



Latimer Focus

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Rev. Mark Hood

Editorial

Welcome to our Summer edition of Focus.

In the Great Commission, the risen and ruling Lord Jesus famously commands his church to make disciples. The kind of disciples intended are people from every nation who are baptised into the triune name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; these disciples are to be hearers of God's every word, and not hearers only, but doers of that same word, 'obeying everything I have commanded'. These disciples are to also be those shaped by the presence of the indwelling Spirit: because unique to the Christian faith, the Lord our God is with us '...always, to the very end of the age.' (Matt 28:16-20).

Similarly, the Apostle Paul exhorts the church to 'offer your bodies as a living sacrifice'. This is a discipleship which involves saying no to the world, 'do not be conformed to the pattern of this world', and yes to the word of Christ 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind'. (Romans 12:1-2). These are two foundational texts for our churches as we faithfully go about our work of ministry, the work of making disciples.

Humanly speaking, this work of forming disciples seems almost impossible. For one reason, there is so much to learn: of God our Maker; of the enslavement of sin; of the Lord Jesus Christ; his incarnation; his rescue at the cross; his resurrection; ascension; rule and return; of the Holy Spirit and his miraculous regeneration, his sanctifying, the growing of his fruit in our churches, his perseverance and finally his glorification. At the same time, there is so much to unlearn – because the world is not neutral to these foundations of faith but opposed. For another reason, it's one thing to learn Christ, it's another thing entirely to walk in step with the Holy Spirit. How is the church faring in the fruit of the Spirit? Growing in gentleness, love and self-control? The task is so difficult!

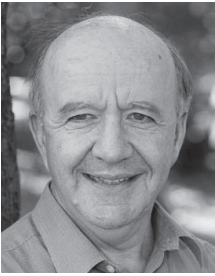
Thankfully it is the Lord Jesus who is the master builder: "I will build my church". Thankfully, He is the one overseeing the life of his church (moving 'among the lampstands' Rev 1:13). Thankfully, transformation comes by the Spirit of the Lord who uses 'jars of clay' in the ministry which brings life.

Humanly speaking, the work of forming disciples seems slow. In the case of Romans 12:2, because transformation into the image of Christ begins by taking the word into the mind and having it do the deep work of changing the heart, such that God's will is (eventually) seen for what it really is: good, pleasing and perfect. At the same time, transformation *into* Christlikeness is slow because it is also transformation *out from* worldliness. 'Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world'. The flipside of the Great Commission is if we're not being formed into disciples of Christ, we are being conformed as disciples of this world. The world seeks to form people to be its own 'chip off the ol' block'. The world in rebellion to our Maker, seeks to have men and women so shaped according to its desires and priorities, that Christlikeness is neither known nor sought.

In this edition of Focus, we explore gospel ministry in contemporary culture, out of our desire to see churches growing into greater Christlikeness.

A number of years ago, John Stott used the analogy of 'double-listening' to describe the work of ministry. By this he meant prioritising listening to the authoritative Word of God, and at the same time listening to the voices of our modern world with the aim of faithful gospel communication: of helping people hear the call of Christ and respond.

In these pages, from various angles we explore the intersection of contemporary ministry in contemporary culture. Our interest in doing so is to spur on the effort required in reaching people who live in and are shaped by culture. We want to do all we can to help people hear the call, summons and invitation of Jesus Christ, turn away from the world, turn to Him and live. He is the one who is transforming a people from every nation, every culture, every language. It's into his image and likeness that the Spirit is at work in his church. John writes: *'The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is'* (1 John 3:1-2).



Rev. Dr Peter Adam

Cultural awareness in Christian ministry

Editor: Recently Peter Adam joined us for our annual Latimer Fellowship ministry retreat and spoke encouraging our renewed prayers and trust in the Lord. Here, from his writing ministry, Peter challenges those engaged in Christian ministry towards greater cultural self-awareness, such that we can better cross cultures with the gospel. This long article was originally written in two parts and is here reproduced with permission¹.

PART ONE: THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL AWARENESS

What is 'Cultural Awareness'?

Human culture is the patterns of thought, relationships, values, beliefs and behaviour expressed in any human community. It is usually assumed and accepted without critical reflection. It is universal but, of course, expressed in different ways: There is Western culture, Chinese culture, 21st century culture, 16th century culture, European Culture, Australian culture—and within Australia there is outback culture, rural culture, regional culture, suburban culture, inner-city culture, wealthy culture, middle-class culture, working-class culture, and welfare culture. There is also indigenous culture and the different cultures of each immigrant group. Different age-groups have different cultures. Different sports have different cultures.

While we think of national groupings, 'Australian' [or *New Zealander*] as a main cultural grouping, 'sub-cultures' are even more powerful. Imagine what would happen at a party if you invited bankers and bikies! Culture unites, and cultures divide. Music is an excellent example of human culture. In some nations, there is one national style of music, which unites the nation. In most nations, there are many different musical cultures, and so music divides. You may even experience musical cultural divide or cultural divide between different age groups in your church!

Human culture shapes our identity. When we meet people with the same culture, we feel

an immediate affinity. When we meet people of a different culture, we may enjoy the differences, or we may be repelled by some of them.

When do we use Cultural Awareness?

We use it when we read the Bible

Here are some examples:

- Abraham was a nomad, and that is how we read of the way he lived in the promised land. The fact that he was a nomad does have theological significance, but it was also a normal mode of life in that time.
- In the Old Testament, the word 'gate' or 'gates' refers to the gates of a city or village, not, as we might expect, the gates of private houses. So in Deuteronomy 6:9, to write God's law 'on your gates' means on the gates of your village or city, where public affairs are discussed and legal transactions made.
- We might think that the many concubines of Solomon or the king of Persia signifies immense sexual greed. But in those days great rulers used concubines to support political alliances, as well as for their beauty and sex.

Bible Culture and Genre

Each literary style in the Bible is an expression of the culture of its day, including history, poetry, wisdom, parables, prophecy, apocalyptic, and letters.

God's creation and salvation plan is worked out in human history, as his verbal revelation is given in human words. God's works and his words are expressed in human culture, and

¹ Part one of this article was published here: <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cultural-awareness-christian-ministry/>. Part two (included here with permission) is not otherwise published.

his personal presence in his incarnate Son is also an enculturated event and presence.

As we read the Bible carefully, we are aware that many different cultures are described, including ancient Middle East, Egyptian, Canaanite, Israelite, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. And there are also different subcultures within these cultures, including the poor and the rich.

Then we are aware of the different sub-cultures of the Holy Land in Jesus' day, including 'sinners', 'lepers', gentiles', 'Roman officials', 'Pharisees', 'Sadducees', 'women', people who are ill, 'Samaritans', 'Galileans', and visitors from the Jewish diaspora. In the gospels we see how Jesus was adept at cross-cultural and cross-sub-cultural relationship and communication.

We use cultural awareness in interpreting Jesus words, including 'if your eye offends you, tear it out and throw it away', 'take up your cross' (Matthew 5:29; 10:38). Language, literary style, and genre, are all aspects of human culture. The Bible is not a product of 21st Century human culture, and good translations convey the meaning without losing the cultural distance.

You may say that all of these are obvious, and not worth mentioning. But the fact that you recognise them, and assume them, means you have already employed cultural awareness, even if you don't know it!

Paul and Culture

Acts, Revelation, and the New Testament letters introduce us to some of the different cultures and sub-cultures of the Roman Empire. In his role as apostle to the Gentiles, Paul provides a vivid example of cross-cultural awareness. He recognises the difference between the theological and cultural requirements of the Old Testament and the theological and cultural requirements of contemporary Judaism. He enables

"One danger for ministers is that we imagine that everyone else is just like us and treating them accordingly. We need to be in the business of conforming people to Christ, not to ourselves!"

Gentiles to embrace the former (as they are fulfilled in Christ) and helps deliver them from the latter. This task requires theological clarity and cultural awareness.

Paul's wisdom is expressed in these words:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some (1 Corinthians 9:19-22 NRSV).

This cultural wisdom is also expressed in the practicalities of his ministry: for example, Timothy is circumcised, and Titus is not (Acts 16:3, Galatians 2:3). Paul deals with the application of food laws and idolatry with theological clarity, cultural awareness, and pastoral sensitivity (Romans 14:1-15:13, 1 Corinthians 8,10 etc.)

We need to use cultural wisdom in our ministry every day

One danger for ministers is that we imagine that everyone else is just like us and treating them accordingly. We need to be in the business of conforming people to Christ, not to ourselves!

Here is a check-list that we must learn to use instinctively:

- age,
- gender,
- social background,
- ethnicity,
- religion,
- Bible knowledge,
- character,
- health,
- politeness,
- communication style,
- life-stage,
- intelligence,
- openness to new ideas,
- way of learning,
- flexibility,
- energy,
- politics,
- interests,
- etc.

The more varied the people to whom you minister, the more cross-cultural awareness you need. Some who do not see the need for cross-cultural awareness can still do excellent ministry in one niche context—for example among: youth, students, traditional or radical people, those who are ill. Their challenge will come when their work begins to take in people from other cultures.

I used to say to young people about to be ordained to serve in a traditional Anglican church: ‘Think of it as cross-cultural ministry.’ And to youth workers: ‘In five years’ time young people will have a new culture—get ready for it!’ Because one of the extraordinary features of Western culture is the rapid rate of cultural and sub-cultural change. We all need cross-cultural awareness and cross-cultural adaptability. One of the extraordinary features of Western culture is the rapid rate of cultural and sub-cultural change. We all need cross-cultural awareness and cross-cultural adaptability.

God of All Cultures

- We believe in a cross-cultural God, whose gospel works in every culture and sub-culture; and who can be served in any culture and sub-culture.
- We believe in Christ who came to save people from every culture and sub-culture.
- We believe in a Holy-Spirit inspired Bible which can be translated into every culture and sub-culture.
- We believe in the church—the people of God—which includes people from every culture and sub-culture. We know that Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations, and that people from every tribe and language and people and nation will worship the Lamb.

Growing in cultural awareness and cultural adaptability is a human duty, and a Christian privilege. And it is essential to Christian ministry!

Prayers for cultural wisdom

‘Dear Heavenly Father, please grow in me the ability to be all things to all people, for their benefit, for gospel growth, and for your glory. Amen’

‘Praise be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation and comfort...’
(2 Corinthians 1:3)

PART TWO: GROWING IN AWARENESS OF OUR OWN CULTURE OR SUB-CULTURE

Why does this matter?

- 1. We need to be aware of our own culture lest it rule us invisibly but effectively, and damage our relationships and our ministry to others**

Other peoples’ culture or sub-culture is often obvious to us. They wear the wrong

clothes, speak the wrong languages, get upset at the wrong things, communicate the wrong way, have the wrong patterns of behaviour, and don't seem to be aware of how obvious their culture or sub-culture is!!

Our own culture or sub-culture is often invisible to us. It is the way we were brought up, the culture of our generation, the culture of our friends, patterns of behaviour which are obviously right, and which we follow instinctively, automatically, and unconsciously.

Why should we learn enough cultural awareness, cultural intelligence to recognise the culture we practise? There are four very important reasons:

- i. **Because some of our automatic and unconscious thoughts, word and actions may be sub-Christian and sinful.** They are so dangerous, because we don't know we are doing them, and they are reinforced, supported, and endorsed by our friends and family who share our culture or subculture. They can be even more destructive than our conscious sins, because they are repeated and reinforced every day. Habit makes them comfortable and reassuring. Repeated actions or words speak very powerfully.
- ii. **Because we are blind to our cultural and sub-cultural sins in ourselves, we are also blind to the same sins in others who are like us.** So, we are not able to challenge or rebuke them, or pray for their transformation. We owe them this debt of love, and are unable to pay it. Our close relationship gives us the opportunity to serve them, but we fail to exercise this vital ministry, because we are blind. The negative features of our unconscious culture or sub-culture may effectively undermine our conscious positive intentional actions.

iii. **Because we tend to keep people of other cultures and sub-cultures at a distance, because we regard them as putting up unnecessary barriers, of failing to understand the right way of doing things!** This diminishes us as humans and as Christians; and it means that we cannot understand or support them. Here is another debt of love we fail to pay.

iv. **Because our ministry to fellow-believers, and to unbelievers, is hindered and marred by our tendency to make them in our own cultural image or sub-cultural image, rather than in the image of God and of Christ.** 'Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all' [Colossians 3:11]. A tendency to ignore differences in human cultures inhibits the range of our ministry. We are effective with people like us, but not effective with people who are not like us. We are failing to recognise the richness of humanity, which is expressed today in many cultures and sub-cultures, not just our own.

Curiously enough, we allow ourselves to appreciate the food of other cultures: but that is as far as it goes!

No doubt you will have heard the expression, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'. It means that whatever strategy we plan to implement, it may easily be frustrated by our culture. My version of this expression is that 'Culture eats theology for breakfast'. Whatever theology we believe and try to practise may so easily be frustrated by our culture, our usual way of doing things, what we regard as perfectly normal. **Lack of cultural self-awareness will hinder our humanity, our Christian lives, our ministry to other believers, and our evangelism.**

"Evangelicals often pride themselves in the purity of their doctrine and grasp of Biblical truth. But we rarely notice how our tradition has been profoundly influenced and shaped by our historical cultural context."

Here are some examples, to help you understand what I am talking about.

One widely recognised feature of Australian culture is that of putting people down, of insulting them, as a sign of affection and acceptance. As Don Carson observes, you know you are welcome in Australia when people start insulting you! When I began ministry at St Jude's in the 1980s, I used to do this publicly, and it seemed to work. But then I realised that it had become inappropriate. Women did not appreciate it. Young people were easily offended by it. As the church grew in numbers, new-comers who did not know me were unnerved by it. People from other countries did not understand it, and it alienated them. Even if I did not do it to people who would not like it, if I did it to some and not others, it would look odd. And if I did it to some, others might worry that it might happen to them. So I stopped [I hope!].

I notice a similar issue in some marriages. A husband or wife may be loving to their spouse in private, but in public, at a party, for example, they get into the habit of insulting them. For example where a husband says of his wife, 'Grace could get lost in a supermarket, and one day she will forget her own name'; or where a wife says of her husband, 'Jim thinks he can fix anything: you should see the messes he makes'. Friends cheer on those who make comments like this, and anyone who makes them gets a reputation as a wit. But I always watch the spouse who is on the receiving end of these comments. Their tight lips tell their own story.

We automatically express our cultural captivity in our instinctive racism, and our instinctive prejudices. How easy it is in conversation to favour males, or favour females, or favour beautiful people, or wealthy people, or clever people, or Alpha males or females, or people we know. When we favour some, we diminish others.

If our own personal culture can rule us invisibly but effectively, to the great detriment of gospel ministry, the same is true of our 'evangelical tribe' culture.

2. We need to be aware of our own culture because it has shaped evangelical culture.

Evangelicals often pride themselves in the purity of their doctrine and grasp of Biblical truth. But we rarely notice how our tradition has been profoundly influenced and shaped by our historical cultural context. Again, 'Culture eats theology for breakfast'!

Here are some signs of this cultural captivity that we do well to reflect upon:

- **We are deeply individualistic**

We favour personal Bible reading and prayer over hearing the Bible together and praying together in church. We focus on personal and individual evangelism, rather than winning families or communities. In our preaching and teaching of the Bible we apply it to individuals, even when the Bible itself addresses God's people, the church.

Young Christians ask questions like, 'Do you have to belong to a church to be a Christian', when the message of the Bible is that God has created his people and saved his people, and invites us to join his people. Young Christians ask questions like, 'Do I have to be committed to global mission?' when the message of the Bible is that of God's plan for his world. We often present the

gospel in individualistic terms, 'God has a wonderful plan for your life'; 'You must make God your king'; 'Christ died for you'; 'There are two ways for you to live'. Actually, the Bible more often presents the gospel as what God and Christ have done for their people, for the world. 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'; 'I lay down my life for the sheep'; 'Christ loved the church and gave himself for her'.

We are more likely to read the Bible in an individualistic way because the English word 'you' can either refer to one person, or to many. So often in the Bible, 'you' actually means 'youse', or 'you-mob' (two Australianisms!), but our natural tendency is to think it means 'you', an individual.

This individualism has sometimes been sanctified in our history in a commitment to 'the right of private judgement'. We do have a duty of personal reading, understanding and acceptance, but this sometimes results in a situation well described as 'Everyone is his or her own Pope'!

Why are we individualistic? Because our faith has been greatly influenced by the individualism of the European Enlightenment of the 17th-19th centuries, with its focus on individual responsibility, over against external authorities, with the statement 'I think, therefore I am', basing certainty in the individual, and the rise of freedom of individual thought, individual expression, and individual rights. This individualism has been reinforced by the Romantic Movement of the 19th Century, with its celebration of personal emotion as a response to beauty, music, or art. So that what was 'most real' was what individuals 'most felt'. Whereas the Enlightenment was intellectual and cognitive individualism,

this was emotional individualism. These tendencies were increased in the 20th Century, with the rise of Existentialism and Post-Modernism.

- **Individualism leads to competition**

Our individualism in Western society has also been shaped by our Capitalism, with its inherent competition. Individualistic Capitalism makes it possible for individuals to better themselves by gaining wealth, and gaining wealth becomes competitive. Evangelicals have absorbed this competitiveness. In the 19th Century in Australia, Christian denominations and churches fought to build larger and more impressive church buildings than their opponents!

Nowadays competitiveness is often found among ministers. We evaluate ourselves against other ministers. We boast of more conversions, larger congregations, and high public profiles. We envy other ministers their success, their gifts, their opportunities, their profile. Competition is the enemy of mutual encouragement and support, and is the antithesis of the New Testament standard of gospel cooperation.

- **The Enlightenment suspicion of the supernatural has led to our current silence about angels, Satan, and evil spirits.**

We pride ourselves in developing a Biblical mind, yet we are so often silent if not embarrassed about angels, Satan, and evil spirits. Even when we preach expository sermons, which should lead us to teach about these issues, we are reluctant to do so, possibly because we are reacting against those who over-emphasise them. But reaction against error is no way to find the truth!

- **The Enlightenment suspicion of the supernatural has led to our neglect of prayer.**

We tend to do our ministry and live our lives in an Enlightenment world, in which all the responsibility and all the power is exercised by us, not by God. We tend to function as Deists, believing that God created the world, but now it is up to us to make it work. We think that as long as we keep Biblical rules about how ministry should be done, or as long as we follow the patterns of ‘successful ministries’, then we will succeed. Constant dependence on God is marginalised, and so we are relatively prayerless, when compared with Christians in the past, or other Christians today².

- **The Enlightenment suspicion of the supernatural has led to our neglect of the second coming of Christ.**

We have an Enlightenment focus on *this* world, of observable, measurable and predictable realities. We tend to think of death as loss, not gain, and we think of the return of Christ the same way! ‘Come, Lord Jesus’ is no longer our frequent prayer. We dare not pray the opposite[!], but do not pray this Biblical prayer.

- **The Romantic movement has made us focus on emotion, rather than intellect.**

We have followed our world in trusting our hearts, in constantly asking ourselves ‘How do I feel’, and constantly asking others, ‘How do you feel?’ We evaluate people and activities, by our feelings. The Romantic movement has made us distrust institutions, and value spontaneous prayers over prepared

prayers, even though we are happy to sing prepared songs!

- **We have absorbed the cultural arrogance of our Western culture.**

Of course, there are many good gifts of God reflected in Western culture, and I am profoundly thankful for them. But those good gifts should not blind us to our weaknesses, they do not justify our arrogance, and they do not justify our lack of recognition of God’s good gifts in other cultures.

- **We have absorbed the quest for personal happiness and fulfilment from our Western culture.**

Christians in the past used to pursue holiness: we tend to pursue happiness, self-fulfilment, safety, luxury, and self-indulgence. Personal self-sacrifice and suffering for our own sake [our growth in Christ], for the sake of others, or for the sake of Christ is curiously absent. We have swallowed the pop-psychology lie that self-denial damages us, and that our moral duty is to realise our full potential for happiness. Christ dignified self-sacrifice, as he dignified suffering and serving others. We have lost that Christ-like and Christ-shape dignity in our shallow but urgent quest for happiness and fulfilment.

The now-dated words of Amy Carmichael make my point.

No Scar?

Hast thou no scar
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,
Hast thou no scar?

² Editor: At the recent Latimer retreat, Peter challenged us to go back and read Acts 6:4. We often read this as ‘the ministry of the word and prayer...’ – focusing on our abilities ahead of our dependence. It’s worth looking up the reference to see the Apostolic priority.

Hast thou no wound?
 Yet I was wounded by the archers,
 spend,
 Leaned Me against a tree to die; and
 rent
 By ravening beasts that compassed Me,
 I swooned:
 Hast thou no wound?
 No wound, no scar?
 Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,
 And, pierced are the feet that follow
 Me;
 But thine are whole: can he have
 followed far
 Who hast no wounds nor scar?

Our cultural captivity profoundly shapes our ministry without us even noticing. We need to read the Bible afresh and ask God to reveal our blindnesses, our sub-cultures, and our prejudices. We need to seek God's help to escape our cultural captivity, and to enable us to minister in a way that seeks for transformation into the image of Christ, and not into the image of our own culture.

May God in his mercy shape us in Biblical truth by his Spirit.

"Christians in the past used to pursue holiness: we tend to pursue happiness, self-fulfilment, safety, luxury, and self-indulgence. Personal self-sacrifice and suffering for our own sake [our growth in Christ], for the sake of others, or for the sake of Christ is curiously absent. "



Rev. Ron Hay

Godless in God's own?

After a very lengthy delay the results of the 2018 New Zealand Census have now been released. In commenting on the religious affiliation section of the census, the editorial in the Christchurch Press on the 27 September 2019 asked the question "Has Godzone turned Godless?" At first sight the answer seems to be a resounding "yes". This is the first census in which the proportion of people who recorded "no religion" (48.6%) has exceeded the proportion who identified themselves as Christian (38.6%). In 2013 the respective percentages were 38.6% and 43.5%.

This crossover in the last five years is striking, but was entirely predictable in view of the trends of the last seventy years. Within our generation there has been a massive and persistent decline in religious affiliation. The contrast between the latest statistics and those of the 1951 census are remarkable. Then the "no religion" proportion of the population was 0.6%, while 87% identified as Christian.

The growth of secularism and the decline of the church is a phenomenon of our times throughout the western world and is as marked in Aotearoa New Zealand as anywhere. It is clear that the so-called mainline Protestant denominations in particular have haemorrhaged heavily. This is particularly so with the Anglican Church which was for many years the most populous denomination in Aotearoa New Zealand but has been surpassed in recent years by the Catholic Church.

The reasons for growing secularism are not hard to find. Vastly increased affluence, rising life expectancy and spectacular technological advances have all contributed to a this-worldly materialistic perspective. Who needs God when life is cosy and we are in control of our own destiny? The prospect of looming climatological disaster has not yet significantly dented our complacency, and modern medical care enables us to push the awareness of mortality to the edges of consciousness.

The church is also hugely responsible for its own decline. A major factor has been the spread of liberal theology which results in the church having no distinctive message to proclaim and looking simply like humanism

with a few ritualistic trappings. Who needs a church which does nothing more than encourage us to be kind and loving when most of us live by that ethic already? When New Zealand's most widely known theologian is an atheist clearly something major is amiss.

Sometimes, too, local churches have been stuck in traditional ruts and slow to adjust their culture and music styles to contemporary society. Spiritual seekers are not attracted by having to step back decades in cultural time. Churches which have a creative and contemporary style plus a distinctive message have thrived and grown. Many of these are independent churches or recent denominations that have sprung up and are worshipping in non-traditional buildings.

For me, however, one of the most intriguing features of the religious affiliation category of the last census lies not in the growth of the "no religion" category or in the decline of church affiliation. I'm struck by the fact that, while the "no religion" category has continued to grow, only 7,000 people put themselves down as atheists. That is 0.15% of the New Zealand population. With the great decline in church adherence I would have expected to see the number of atheists soaring. But that is not the case.

Obviously, Richard Dawkins has a few hard-core disciples, but the vast majority of those who have abandoned the church have not necessarily abandoned belief in God or in something beyond this life. The census records religious affiliation, but it does not measure personal belief. And as the Press pointed out, recent surveys both here and

in the US reveal a significant percentage of people who don't identify themselves as Christian but believe in God or a higher power. The Press editorial comments that this "suggests a sense of yearning or spiritual wonder remains even when organised religions decline, and that a partially formed sense of something greater than us may even be central to the human condition." That is quite a comment from the secular media.

Christians would say that "a partially formed sense of something greater than us" is indeed central to the human condition. And the message of biblical Christianity is that the partially sensed something or Someone has been revealed and made known to us in human history through the prophets of the Old Testament and pre-eminently in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He invites us to move beyond wondering and yearning with the words, "Come, follow me."

"Who needs God when life is cosy and we are in control of our own destiny? The prospect of looming climatological disaster has not yet significantly dented our complacency, and modern medical care enables us to push the awareness of mortality to the edges of consciousness."



Geoff Robson

Drowned in a sea of irrelevance

Several years ago, a friend and ministry colleague in Sydney was invited to be a guest on Australia’s highest-rated TV morning show. His church’s building is located on a major road, and they’d been posting a series of thought-provoking signs that drew enough public attention to earn him his ‘15 minutes’. He used it shrewdly, speaking to the nation of God’s love for the world and the hope that Jesus offers. But he also tried to highlight the larger aim of the exercise: these days, few people take time to ponder life’s big questions—why am I here, is there a God, what’s it all about? They posted those signs, he explained, because they longed to make people stop and *think*.

It was a terrific segment, but it came with a deliciously ironic sting in the tail. My friend’s brief moment was immediately followed by an appearance from K-pop star Psy, who performed his viral mega-hit *Gangnam Style* in a nearby plaza. So one guest passionately urges viewers to focus on the things that really matter, then (after a commercial break, of course) we witness thousands of people gathered to watch some Korean bloke do a horsey dance.

It was a perfect illustration of something that poisons the collective mind of 21st century Western culture: a growing inability and, dare I say, unwillingness to think deeply.

Our electronic media drive relentlessly toward the trivial (“if it bleeds, it leads”). Our urge for constant entertainment is met with countless options that are, quite literally, at our fingertips. Everything—from the important to the unimportant, from the life-changing to the twee—blends together in one big pool of mind-numbing distraction.

Thoughtful Christians will have noticed these dynamics playing out in our culture and started to consider how they shape life and ministry. It’s something I’ve pondered at length over the last few months, largely as part of taking a group of university students away for a ‘digital detox’ weekend. The preparation for that weekend was genuinely scary. The more you examine the all-encompassing presence of digital technology, the more you become concerned over what this might be doing to our evangelism, our discipleship, our minds, and our hearts.

We are a very long way down the road of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

That’s the title of Neil Postman’s seminal 1985 book, subtitled *Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. You might be forgiven for wondering what a 34-year-old book could have to offer in the age of the smartphone, but most of Postman’s insights are frighteningly prescient and gloriously relevant as we prepare for the 2020s.

If you’ve reached a point where you know your own ministry, or perhaps your personal life, would benefit from some sustained reflection on the place of electronic media, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is well worth your time. It will do more than any other book I know of (apart from the Bible, of course) to help you see the dangers and feel the urgency of addressing them. You’ll need to do some updating for the internet age, but the key principles are all here.

And let’s face it, these issues absolutely demand careful attention. For one thing, Christians—those whom God commands to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2)—should care more than anyone about our culture’s collective ability to think, ask big questions, listen to more than a soundbite, and engage in serious but respectful disagreement. What’s more, digital technology is so pervasive that there’s really no way we’ll drift into seeing all the issues with clarity. If we just let ourselves go with the flow, the negative effects of technology are likely to overwhelm us before we’ve even noticed.

That's why a companion like Postman can be so useful. And many of his points continue to hit the mark. For example, his chapter entitled "Now ... This" contains his critique of the way that electronic media fragments information, disconnecting everything from everything else. 'There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, "Now ... this.'" And what is the internet, what is social media, if not the ultimate form of 'Now ... This' information delivery?

Perhaps the insight that packs the greatest punch comes in the foreword, where he contrasts two competing dystopian visions of the 'future' (i.e. our present): George Orwell's fear that 'Big Brother' would watch and control our every move, as depicted in *1984*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, in which a future 'World State' is insidiously controlled by psychological manipulation. Postman presents his entire book as being about "the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right". It's worth quoting him at length here:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared that we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared that we would become a trivial culture... In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

"Taken for what it is—namely, a searing indictment of our society's relentless pursuit of entertainment and the way this corrupts almost everything—*Amusing Ourselves to Death* is as good as it gets."

As Huxley himself observed, *1984* depicted a future in which the masses are controlled by pain; *Brave New World* depicted a future in which the masses are controlled by pleasure.

Ask yourself: which version most resembles our reality? It's not even close.

Postman's book isn't perfect: he comes across as a bit of a curmudgeon, and some have questioned whether he goes too far in his disdain for visual media and not far enough in his willingness to offer solutions. It would be a shame, but not impossible, for some personality types to read Postman and be turned into angry cranks on the margins of society. He also shows that he's a little out of his depth when he starts pontificating about the relationship between TV and religion ("there are several characteristics of television and its surround that converge to make authentic religious experience impossible").

But taken for what it is—namely, a searing indictment of our society's relentless pursuit of entertainment and the way this corrupts almost everything—*Amusing Ourselves to Death* is as good as it gets.

The book raises so many vital questions that they can't possibly be unravelled in a short article like this; we can barely even scratch the surface. These issues need to be thrashed out—prayerfully, in gospel-centred ways—over the dinner table, at elders' gatherings or staff meetings, on long car rides, at device-free retreats, over morning tea at church, at a major conference that I hope someone organizes, and wherever else God's people meet together.

All we can do here is make a start. So here are just a few of the questions that Postman has prompted me to ask: How do we communicate the gospel to those whose minds are shaped by media that discourage sustained thought and critical argument? Since God speaks through the written word, how can we help a visual culture to hear him? How do we break people out of the ravages of the ‘attention economy’ where their eyeballs are the commodity, and help them to see that there is so much more about Jesus that demands their attention? How do we get digital natives to read books? We know that the truth will set people free, but how do we help them to hear it in a world that drowns truth “in a sea of irrelevance”?

But we’ll want to do more than ask questions; we’ll also want to take action. And maybe the best place to begin is small and personal. For example, consider your own digital detox: 30 days with no non-essential digital technology.

Ask someone to join you, then debrief together as you work out what technology to reintroduce, what to abandon, and who else to bring with you. Postman would make an excellent reading companion for such a detox—as would Tony Reinke’s *Competing Spectacles*, a more up-to-date take on these issues from the pen of a gifted Christian writer.

Wherever we choose to start, and whatever questions we ask, faithfulness to Christ and to his mission demands that we wrestle with these issues. This is no longer a special interest topic for the media-savvy culture vultures among us; this is essential. It’s part and parcel of gospel ministry in the 2020s. Triviality—the power of constant distraction—seeps into every crack of our society. Love demands that we pay attention and push back. The unsurpassed power of our message demands that we toil and sweat to effectively communicate it to a lost, confused and distracted world.



What should we pray?

Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Matthew 6, Luke 11). Being taught how to pray is foundational for relationship with God and a key part of discipleship. But what should we pray?

Rev. Lucy Flatt

Recently I have been preparing a student for baptism and we have been working our way through the New City Catechism¹. Question 40 asks this exact question – what should we pray? “The whole Word of God directs and inspires us in what we should pray, including the prayer Jesus taught us.”²

The Bible is foundational for our prayer life. But in a school context many of my students would ask – ‘What is the Bible, and why should we care?’ Why should they care about a book that was written ages ago? A book that has ‘old sayings’ and weird requirements. What relevance does praying the Bible have in our lives? So many of my students have had little to no exposure of the Bible before coming to school. Those who have know the basic stories and have a family connection with the Church. For those who don’t their first question is – “by whose authority?”

God’s. God is the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything. His word provides a lamp for our feet, food for our souls and satisfaction for our thirst. The Bible is not simply a book ready to be checked out of the library and forgotten under a lunchbox. It is the living word of God (John 1:14).

So many students attest to ‘loving reading the stories’. Of listening to Jesus’ teachings. They engage with the truth of it. Yet the difficulty comes when we become distracted. When we stop listening, stop seeking.

The world’s narrative of choice is so loud. It haunts them and pulls them into making decisions about everything – even morality! How do they know what is right? How do they make a good decision? What even is good, right, loving?

These questions plague them – all the while their neurological functioning is being rewired³. Their choice anxiety is not helped when even their identity is up for grabs. Praying the Bible grounds them. It provides a strong foundation upon which to weather the storms, it gives them roots to look at, examine and critique the world’s narratives.

But without the Bible what do they have? Confusion. Anarchy. Anxiety. And the list goes on.

One of my greatest joys in being a Chaplain - at a ‘special character school’ - is that we are reviewed on how prevalent our special character is. Special character means ‘set aside for a purpose’ – and that purpose is knowing Jesus and making Jesus known.

I am given the daily opportunity to share about Jesus, to function as a sign post and draw my students to the Word of God. Question 42 of the Catechism asks “How is the Word of God to be read and heard? With diligence, preparation, and prayer”⁴. These students are hungry. They are curious.

¹ This Catechism is created from a range of other Catechisms such as the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 and Westminster Shorter and Larger catechisms of 1648 and more information can be found at <http://newcitycatechism.com/introduction-timothy-keller/> This is also available as an interactive app, with readings and commentaries – as well as a children’s mode which makes it more accessible for younger candidates.

² 2018, The New City catechism, Question 40

³ The brain undergoes two major development cycles. The first at ages 1 to 3 and the second at ages 14-16. In adolescents, this is when the frontal cortex – the reasoning centre, is shut down while a process called pruning is undertaken. Pruning is where myelin pathways that have not been used are culled and new ones are formed. This results in teens being more susceptible to peer influence and risk taking behaviours. For more see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inspire-rewire/201402/pruning-myelination-and-the-remodeling-adolescent-brain>

⁴ 2018, The New City catechism, Question 42

Unlike generations before them they don't have the same negative connotations of the Church – they are *tabula rasa* – a blank slate. Take the Year Seven cohort as an example. They are brimming with questions about God. “Why was Noah the only one who listened to God? Do you hear God? What's God like? Did Eve get tricked by the snake?” To, “Did God kill my cousin?” They hunger to know what it's all about and why someone would get baptised. Why someone would bother giving up their life to follow some random guy from “Where is Jesus from again?”

In prioritising Scripture as a response to these students, they are given the opportunity to encounter and engage with the Word of God. They are exposed to the truth claims Jesus makes, not only about himself, but about the world and his sovereignty of it. We continue to pray God's Word - why? “So that we may accept it with faith, store it in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.”⁵ Daily, weekly, termly. The rhythms of praying the Bible guide our Chapel reflections, guide our special services, guide our class discussions, guide our lives.

So, when we gather, be it on the sports field, in the Chapel, in class or randomly in town – we pray the prayers of those who have gone before us. “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col 1:9-14)

⁵ Ibid



Liturgy, the gospel and history

Editor: Where church attendance numbers may suggest liturgical churches are in decline, and non-liturgical denominations are those that are growing, here Rory Shiner asks if renewed interest in Christian disciplines, habits and liturgy might be related to barrenness of secular culture.

Dr. Rory Shiner

With permission to re-publish; this article first appeared here:
<https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/liturgy-gospel-history/>

INTRODUCTION

In this article I want to make an observation and provide a hypothesis. Give this the epistemic status of a hunch, a blog post, or an energetically defended position over drinks with friends. In short, if you don't agree, no harm, no foul. We can still be friends.

First, the observation. In the last decade or so, there have been a spate of books, articles, and resources encouraging Christians (and non-Christians) to resume what we might broadly call spiritual disciplines—prayer, sacraments, liturgy, personal devotions, intentional community, and general churchiness.

Consider the following titles:

A Common Rule; The Benedict Option; The Imperfect Discipline; The Liturgy of the Ordinary; 12 Rules for Life; Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices that Brought Peace; You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit, and Religion for Atheists to name a few.



All books written in the past ten or so years. Many by evangelicals. Some by unbelievers.

They point, I think, to a wider trend both in the Church and beyond it: a trend of exploring and embracing a life of discipline, habits, patterns, and liturgy.

The way this plays out across the generations is ironic (in the broadest, Alanis Morissette sense of that word). It's the younger generation who are leading the charge back toward liturgical forms, whilst the older generation watch on (slightly aghast) as the cool kids start to re-create church in a form baby-boomers largely rejected.

That's the observation.

My question is: Why? Why now?

Well, as with any historical phenomenon, the causes are multi-faceted and complex. The true answer will be a rich *potpourri* of genuine longing for God, affectation, consumer choices, historical cycles, economic realities, generational preferences, signalling, and aesthetic sensibilities.

But, for what it's worth, here's my theory: This change reflects the fact that the main threat to the gospel in the west is secularism, not nominalism.

THE POST-1960S BATTLE FOR RELEVANT

As I have argued elsewhere¹, Australia has moved from being a "roughly Christian" nation to a post-Christian nation. What this means, in short, is that most people

¹ <https://www.ternitynews.com.au/opinion/what-happens-after-the-last-christian-australia-secularisation-and-god/>

used to nominate their religious identity as “Christian”. Now a majority do not.

For evangelistic purposes, the most important distinction used to be between nominal and active Christians. We were trying to explain to culturally Christian people that they needed a personal relationship with Jesus—people who cheerfully said they were Christian but had no living faith. They didn’t understand the gospel. They needed to be born again.

In a “roughly Christian” context, the liberal application of the sacraments to the wider population made the evangelists’ task harder. When we called on people to repent and believe in Jesus, they could simply say, “Hey, ease up there! I’m Church of England. I’m baptised. My uncle was a bishop. I’ve been confirmed, I went to St Cuthbert’s Anglican School for Girls.” And so on.

CHANGES IN AUSTRALIA

After the cultural revolution of the 1960s a new generation of Christian leaders saw that the *relevance* of Christianity was under threat. Edwardian modes of church life began to come unstuck in a rapidly changing culture.

Movements such as the Jesus People, the Seeker-Sensitive Movement, the Church Growth Movement, the homogenous unit principle, and the missional community movement, church planting, and evangelistic tracks like Two Ways to Live were all, in one way or other, coming to grips with the new culture. Part of that process was de-churching the language we used in evangelism. This was important work.

ANTI-ALCOHOL MOVEMENTS

It’s always hard to assess things in a historical vacuum. Consider anti-alcohol movements such as prohibition and abstinence. From the perspective of 2019 they look judgemental, legalistic, exegetically unhinged, and world-denying.

But before we condemn, we should ask: “What were they responding to?”

The answer, in the case of abstinence movements, was a massive and pervasive abuse of alcohol in the wider society.

Drinking rates in the nineteenth century were by some estimates five times higher than they are today. In Australia, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, the abuse of alcohol was ubiquitous and costly, especially for women and for girls, and especially in working class communities.

Drinking rates have dropped dramatically in Australia in the last fifty years. This, as much as reading our Bible’s, is crucial context for the relaxation of evangelical attitudes toward drinking.

Did that previous generation sometimes mishandle scripture on this issue? Sure. Was it legalistic? Often. But the next time you sit down to a glass of Pinot Noir, spare a generous thought for that generation and the context they were in. The effects of alcohol were horrific. The cause was noble.

LITURGY: THE BATTLE FOR RELEVANCE AND CONTEXT

I think we need to apply a similar generosity on the liturgy question. The post-war generation was fighting a crucial battle. They saw the threat nominalism posed to the gospel.

But today, it would not occur to the average younger Christian that reciting the Lord’s Prayer might be inauthentic, precisely because no one they know outside the church knows the Lord’s Prayer at all. Going to church in a building that looks like a church doesn’t illicit a PTSD response in the under-40s. They find it at least neutral, maybe even attractive. They are not shadow boxing with nominalism. In fact, they’ve often never met a person who is nominal. By the time you’ve bothered to say you’re a Christian in this culture, chances are you are serious about being on Team Jesus.

Currently, the great threat to the gospel is not nominalism, but secularism.

The fact that the wider culture is in some ways interested in Christian practices is fascinating. It's a vote against the listlessness, the disorder, the aimlessness, and the sheer loneliness of secularism.

In 1950s Australia, Christianity gave our culture a rhythm of work and rest. We had a universally observed Sunday, an expectation of shared family meals, and a deep sense of connection with the local neighbourhood or parish. Now we live in a world of 24-hour shopping. Sunday looks suspiciously like Every Other Day. Secular life is disordered life. You can be watching cat videos at 2pm on a Monday in your office, and replying to work emails from the bath at 10pm on a Saturday.

Productivity literature is now full of advice that sounds suspiciously Sabbatarian. Young urbanites choose walkable neighbourhoods. They want to know their locality, buy from the same shop, know the name of the grocer, and so on. My grandma would find it all strangely familiar.

Or consider the rise of atheist churches in London. Young, secular Londoners gathering in churches to sing bad John Lennon songs and share fellowship. They have turned on its head our assumption that people like Jesus, they just don't like the church. It would seem the other way around. They like church, they just don't like Jesus.

CONCLUSION

So, there it is...

Observation: There is a move toward re-embracing of what looks like, in some ways, fairly traditional church forms and disciplines of life.

Hypothesis: This trend is a response to the end of the Battle for Relevance (1963–2011) in the churches on one hand; and the listlessness, meaninglessness, and disorder of secular culture on the other.

"The fact that the wider culture is in some ways interested in Christian practices is fascinating. It's a vote against the listlessness, the disorder, the aimlessness, and the sheer loneliness of secularism."

If this is in any way correct, it means that (if we are older) we should not immediately understand any interest in liturgy as a move toward nominalism, a shirking of evangelistic duties, or a step toward crossing the Tiber.

As Lauren Winner has brilliantly argued in *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, traditional practices are not a silver bullet. Far too much is claimed for them. All Christian practices are affected by the fall. They all have attendant and predictably de-forming effects.

But historical context for why distinctive Christian practices are seen differently by the older and younger generations will help us understand each other, and our context, better.

Rory Shiner studied Arts at the University of Western Australia and theology at Moore College in Sydney. His PhD is on the life and work of Donald Robinson. He is senior pastor of Providence City Church in Perth, where he lives with his wife, Susan, and their four boys. He has written books on *Union with Christ* and on the relationship between Jesus' resurrection and our own.

Rory serves as a member of the TGCA Editorial Panel as Editor for the Arts and Culture Channel and for Book Reviews.



Rev. Mark Hood

In appreciation for Bob Robinson's book reviews

Long-time Focus readers are familiar with the fact that published book reviews flowed freely from the pen of Bob Robinson over many years. Recently Bob has signalled his decision to conclude this ministry. Here we want to acknowledge and warmly thank Bob for his dedication to Focus readers. We thank God for the way Bob has sought to extend the ministry of the gospel (in many ways, not least through NZCMS), but especially in relation to Focus through his efforts to bring relevant scholarship and thinking to the attention of those in ministry here in New Zealand. Readers have themselves expressed their thanks to Bob for the way he has encouraged and challenged us over the years. Here we wish to formally acknowledge his labours and say, many thanks Bob!

At the recent Annual General Meeting, the Chairman's report also included this line: *'Bob has served the Fellowship wonderfully, most prominently in the excellent book reviews in Latimer Focus. We will deeply miss his scholarship and insight, and pray God's richest blessings as he steps back in his retirement.'*

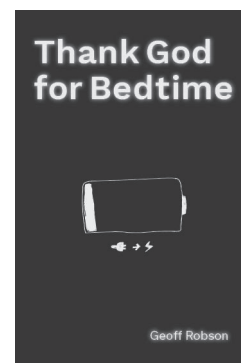
In sending this signal, Bob also alerted us to the increasingly hard times befalling book publishers, as well as the challenges involved in bringing relevant and beneficial new titles to the attention of Focus readers. Here is a good question for readership feedback: where do you look to become aware of potential worthwhile new books to read? This editor would like your feedback. Responses to online@latimer.org.nz.

Two further points of interest in relation to good reading materials:

Many of us will have our own particular set of websites or blogsites that feeds us new book title suggestions, and Focus readers who've appreciated Geoff Robson's earlier piece may be interested to learn that last month he has had a book published by Matthias Media: *Thank God for Bedtime: What God says about our sleep and why it matters more than you think.*

In this book, Geoff asks what the Scriptures have to say on the topic of sleep - for example both God 'gives sleep to his beloved' (Ps 127) and 'stay awake' (Mk 13). Helpfully, Geoff's aim is not a quick fix for insomniacs. Rather his long term aim is to help us think deeply about how even our sleeping can bring glory to God. Ray Galea writes of this: 'In a world where anxiety and depression are at epidemic levels, this is a timely pastoral resource'.

A second point of interest especially for those newer to Focus: some 20 years ago, the Fellowship donated more than 1,200 book titles to the Laidlaw College library. As part of this arrangement, Latimer Fellowship members can join and borrow books for free from the Laidlaw library collection, which contains some 20,000 titles. These collections are shared between Auckland Campus (80 Central Park Dr, Henderson) and Christchurch campus (70 Condell Ave, Papanui). *Tolle lege: take up and read!*



Latimer's Curate

This morning the Curate's inbox was full of promotional emails from various para-church organisations. "5 steps to increased attendance this Christmas". "The best way to share the gospel with millennials". "The app to revolutionise your worship". The emails sat there, enticing the curate. Offering clear, straightforward, proven results. All I had to do was click through. Sign up. Download. Pay now! They all looked good (how could they not, with the stylish layout and trendy fonts, and the photos of relaxed, smiling, beautiful, appropriately-diverse, we're-who-you-want-in-your-church young people). And if I paid my money (well, the Vicar's money), ran the programme, followed the system, results were guaranteed.

And the results seemed like such good things. More people in church. More people hearing about Jesus. Worship and services where God was *really* at work. Even a programme to get an increase in giving was on offer! Surely they're great things to want?

And yet there are dangers (even beyond the Vicar finding out about the eye-watering cost of some of those programmes!). For the results did look very good, but I needed to think through why I wanted them - what motivated me. And I needed to think through what cost they would have on people. And I needed to think through what the programmes and their systems and strategies were really saying about me, and about our church, and about our faith.

There's a danger that I want to run a programme or implement a system because I don't like the way things are now. Of course, at one level, that's a given (and a good thing, in many cases) - I want to see change in Christ. But my desire for change can be driven by a dissatisfaction with the church the Lord has placed me in, and I want to see it bigger and better. Maybe more like the churches which run this programme (again, look at the photos of those smiling diverse young people). Or more like the church down the road which is so enticing to people. Or my desire for change can come from the fact that

I'm despondent about the people the Lord has entrusted to me, with all their problems and difficulties. And a course or a programme or a system will change them. I'll plug them in at one end, and they'll pop out the other. Different. Fixed. Easy!

A similar danger can exist for the church themselves as they embark on my newly-downloaded programme. They can think that this programme is the thing which will change the church, get people to come along, and sort everything out. Make church like it was back then (whenever 'then' was). That's understandable. I mean look at the quality production on the DVD's (unlike Sunday when the microphone was booming). Listen to the wonderful accents and clear annunciation of the presenters (unlike last week's Bible reading which sounded like someone calling the New Zealand Cup at Riccarton Park). We run the programme and things will change!

Change is good, and God is in the business of changing his people, and can even use programmes and systems to do it! But the real danger which this curate sees, is that very often we look to programmes and systems, to techniques and strategies as the thing which brings about change. We chose the outputs we want, we quantify the results, and we manage the process. We place our confidence, our trust, our faith, in these programmes and strategies and systems to bring about the change which we want to see. And people who do them see results, and praise the programme.

Change is good, and God is in the business of changing his people. By his Spirit, through his Word. Into the image and likeness of his Son. In his time. Even as I'm writing, I've received an email with the title "Do you REALLY want to see your church turn around?" Yes, I certainly do. And so I will pray to the sovereign Lord to do his work, through his appointed means. Which means I might employ strategies and run programmes, but my confidence will be in the triune God, and my faith will be that he will change his people. Including this one.

