

What Future – Our Church ?!

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1. What is Happening and Why?

Introduction

This article addresses the vexed and challenging issue of the future of the church in Australia. In particular it speaks out of and to the context of the established traditions of the church, a context with which I have become familiar over a period of thirty years of ministry. It begins with the question which, in one way or another, is on the minds and hearts of all church people: What future – our church?

In exploring this question, I want to identify what is currently happening in the life of the established churches in Australia, explore why it is happening and propose some implications for the future directions of the church. I will then seek to offer a re-definition of what I think is the prevailing and assumed understanding of the nature and purpose of the church, and through that redefinition come to some radically alternative ways of addressing the question of this paper: what is the future of the church? In that sense, this article is about 'the reimagining of the Church'¹, a reimagining which arises from a particular (but not new) understanding of the Gospel.

What future – our church? ... The significance of the question

Christian communities throughout Australia are occupied, even preoccupied to the point of paralysis, with this question about the future of the church. It most commonly takes the form of concern about the survival of the local community to which they belong – what is the future of 'our church'.

The fact that there is such a question in the minds and hearts of our church communities is itself most significant. Such a question has come to expression only in very recent times. In the last generation, the established church traditions have all experienced decline² and it is clear that the pattern of church life which flourished in the 1950s and 60s can no longer be sustained. There are fewer active church members in our congregations and they comprise mainly older people; young people are showing little interest in participating in the established churches in the way that earlier generations of young people did. Congregations across rural and metropolitan areas are having to close down or amalgamate with neighbouring congregations, or seek an alternative means of survival. Church leadership is under stress – there are declining numbers of ordained leaders available to the churches and there are declining numbers of congregations who can afford to support them.

Some of the less established traditions of the church are doing better. There are indications that more 'experience'-based churches and those with less connection with traditional forms of church life are making inroads into the cultures of today – among older people as well as younger people³. For these churches, there is a greater sense of optimism and vitality.

But for all churches across Australia, the question: 'What future – our church?' remains significant. The fact is that, taking all manifestations of the church into account, a very small proportion of Australian people, across all age groups, are actively involved in the life of a church. We have to take seriously the claims and observations of those who tell us that there are serious challenges facing all churches in Australia. Well known missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, tracing the changes and challenges offered by contemporary western culture, asks us: '*Can the West be converted?*'⁴ Similarly, Alan Walker, well-known Australian Methodist evangelist, speaking from his familiarity with Australian church life, has declared: *The Western world is now the toughest mission field on earth. The whole church must come to*

¹ This article was first presented as a paper at the Missiology Conference in Melbourne in September 2005, the title of which was '*Reimagining God within Australian cultures*'.

² The National Church Life Survey reports over recent years have given clear and consistent documentation of this evolving reality.

³ Apart from anecdotal evidence which members of established churches are prone to offer, usually with a sense of envious enquiry: 'what are they doing which we are not?', the National Church Life Survey attests to this

⁴ The title of the series of Warfield Lectures offered by Lesslie Newbigin which he gave in Princeton Theological Seminary in 1984. Lesslie Newbigin's two publications: *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1990) give a most helpful and systematic insight into the issues of the relationship between the Gospel and western culture.

*the aid of stricken declining Western churches.*⁵ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, recent commentators and pioneers of new directions in church life in Australia, make the claim: *This is a time when the need for the gospel has seldom been greater, but the relevance of the Church has seldom been less. If ever there was a time for innovative missionary effort in the west, it is now.*⁶

In tackling the question of the future of the church in Australia, we need to understand not only what is happening but more importantly why it is happening. Unless we do, then one of two things will happen: we will continue to try and retain patterns of church life which, while serving us well in the past, are not the patterns which will serve us well in the future – we simply will not be able to sustain them. Alternatively, as we turn our backs on the traditional forms of church, we will develop new forms of church life which in the end will simply be captive to the culture in which we live. In our culture which is occupied with self-serving experiential individualism, the danger will be that new church forms will do no more than provide what the culture decides it needs and the people decide they want. Even if such a church may flourish, there is a real question as to whether it can in any sense be faithful to the gospel. Therefore, the question: What future – our church? is a very serious one for all churches, established or otherwise.

Among the myriad of reasons given for the decline and marginalising of the church in Australia, my own observation and assertion is that the most fundamental reason concerns the fact that the western world, and Australia within it, is going through one of the most profound periods of historical change and redefinition, and the Christian church is inevitably caught up in this.⁷ Unless this is understood, then our diagnosis of the current situation, and our response to it, will be wanting.

Why are we where we are?

What I will explain in some detail below can be summarised in the following way. The church in the western world has enjoyed a period of 'Christendom' for over sixteen hundred years. This period is now disintegrating under the weight of the Enlightenment and modernism, leading inevitably to the disintegrating and marginalising of the church. Assumed presuppositions about the church and its place in the world are then being radically redefined for the first time in the western world for some sixteen hundred years.

In a very general sense, the history of the church in the western world can be represented by four periods of mission: the Apostolic period, the period of Christendom, the post-Enlightenment (or Modern) period, and the Post-Modern period.

1. The Apostolic Period

The period starting from the days of the founding of the church until the early part of the fourth century can be referred to as the Apostolic period. It was a period where there were many faiths and beliefs; the church was a minority faith; Christians were culturally marginalised, politically powerless, socially without influence; it was not popular to be a Christian and members of the church were subject to persecution. During this period, people came into the church through conversion from another faith.

In this context, the church's mission was to go forth and share the gospel with a world which did not know anything about Jesus Christ. The word 'apostolic' comes from Greek and means 'to be sent out', which expresses the character of church mission in this period. The saying which is perhaps the most appropriate to capture the nature of this apostolic period of church history is the text from Acts 1:8: *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth*

2. The Christendom Period

The subsequent period of Church History can be called 'Christendom'. It began with the conversion to Christianity of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early part of the 4th century. After his conversion, the Christian Faith became the approved faith of the state. Effectively this dramatically changed the 'status' of the Christian Church in the society and was to have consequences for the church in the western world for centuries to follow.

The saying most suitably summarising the period of Christendom is the catechetical question and answer: *What is the chief end and purpose of human life – to glorify God and enjoy God forever.*⁸

⁵ From *World Parish* (Nov 1985) quoted in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12 no.3 (1988)

⁶ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003

⁷ In his book, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis, 1990, David Bosch sets out the history of mission and explains the current period of church history in the western world as one of only six periods of paradigmatic change in the history of the church. (see pages 181ff)

⁸ This question and answer comes from the Westminster Shorter Catechism and in its original context was actually a means by which the Westminster Divines set themselves apart from the state religion of the day. It was specifically

In this statement, the existence of God is assumed and not in question; the only question is about what it means to be human, and this question is answered in terms of relationship with God. God is assumed to be at the centre, and in the light of this, all things take their place and are defined. Note too that within this statement that there is a sense of meaning and purpose implied, together with an acknowledgement of the eternal nature of life with God.

God at the centre implies ... the church at the centre, so that in this period of the church's history ...

- every existing community has a church and every new community ought to have a church. In fact, for every community there are a number of churches, one for each of the established traditions.
- The whole population assumes they belong to the church even if they are not committed attenders of weekly worship
- The authority of the church extends over its members, and over society
- The church is central to the structure of the society: Sundays are Sabbath days, rites of passage (to do with birth, marriage and death) belong to the church (through baptisms, church marriages and funerals); politicians are assumed to be Christian and operate with Christian values (parliamentary sessions in Australia still begin with the Lord's Prayer); while it may be only the loyal church members who attend church with regularity, everyone attends at Easter and Christmas; the church runs social and sporting groups for all ages
- Christianity is the only publicly recognised faith
- There is an assumed permanence about church structures, buildings, liturgy
- The word 'sacred' refers to the church building

Even though the church in Australian history may never have been a 'Christendom' church in the strictest sense⁹, nevertheless, it is this past era which is the living memory of the contemporary established Australian churches and which has given general form to Australian church life.

3. The Enlightenment (or Modern) Period¹⁰

The Enlightenment is that period which marks the development of the sciences and the flowering of human reason; it is that period which evolved through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The adage most representative of the categories of the Enlightenment period is the assertion made by the French Philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650): *I think, therefore I am*.

In contrast to the adage identified for the period of Christendom, it is noteworthy that in this assertion, there is no mention of 'God'. The centre of the stage is now taken up by the human person, whose existence is assumed. In the light of the givenness of the human, the question now arises: is there a god? Note too that it is the 'I' of the human person which is at the centre rather than the 'we'. In other words, basic to Enlightenment development is the notion of human individuality which in its extreme form undermines any sense of 'community'. The validity of all things is determined by the individual human person: if it is true for me, then that is all that matters.

The category of 'thinking' as the one distinctive aspect of human life (*I think, therefore I am*), leads to an idolising of reason and education, which become the measure of successful and valued human life. With '*thinking humanity*' at the centre, all other things become objects for exploration and analysis. This has led to an emphatic development of the sciences, as all things in the world become subject to exploration. Issues of why things happen (cause and effect) replace matters of meaning and purpose. Anything which is not available for analysis and testing is devalued and marginalised, leading to dichotomies between natural and supernatural, public and private, facts and values, the scientific and the religious, with the latter of these couplets in each case being considered of less significance. Consistent with the Enlightenment outlook, there develops an optimistic view of the human person, and a view that history is about a progressive evolution to a better world.

A fundamental assumption of this new era, as already stated above, is that 'the human self' is located at the centre, while God is pushed to the edge if not out of the picture completely. The importance of this 'God on the edge' is that it leads to a situation where the church is on the edge, so that ...

for those who took seriously their commitment to the faith of the church and did not assume that they were automatically Christian by virtue of their birth or even their baptism. However, it is a useful way of summarising the presuppositions of the Christendom era, when the general population considered itself to be Christian, and to be living in a Christian society. This was the mark of the Christendom period.

⁹ Note for example Ian Breward's publication about Australian Church History titled: *Australia – 'The Most Godless Place under Heaven'*.

¹⁰ It is a matter of convenience in this summary that I am identifying the Enlightenment as the era which sows the seeds for the undermining of Christendom. It could be argued that the Enlightenment itself could not have occurred without the eras that immediately predated it, for example the Renaissance. However, it is the categories of the Enlightenment which have had the most profound impact on the dismantling of Christendom.

- The centrality of the church in people's lives is no longer sustained; fewer people choose to belong to the church; as a consequence there is a need for civil birth rites, civil marriages, civil funerals; Sunday is now a day with many options apart from going to church.
- The authority of the church diminishes while the individual authority of people over their own lives increases ... there is optional and irregular attendance at worship, and optional involvement in the church; politicians are no longer assumed to be Christian and the society distances itself from a Christian milieu and Christian values.
- The Church exists 'for the sake of satisfying the people' in a 'feel good' or self-authenticating society
- Denominational choice means denominational diversity and a wider array of churches
- As the past (Christendom) era disappears, so the form of church life marked by the past seems to be dying. This means that many people regard the church as old-fashioned, and belonging to the past
- The legacy at local congregational level is of small, ageing congregations, with burdensome buildings to care for.
- The Christian faith, as with all beliefs, becomes one of many possible privatised religious options

4. The Post-Modern Period:

If 'Modernism' is the description given to the sort of society which evolves out of the Enlightenment, then 'Post-Modernism' is a movement which is essentially a protest against the inadequacies and failures of the Enlightenment.

Thus, in post-modernism ...

- The 'I' is replaced by the 'we', so that there is a rejection of rampant individualism which marks the Enlightenment. Relationships and connectedness become important.
- The human person is understood to be more than a reasoning mind, and so in post-modernism, there is a rising tide of interest in the 'spiritual', and in human experience and validity is given to those things outside the limits of western science.
- The human person is in connection, not only with other humans, but with the whole of creation - this leads to an interest in environmental issues for the sake of human survival.
- Enlightenment's optimism about the human person becomes sobered by an awareness of human failure and brokenness.
- The notion of progress in society is replaced by a cautious self-criticism.
- Order is replaced by chaos and disorder.

Having said this, the period of Post-Modernism is still profoundly 'self-referencing'. In fact, some would claim that what distinguishes this emerging period is 'a search for a self-authenticating spirituality'¹¹. In this sense, Post-Modernism, is still very 'Modern' in its presuppositions, with its focus on the self, and the marginalising of God.

If we return to the question: 'why are we where we are in this period of the life of the church in Australia, then the answer is that we are in a period when the era of Christendom is fast coming to an end, and the categories of Modernism and Post-Modernism have established themselves in the human psyche and culture. Because cultural changes are phased in over generations, what we find in our present period is that all three eras: Christendom, Modernism and Post-Modernism, are evident, with a rapid diminishing of the foremost of these, namely Christendom.

Hence, one of the vivid realities of our time is the decline and disintegration of the life of the church which marked the era of Christendom. What is clear is that we shall not be returning to such an era and we must anticipate new forms of church life which respond to the current and emerging cultural contexts.

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¹¹ This is the term used by The Community of Hope, a new Christian movement which seeks to engage with the various contemporary forms of 'New Age' culture in Australia.