

## **The Future of Western Christianity and the State of the Church**

A well-known social commentator in Australia recently interviewed a Muslim scholar in Switzerland on national radio. During the program he complained about the state of Christianity in the West and admitted he had become an atheist because there was nothing in what he saw that attracted him to church as he grew up in Melbourne. He believed Christianity was out of fashion, irrelevant to people he knew and was too introspective. "There is too much focus on churches", he lamented. He may have been right.

### *Where to, church?*

The future of Christianity is not in doubt. The future of structures of "church", on the other hand, is more mercurial. That is because Christianity can cope with changing cultural contexts much better than most Christians can. One is administered by the Holy Spirit; the other by men and women with human weaknesses.

Like the story of the blind men and the elephant. None had ever seen an elephant and as each explored a different part of the great beast they disagreed about what it was really like. One felt a leg and stated the elephant was like a great tree. The other rubbed his hand against the side of the elephant and disagreed. "No", he said, "this animal is like a wall". The third held the tail and declared it was like a snake. Christians everywhere are familiar with certain elements of the multidimensional universal church but run the risk of concluding the expression they know (heritage, architecture, liturgy, worship style, doctrinal emphasis, functional framework, personalities) is the entire and genuine article. What we all need is a bit more intra-communal dialogue, bridge building and return to first principles. If not, we will end up following a well-worn but erroneous path. We will regard other Christians as the "enemy" and those who attempt to walk a middle path will suffer the fate of the man in the US Civil War who tried to bring about a truce by putting on both uniforms. They shot at him from both sides. Christians who attempt to bridge denominational chasms are all too frequently labeled controversial, dangerous or backslidden. (Most cultures regard minorities as dangerous.)

### *Bricks or people - a personal account*

I could tell that Louis was uncomfortable with my interpretation of the word "church". He came from a liturgical background, in which Sunday church services were rigidly structured, usually based on a written format. The order of events was predictable, some might say "safe". Strict protocols were observed and only professional clergy were entitled to exercise leadership. Their mode of dress made them distinct. The area around the altar was considered sacred. After all, the bronze plaque on the side wall declared that this particular

sanctuary had been “dedicated to the glory of God” by a particular official in the denomination. Like church buildings around the world, a huge cross confronted worshippers; beneath it stood a table covered with a white cloth decorated with a cross and weighed down at each end by a candlestick.

I am not against liturgy or nice appointments per se, where we assemble to worship. (God pays more attention to the heart than external features about which we are apt to have hang-ups.) Even the least overtly liturgical churches are structured. Go, for example, to any charismatic meeting. Typically, the Holy Spirit is “welcomed” to the “house of God” and services, meetings, or celebrations follow preordained patterns. Order is important. After all, “autonomy” all too often masks anarchy. Paul says so in the fourteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). But however we structure it, whatever terms we use, liturgy is never a substitute focal point for life.

My present interlocutor had grown up accustomed to patterns and hierarchies in his church in the Middle East. As a much-loved brother I felt I was free to challenge his assumptions about the nature of “church”. He was concerned about building maintenance, seating, parking and deference to those in authority. After all, the world *does* judge by external appearances and I would rather worship God in comfortable, aesthetically pleasing surroundings than uncomfortable and unpleasant ones. On the other hand, I was keen to stress that church is not the building, but people. God does not restrict himself to structures made with human hands – although the Scriptures affirm that, at times, he has chosen locations to reveal His presence and glory to men and women.

In the New Testament the word “church” denotes those who are “called out”, the “ekklesia” who follow Christ rather than the ways of the world. They physically live in the world (how could it be otherwise?), but they do not belong to it. Their loyalties are elsewhere. Their King is Jesus. This realignment of primary allegiance from Emperor to God was a major factor contributing to persecution of Christians under Rome and continues to be so in many parts of the world today. Every religion at the time of Jesus esteemed externalities, such as temples, idols, sacrifices, priests and ceremonies. Jesus turned every one of these practices on its head, emphasizing the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God.

Enjoy the building if you will – we all need a “home”, but millions of Christians do not have such a privilege. Equally, lose the building, for whatever reason, and the church does not automatically cease to exist. As much as I recoil at buildings constructed for the worship of God being converted into museums, shops or even mosques (as occurred to friends whose sanctuary proved too small for an expanding congregation), it is important to remember that people are eternal, edifices are not.

“Where did you get these ideas?” was my friend’s response. It was clear he believed my Western background did not enable me to see the beauty of the building. I replied that the concept of people as church came not from my culture, but a man, like him, of Semitic background. This was too much. After some debate, I revealed that the Christian I was quoting was the Apostle Paul. Born a Jew, educated in orthodoxy at the feet of one of the leading teachers of his day, exposed to Greek and Latin ideas, Paul emphasized people over forms and traditions. But he was certainly not a Westerner.

When we talk about the nature of the church, its mission, its God-given authority and its relevance to, and future in, a secular world, we must be careful not to limit our understanding to particular cultures or conventions. When all that we see around us is swept away, the Body of Christ will endure and triumph with Him.

Church is not a cathedral, a catacomb, a barn, a pilgrimage, a creed, an order, a uniform, a label, a form of ritual, a worship style, a revival meeting, a place to be seen at (or to avoid being seen at, depending on our societies’ expectations). It is people. Without wanting to be too much of an iconoclast, it is my conviction that we do not have to become clones of particular forms to be Christians. Otherwise we run the risk posed by “Judaisers” in the New Testament. Let me explain.

*You don’t have to become like “us” first*

The very first Christians were Jews. The coming of Jesus fulfilled Messianic expectations on the part of the Jewish people. For long centuries, Jewish girls hoped to be the mother of the Promised One. He would restore the “old” way of doing things and bring in a new era of Jewish suzerainty. While the ministry of Jesus, and his attitudes towards the positions of the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, religious lawyers and other officials was never about compliance with rigid external requirements, the Christian faith was nevertheless initially seen as a sect of Judaism. So, it made sense for those on the inside to assume that non-Christians had to come through their “front doors” to reach the Kingdom of God. The attitude went something like this: to become a Christian you must first become a Jew. The structure and apparatus, including circumcision, feasts, laws and commitment to the Patriarchs, was portrayed as an essential part of the faith. The shock came when the Holy Spirit began to reach out to Gentiles, saving Cornelius and others without Moses or the strict requirements of the Law. That was heresy to some people. This new religion was dangerous and potentially fatal to the old ways.

Hadn’t Jesus been accused of threatening to pull down the temple? He had caused chaos by overturning the tables of the money changers who had made the place where God was worshipped a commercial centre. Hadn’t Stephen alienated the Jews when he declared that the Most High “does not live in temples made by men” (Acts 7:48)? This had infuriated them and they had peremptorily

killed him. Too many vested interests were affected. The most visible result of their anger was a wave of persecution that drove Christians out of the building, out of Jerusalem.

Some of those who fled persecution were, nevertheless, committed to retaining as much of the traditional structure as they could. Wherever they went, they preached a Gospel mixed with their own tradition. Jews outside of the Holy City were confused, because they could not see how the new religion complemented the patristic traditions. Non-Jews were equally bemused, because they could not see the difference between Judaisers and the Jewish faith they had known. There was no incentive for Gentiles to accept Christ. The first church council (see Acts 15) produced a breakthrough; the central theme was about how Gentiles could be Christians outside of the traditional frameworks and still be pleasing to God.

The challenge for us today is to ensure we do not simply substitute “church” for “temple”, by inferring, “You must be a good Baptist, Methodist, Catholic or Anglican to be a Christian and get to heaven. You must not touch, taste or handle issues that are taboo in our circles (this was a failing in the Colossian church, cf Colossians 2:21).

Christianity is not about creating religious ghettos or comparing crowds. God’s strategy is not geared to building newer and better facilities for their own sake, but enlarging ~~the~~ His Kingdom through the power proclamation of the Gospel. When we say, “I’m going to church” we usually mean a venue. However, bigger buildings, programs or meetings do not necessarily constitute a bigger church. They simply denote a bigger organizational structure and a larger role.

Church is not an edifice, it is a hospital for the wounded, a spiritual emergency ward that offers unconditional acceptance, a practical training ground for the unlearned, a launching pad for world evangelism, a situation room where spiritual warfare can be organized and directed, a centre of excellence in Biblical instruction and worship, a light on a hill shining in a dark place, a refuge for the alienated, a show-place of godly living, a powerhouse for intercession, a terminus for Christian enterprises and ministries and a meeting place for people to prepare to go head-to-head with the world on matters of social importance. A large people base can facilitate a large vision, a magnet for others to be exposed to aspects of the Gospel, meet with believers, worship together and plan and caucus about how to take God’s love into the community. But that is only part of the picture. People do not have to become like us to be Christians.

The external nature of church will change. The way we “do” worship will evolve over time. As the world shrinks, cultural expressions of Christianity will collide and fuse. We should not be worried or defensive about this, as long as Christ is preached (Philippians 1:15-18).

### *From holy places to the Holy One*

In Lebanon I once visited the Qadisha Valley, the Holy Valley, where some locals say the original Eden was located. The Arabic name Ehden still bears the name. One of the community leaders took me to the roof of his house and pointed to the beautiful snow-covered mountains that culminated with majestic Jabal Lubnan, Mount Lebanon, overlooking ancient cedars, monasteries and modern ski resorts. "That is the Mountain of God". In the valley below, hermits still live in caves, visited only by those who take them food. There, in seclusion they pray and meditate about God and church tradition. In a church in the town centre a Christian warrior who fought the Ottomans lies in state in a coffin under a glass top, to be revered by all for his holy exploits. The cataclysmic civil war that raged in Lebanon during the last quarter of the twentieth century did not touch these villages. They had withstood earlier waves of Ottomans and other Muslim unbelievers. My reverie was interrupted by my host. "This is the true church". As we surveyed the apartment buildings of nearby Bchare, diminutive beneath the towering mountains and clinging precariously to the tops of the valley walls, there was a sense of holiness. But when I came away I was reminded that the church, the true church, is not about place or tradition. It is about Jesus.

The models with which we are all familiar in the West may be transmogrified into new styles, but Christianity will outlast them all. Our faith is not about styles or bricks that crumble. It is about the Gospel of Christ, the power of God that is able to save men and women (Romans 1:16). I do not have to join that man's church to be a functioning Christian. But I do have to join Christ. If Jesus is the centre, I will naturally want to fellowship with other Christians on a very regular basis, but nothing will dislodge Him from the throne. He is the Lord, and he will not give his glory to any other (Isaiah 42:8).