

Breaking Through The Barriers Of Faith Today
Brian Carrell

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The Christian Church in the Western world today faces unprecedented barriers to faith. They have not always been there. Many have grown up in less than a generation. But for a church which lives under the sign of the Great Commission they pose a challenge which cannot be evaded. The new situation we live in is one of crisis - and also of great opportunity. One thing at least is clear: in thinking about the church's calling to reach out into the world with the gospel of Christ, we must live in the world of today, and not the world of the past. For the spiritual geography of our country has changed out of recognition within our own lifetime.

Let me tell you about the world in which I grew up during the 1940's, the period of the Second World War, in a southern suburb of Christchurch, alongside the Heathcote River. It was a world in which God was 'in the air'. Not in a spooky sense; but everyone took it for granted that God was real and important. Nearly everyone in my primary school class went to Sunday School or to church somewhere. When it was appropriate the teachers without exception were able to talk naturally about God. We were taught to stand to attention and remove our caps when a funeral passed by. Some Protestant churches seemed always to have closed doors, but all Church of England and Catholic churches were always unlocked, day and night. The church I went to didn't even have a key!

Churches were not all full, and by no means did everyone go to church. But there were lots of them, all with their own ministers. And when Sunday came the whole neighbourhood quietened down and everyone knew that that was the day people went to Church. Sunday was patently a day for God. The Press and the Christchurch Star-Sun reported on the Anglican Synod, and the Methodist Conference, and the Presbyterian Assembly with care in those days. The press desk at Synod always had a roster of reporters on duty for any snippets of news. Rarely was a funeral not taken by a minister. The vast majority of children were baptized somewhere, and most weddings would take place in a church. There was no real embarrassment about believing in God - the objects of curiosity in that world were the occasional people who openly admitted being atheists or sceptics.

In brief, there existed what sociologist Peter Berger describes as a 'plausibility structure' for Christian faith. This was a legacy of Christendom, a legacy which, though we did not realise it then, was soon to run dry. But in those decades of the faith-filled 'forties and 'fifties we were still enjoying the afterglow of Christendom: Christian values were assumed as the cement of society, the Church was esteemed as the soul of the community, and God was there. This was the world in which I grew up during my formative years of primary and secondary schooling, and then student days: Anglican Bible Class Union Camps each January; a fifty-strong Sunday afternoon student bible Class; a Bryan Green mission packing Christchurch Cathedral; Martin Sullivan drawing in the crowds; and a highly successful Billy Graham Crusade at Lancaster Park in 1959. In this world I grew up with God and prayer and the Christian Way as near and natural to me as the air I breathed.

The Billy Graham Crusade of 1959 was the last really successful mass evangelism crusade in New Zealand. Later I would come to recognise it

as an event marking the end of Christendom in this part of the world. The following year the Soviets put their first man into orbit around the earth. Remember Yuri Gagarin? His comment on return to earth was: 'I looked around but I couldn't see God anywhere' This stunning achievement heralded the secular 'sixties, and indeed the beginning of a rapidly accelerating secularization of society in the Western world. The world we now live in is a different world: a world largely shaped not by our traditional Western Christian roots but by modernism; by the impact of cheap jet travel introduced in the 'sixties; by the influence of television, which was also established in New Zealand during that decade; and by the dazzling innovations of the technological age. We are no longer living now under the umbrella of Christendom; we are an openly and unabashedly secular society. This reality throws up all kinds of barriers to faith and effective evangelism today.

With that as introduction, let us try to understand this world of ours today a little better. We live in a society where three things have happened to religion:

1. The Practice of Religion has been Privatized

There was once a public dimension to the practice of religion. It was seen as important to society. There were many civic occasions of worship. Anzac Day was a big city event. Shops did not open on Sundays. The Church belonged in the community. God was God.

Now, however, we live in the age of the individual. We are strong on my needs, and my rights, and my freedoms. In the last twenty years even Christians have climbed on the bandwagon of promoting personal happiness as the goal of their gospel. This sounds good and commendable. But the effect of putting personal happiness at the centre has been to say that religion belongs in the private sphere and not in the public realm. We have contributed to our own irrelevance.

Another factor has been the way our modern industrial society has broken our lives into defined compartments - home and business; work and leisure; and so on. Faith and the Church, instead of being an integrating principle, has become just one more compartment we can move in and out of at will.

2. The Authority of Religion has been Relativized

Religion in a secular society becomes a smorgasbord: take your pick from all that is in front of you. It was formerly an unquestioned assumption that the Christian faith was true. Now it is one among several faiths, and it is a brave man or woman who would claim any kind of exclusiveness or uniqueness for this or that faith over the others. The spirit of the times sees much good and some truth in all religious systems. All are equally valid and should be equally available.

If this is so, no one religion can provide the moral base to society. The Ten Commandments as a moral foundation are replaced by 'what the public will accept'- and this changes from year to year. (Read the judgements of District Court judges where a moral issue is involved to see this illustrated.) We are in fact today a pluralist society where anything goes if it is found to be acceptable to most people. There are no absolutes and hence no sense of accountability except to

the rest of society. Life in the community is what we make it. No religion should tell us how to live.

3. The Place of Religion has been Marginalized

In a technological society God seems to be irrelevant. Answers to human needs can be found without turning to a supernatural being. Explanations of human mysteries can be provided without recourse to a sacred book. People do not feel the same need for religion in a modern secular society.

Not that religion is attacked - just neglected. In a secular society what we are up against is not so much unbelief as ignorance. The plausibility structure for faith has disappeared. This means that we have to start our evangelizing at a different point and continue it with different assumptions. We are not just appealing to a subconscious awareness of God that merely needs awakening and enlivening - we are addressing a people to whom the letters G-O-D mean nothing. The acids of modernity have burned deeply and destroyed the familiar landmarks of the soul.

What are the consequences of all this?

We have a changed landscape.

A couple of years ago we moved into a new home in Palmerston North. It has a magnificent view from my upstairs study window. But it is a changed view. Only five years ago I could have seen from this window All Saints' church tower, the Catholic Cathedral spire, St. Paul's Methodist church, and St. Andrew's Presbyterian church. But now there is only a hint of St. Andrew's; a glimpse of the Cathedral. Why? Because of the changed landscape. The churches in Palmerston North instead of being dominant features of the skyline, have been crowded out to become insignificant buildings on the sideline. This is a visual representation of what has happened to the place of the Church in society. `Christendom' has become post-Christendom. A friendly environment for the faith has become an alien atmosphere for the Gospel.

We have a bewildered Church.

The changes have caught most of us unawares. The gracious old ecclesiastical duchesses which are our traditional churches are for the most part ill-equipped to function in this different kind of world. All sorts of new churches and sects have sprung up to fill the vacuum. And this has caused dismay and confusion. Even those churches or denominations which have become aware of the decline of their traditional support-base have often been uncertain as to how to respond to this changed world around them.

We have a host of new opportunities.

The paradox is that in a secular society people are no less religious; it is rather that they express their religious aspirations and yearnings, their search for meaning and purpose and their sense of that which is beyond, in different ways. So we have a proliferation not only of new churches but also of sects. We have an unprecedented interest in the occult and in Eastern religions, as well as the secular idols of wealth and happiness like Lotto and Instant Kiwi. In all sorts of ways we see continued evidence of a religious side to human life which is reaching out for something more

than the dull routines of life provide. And in this there are many new opportunities for the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

How well-placed is the Church to take advantage of these opportunities? First two negatives, then two positives!

(i) The Church has herself been infected by secular values and aspirations.

In the way material needs and securities so often dominate the agendas of our parish and diocesan committees.

In our captivity to the 'instant reward' syndrome which panders to people's expectations of immediate returns at minimal costs for their faith investment. This has sometimes been described as a gospel of 'cheap grace' which minimises the cost of discipleship and the call to suffering and loss for the name of Christ. It is a 'good-times' message without a cross.

In the way church members critique everything their church does by its entertainment value. More than a generation of TV watching and changes in our education system to match this have produced an expectation that anything to be acceptable must be entertaining - even our worship, and major addresses at weekend conferences! If it is not entertaining it is out. This is a secular criterion, a learned cultural response to our world.

(ii) The Church is ill-equipped to minister effectively in a post-Christendom world.

This is especially true of the older, traditional churches, because they learned their skills, developed their expectations, compiled their libraries, trained their clergy, and even built their church plant in another era and for another age.

Some examples:

We have amassed a huge lumber of history and treasures of the past in both worship and organisation which take a lot of energy and time to dust, dry-clean and preserve.

The painful experiences of the last three decades have trimmed us down for the spiritual battle which is ahead of us.

We have many clergy and leading lay people who read the world wrongly. They who have a mind-set which assumes that most people underneath their apathetic exterior really have a grudging knowledge of and belief in God, that is, they assume that we face a 'user-friendly' world.

For generations we have neglected evangelism as a specific role and task so that today when we are in a missionary situation we do not have the tools to respond. How many Vestries plan to take on a staff-member, lay or ordained, whose principal role will be evangelism? What priority on our vestry agendas is given to issues of evangelism in our neighbourhood?

We do little to train our church members to live confidently and distinctively in an increasingly alien society. We assume that more or less they will live like everyone else, but with a little bit of worship on a Sunday and a modicum of giving through a stewardship

envelope scheme thrown in, and perhaps one other church-centred commitment.

Now let me be more positive about how the Church as we have it today is placed to break through the barriers to faith:

- (i) The Church is an increasingly fit and lean Church.

The painful experiences of the last three decades have trimmed us down for the spiritual battle which is ahead of us. We have, for good or ill, lost much of the dead weight of the nominalism which was a burden of Christendom. There today may be fewer people worshipping in our churches, smaller numbers of parents bringing children for baptism or young adults coming forward for confirmation. But there is a much higher proportion of commitment to Christ and his kingdom among those who come. What we have lost in quantity we have compensated for in quality. We have congregations who will be much more ready to hear and to heed the call to evangelism.

- (ii) It is an increasingly fearful and lost world.

Week by week people in droves are becoming disillusioned with the secular idols in which they had come to put their trust and hopes: the economy and its high priests of the Treasury; politics and its gospel, of whatever political flavour; education and its bright prophets who have promised so much for so long. Even the hedonistic idol of pleasure appears to be letting many of its devotees down. A recent article in the Dominion entitled 'Mid-life hunt for meaning' described the growing number of middle-aged workaholics who suffer from a growing awareness of emptiness and lack of fulfilment, and are increasingly disillusioned with life, especially when careers fail. This then is a crisis time for the Church, and for our society also. We either respond with faith and joy to the world we face, or we go under. The 'Decade of Evangelism' has been described as a fortuitous, hasty, inadequately conceived proposal which the Anglican Communion too easily adopted. For all that, it may prove to be an initiative of the Holy Spirit pointing the way we need to go, if we are going to be true to God and to our calling into the 21st Century.

Let me conclude by suggesting five factors for effective evangelism as the Gospel response of the Church in a secular society. These are not five options - as though any three will get a pass! A radical and across-the-board response is needed in each and all of these ways. They are five facets of one diamond.

1. We must become again a holy Church, that is, a body of believers whose life corporately and individually is characterized by the Holy Spirit rather than by the spirit of the age. This will mean:

- Identifying and dealing with the secular infection which so often blights our life as a Church and as Christians;
- Intentional training of our church members to be disciples of Jesus Christ in a post-modern world;
- Thinking through and clearly communicating the 'kingdom values' and the 'kingdom ethic' for our day in such a way that the council labourer on a road works gang, or the businessman, or the solo mum will know how to live out their faith in their daily life and work. This is what the apostle Paul did through his letters for the Christians of his time. We need to do the same for ours.

2. We must create a new plausibility climate for the Gospel. That is, we must make the Gospel a more serious contender for the minds of modern men and women. This will mean:

- Challenging many of the secular assumptions of contemporary education, science and values. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin and the Gospel and Culture project, and the C.S. Lewis Centre under Dr. Andrew Walker are prime examples of this happening overseas. (See Dr Turner's article in this issue of Latimer for a fuller discussion of this point.)
- Producing a theologically literate and articulate laity who can account confidently for the faith they hold before friends and fellow-workers. (We must acknowledge here the value of the work of Education For Ministry, Kerygma, Bible College of New Zealand etc.). This point is really about pre-evangelism: ploughing and harrowing the soil so that when the seed is sown it falls into good soil. Under Christendom, pre-evangelism was unnecessary: the soil was ready. Today we are working in a different paddock. We have to work harder to produce a crop.

3. We must authenticate our Gospel by showing what it is like. We live in a world which has been conditioned through television and scientism to believe only what can be seen. If the gospel of God's love reaching out in Jesus Christ is to be credible in our kind of world, we have to demonstrate it in how we live both as churches and as individual believers. Is there an alternative way of living to that which is all around us? Is there an alternative, credible world-view which gives meaning to life? Then we must show this as well as tell it.

4. We must reclaim the public domain for Christ. We must not give in to the privatising pressures of secularism. This will mean setting aside resources of people and time and finance and recognition to ensure that there are qualified men and women able to speak where people will listen.

Prime examples of folk in the Church who have already taken commendable initiatives in this direction are Richard Randerson and Charles Waldegrave. Let us not begrudge our share in financing these initiatives when discussion of our diocesan levies next comes up. When we talk of evangelism there is a broad canvas for our response, as well as a particular depiction of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Evangelism in its widest sense encompasses both.

5. We must gear all we do to evangelism. The criterion must always be: does this proposal, this activity, this group, make known in deed or word the good news of Jesus Christ? Evangelism today need not mean a regurgitation of evangelistic ways and means which were appropriate in the era of Christendom, e.g. monthly Guest services, house to house letter-box drops, city-wide campaigns, personal button-holing of strangers, altar calls at Sunday worship. There will be other styles which are more suited to a post-Christendom age. In a post-Christendom world the local church will be the most effective unit of evangelism. But that is another subject that deserves separate and closer attention.

<I>Rt Rev Brian Carrell is Assistant Bishop of Wellington, and a Vice-President of Latimer Fellowship.</I>