it. What has happened to our world over these intervening years? In what ways have the gospel battle lines been redrawn? How do we commend the Christian faith in a post-Christian society such as ours today?' He then outlines four paradigm shifts in the Western world, three signs of hope, three prospects for the 21st century and three priorities for the Church.*

Editor

I. PARADIGM SHIFTS

The technological and social changes which have taken place are awesome enough, but it is the changes in Western world-view which are even more significant when considering the mission of the Church and the task of evangelism. These changes have been both radical and unpredictable. It was the Dean of the Harvard Medical School who, in addressing freshman students, stated that by the time they graduated half the knowledge they **P. 355** were being taught would be useless. He went on to state that the tragedy was that he did not know which half!

So far as our Western world-view is concerned, especially when it impinges on our task and calling as Christians, there are four significant, major paradigm shifts which have occurred over these past thirty years.

1. Privatized Faith

The holding of religious belief has come to be seen as the mark of an individual rather than a feature of a community. With this has come a steady removal of religious concerns of perspectives from educational philosophy and practice, from political argument and accountability. A secular society is not anti-religious; it just insists that matters of faith be a private concern, restricted to certain occasions and places, optional at all times, and never intruding into the larger life of society.

The Church has unwittingly aided and abetted this attitude with its insistence on individual faith, personal response, and often a divorce of religion from large areas of life such as sport, politics and economics. And even among many Christians, religious faith is deemed to be a leisure time activity and more appropriate in the privacy of the domestic home than in the politicking of the public meeting.

2. Pluralized Belief

This new secular climate within which we now all live has as one of its unwritten tenets that all belief systems are valid, all have credentials of some sort, no one set of beliefs is true, tolerance is king.

But the consequence of this is that we have to deny society any preference for one faith over another. The 'scandal of particularity' is an offence in such a society. Our Christian heritage becomes a can of worms which no right-minded secularist would want to open. And the future in no way is given direction or shape by the commitment of a community to one such faith as Christianity. So we are no longer, even in a very generous sense, a 'Christian country'.

3. Marginalized Religion

The exclusion of religious faith from the public realm eventually leads to a diminution of respect for its presence and substance on the local scene. There comes a loss of a sense of the sacred. Holy days lose their significance. The meaning of Good Friday or Easter Day or Christmas cannot be naturally explained or promoted in the classroom (though paradoxically there can be an epidemic of witches and weirdos at Halloween!). And churches become targets for vandalism. In such a society, where respect for the transcendent has disappeared, it is little wonder that God becomes irrelevant.

4. Relativized Values

Remove God and there is little need for religion; remove religion and there is little ground for absolute values. Where once our society had a pretty good idea of what was right and what was wrong, of the reality of good and the fearsomeness of evil, in a secular society all these are comparatively relative. It is a morally grey world in which we live. Society sets its own standards, and those with enough media muscle shape such moral and ethical reference **p. 356** points to suit themselves. There is no authority outside our own consensus to which we are accountable. Objective truth (except, again paradoxically, in the steadily shifting sands of science) does not exist. Doubt in such a world is more acceptable than dogma; searching than discovery; feelings than thoughts; departing than arriving. The heretic is the hero, the saint the sinner. In such a topsy-turvey world, it is no longer palatable to point to Jesus Christ as 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life'.

II. VANISHED PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE

What has happened in the last thirty years is that we have lost the plausibility structure for the gospel. What was once a user-friendly world for Christians is now a world at best alien to the message of Jesus Christ, at worst hostile. Where once those who were not committed to Jesus Christ were largely like the God-fearers in New Testament times, sympathetic and at least grudgingly aware of God, today the bulk of people outside the faith community are literally lost to God—ignorant of Christ, uncaring about eternity, without any bad conscience over their chosen way of life or lack of faith.

Facing such a world provides both handicaps and hopes when we come to consider our gospel mandate. The handicaps are not only a resistant society which sees no need for our message but also an illequipped church when it comes to understanding and responding to such a society. For in the process of society contracting this secular sickness, imperceptibly the Church herself has also been infected with the very disease she has sought to resist. The issue has been powerfully and imaginatively addressed in Os Guinness' book, *The Gravedigger File*. It is an absorbing and at times chilling exercise to reflect on what are the classic secular values of our age and in what ways these have unconsciously seeped into the life of our churches, often to a point where they are

promoted as gospel assets! (For example, a preoccupation with various human rights, the elevation of the individual over the community, wealth as a sign of blessing, the pursuit of personal happiness and fulfilment as a supreme goal of life, the separation of faith concerns from social concerns.)

III. SIGNS OF HOPE

But alongside the handicap of a resistant society and an often illequipped Church, there are also encouraging signs of hope for us in the task of making Christ known and bringing the world under his Lordship. We now have, as never before, an holistic grasp of the gospel which will make much more sense in the kind of society we face, a gospel which declares itself in both word and action, in concern for the whole person in all their needs.

Secondly we are discovering, sometimes in a painfully slow way but with the leadership of bodies such as the Bible College, that only a total ministry by the whole of the body of Christ will make inroads on a religiously callous and uncaring society. Both the steady training and equipping of lay people, many of whom will then return to their dairy [p. 357](#) farm or classroom or job-search, and the witness of Christians of various denominational backgrounds studying and working together, have assisted remarkably in this preparation of a church for evangelism in the 21st century.

Finally as a sign of hope there is also, perhaps surprisingly, the growing disillusionment within self-assured secularism. The world which secular society has had a chance to build without God is beginning to let them down. Market forces have not been the liberating angel they had hoped for. Educational changes have not produced a better society. Politics have not become more sensible, long-sighted and honest. The demise of communism has not removed terror and fear from the international scene. Property and persons are less secure in our kind of society today than they were in 1963, and there are no indications that the next political, economic, social or educational recipe is going to make everything right, hey presto! The secular optimists are becoming disenchanted.

IV. PROSPECTS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

What then are the prospects before the Christian concerned to step out into such a world in order to make Christ known? Let me conclude by making three statements about the Church as it faces the 21st century:

1. Christendom Has Irretrievably Gone

There is no way we can return, or probably would wish to return, to the world as our forefathers knew it. The way ahead is not to be found by looking over our shoulders or by making a U-turn.

Yet also, we will in no way want to concede the ground to the secularist privatizing pressures. Somehow, and it will be your generation rather than mine that discovers how, we must reclaim the high ground of public life, morality and order for Christ and the gospel.

2. Our Call To Be A Holy People

That means a people who are prepared to live differently, and who know the telling points where these differences matter.

These will be in the areas of world-view, values, priorities, even possessions. We are still called to be a people set apart for God, living as strangers in an alien world.

Yet we are not asked to withdraw from the world; we are not to lose touch with our culture. Somehow we now need to learn how to embody our gospel in the way that we live and worship as church communities, recognizably part of the culture of this lovely green land of ours, yet distinctive. Encountering Christians in community anywhere should always be for the unbeliever an encounter with Christ.

3. We Are To Be The Salt Of Society

Our evangelism is not to be addressed only to individual people; it is also to be addressed to our culture and its many environments: the arts, literature, environmental concerns, the landscape, industry, commerce, education, the courts, medicine etc. How is Christ to be seen as Saviour and honoured as Lord in each of **p. 358** these settings and in the concerns they express?

V. THREE PRIORITIES

This will require of us three priorities of ministry.

1. Revitalizing Local Churches

It is here that the Christian faith puts down its roots. Institutional Christianity on the national scale will never impress as much as the local church which belongs to a community, cares for the community and makes Christ visible in that community.

A priority must be not simply multiplying churches so that there is one in every 500 people, but revitalizing churches so that they make good gospel sense in every rural and urban community. Ways must be found to make all of our churches more authentic, vibrant, winsome and earthed locally.

2. Training In Discipleship

If this is an increasingly unsympathetic and unwelcoming society in which we live, how can we help Christians to live with integrity as disciples of Jesus in such a society? Most of the practical portions of the new Testament epistles were written with the intention in mind to help new believers in the first century to know how to live for Christ in their kind of world. We must do the same for our changed circumstances of today, as a priority of lay or ordained ministry.

3. Challenging Secular Assumptions

What we are up against is a society which bases its assumptions and therefore makes its decisions and establishes its values on secular premises. We have to challenge these premises, to show with intellectual integrity their shortcomings, to offer an alternative world-view which makes sense for a world such as ours. In short, we have to provide a plausibility structure for faith. After all, it was the world God loved so much that he gave his only Son; it was the world Jesus sent his disciples out into; it is the world that Christ died on the cross to redeem. And a priority for evangelism is to restore this wider world dimension to our gospel-vision.

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