

The Challenge of First-World Re-Evangelization

The “world” of global Christianity has changed radically. In the 1800’s 80% of all Christians were Westerners. Today 70% of all Christians belong to what we call “the majority” or non-Western world. And not only have we become the minority, but the church in the West is not doing all that well. The famous missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, has called it the most culturally captive church in the history of Christianity. While this may be hard to prove, what is fairly clear is that the church in the West is in decline, that it is marked by consumer Christianity, that it is grossly divided with some 30,000 ‘denominations’ (many are single standing churches), that it lacks depth in theological and biblical formation, that its spirituality is shallow, and that members’ commitment to the church is minimalistic – average church attendance of members is now down to once every three to four weeks. And, as we all know, many of our Christian friends no longer attend church at all.

In a longer article, it would be appropriate to ask the question: how did it come to this? And in answering we would have to look at several hundred years of the Enlightenment project, the embrace of rationality and science as the only way to come to wisdom and understanding, the de-enchantment of the modern world, the impact of liberal theology, the weaknesses of conservative Christianity, and the proclamation of a culturally convenient Christianity that lacks theological rigor, formation in the faith, a spirituality that draws from deep wells, an emphasis on the cost of discipleship, and a vision for societal transformation. But this is not the place to pursue this further.

What I wish to do is to look for signs of hope and to help us move forward. We need to ask: what might be the shape of re-evangelization of the West?

No Place for Nostalgia

In seeking to chart a way forward, it is not helpful for us to only look back to a time when the church was a more powerful institution in society and to long for a return to the “good old days.” The church of Christendom when Westerners were predominantly Christians and society’s institutions were shaped by Christian values, has long gone. Not only is the church a more marginal institution, but our multi-cultural and multi-religious “world” has relativized the Christian faith in the public arena. We are no longer the only “show” in town, instead, we are one amongst many religious options, and non-religious options.

It is also not all that helpful to think that some sort of revival or renewal will bring us back to a previous place of strength and respectability. The Jesus Movement of the late sixties soon ran out of steam and the charismatic renewal movement in mainline churches in the 1970’s has not been able to stem the tide of the weakening of the church. And many other projects to “re-jig” the church in the West have failed. This includes the Emergent church movement and the New Monasticism.

This, of course, is not to say that we should not look back for inspiration and encouragement. We should look back to New Testament for its faith, life and service. We can learn from the church of the martyrs. We can gain inspiration from the Desert fathers and mothers, from renewal movements such as the Franciscans, from the Reformation and from the Wesleyan revival. But we can’t just “recapture” these movements of hope and renewal. They can only be *signposts* for us. We have to walk

our own road in this difficult time. The Latin American proverb is appropriate: “make your road by walking it.” At best the renewal movements of the past can be and need to be creatively re-appropriated in terms of some of its emphases, but its “spirit” can’t be recaptured. The Spirit has to move us anew. And if there is any challenge facing the church in the West it is that we have to *live* our faith in the personal and public domains of life, and not “freeze” in theologies and liturgies. The genius of Franciscan spirituality was “*to live the gospel.*”

No Place for Future Escapism

Whenever there have been major changes in society either through social upheaval, tragedy, cultural or economic change and the church has felt overwhelmed, there has emerged the impulse to escape. One form of escapism has been to put life on hold for the second coming of Christ. Another, has been to batten down the hatches and to hide from the so-called “big, bad world.” And tragically another move has been the attempt to find security in rigid fundamentalisms.

While we can’t recapture the past, we can’t fully pull the future into the present either. We are people who are called to live the “in-between.” We live between the first and second coming of Christ. We live in the present, but not yet fully present, Reign of God. We live in both the hope of the Reign of God and the persistent “worldliness” of the world. We are what one missiologist states, “too late for this world and too early for heaven.”

We, therefore, are called to embrace the *sojourner* or *pilgrim* status of our existence as Christians. We have come home to the heart of God through Christ in the power of the Spirit. We have been invited into the communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But we are still on the road. That road is the call to on-going conversion, to grow into the stature of Christ, to live the *imitatio Christi*, to live the faith in our churches, but also in our neighbourhoods and places of work, and especially in the neglected, broken and wounded places of our society.

No Place for Easy Answers

Just as many people in our so-called post-modern world are no longer all that confident about our ability to make and shape a better world, especially in the light of global population growth, nature’s degradation, questions about the integrity of our major institutions, globalization, and global warming, so Christians at this point in history are not all that sure about the way forward regarding the church’s re-vitalization.

While there are the “experiments” in the West with emerging church, missional church, the church in the pub, new friar movements and the new monasticism, just to mention a few, no one is really sure about a clear way forward.

We are in many ways in an intermediate zone, in an “in-between” place. Christendom lies behind us. We are not sure what lies in front of us. For many, this is a difficult place to be.

Yet maybe this is good place for us. Victor Turner calls such as place a “liminal” space. This is the place of the pain of the death of the old and the uncertainty and hope of the emergence of the new. This is a place which Jacques Ellul calls “hope in time of abandonment.”

The reason why I believe this to be a good place, is because it can strip us of some of our illusions. And as Westerners we have many of those. The greatest of these is that we have long thought that the Kingdom of God is our project. And following on its heels is our preoccupation with religious methodologies whether they have been our evangelistic strategies or our church growth projects. We have long worked on behalf of God and not *with* God. Our “poor” God has needed us to help fix things. As a consequence, it is not simply the secular Western “world” which has relegated God to the sidelines, so have we as Christians. We have lost all sense of the Lordship of God and of God’s sovereignty. Having lost an appropriate posture before God all our other relationships, in the words of Karl Barth, have “gone out of kilter.” And a life of prayer marked by a humility that seeks the heart of God has certainly gone “out of the window.”

Recovering the Grand Narrative

The well-known Gandhian saying “be the change you want to see” is appropriate as we look towards a re-vitalization of Western Christianity. And one of the ways forward is to recover the grand narrative of the biblical story. Not only are most Christians in the West biblically and theologically illiterate, but most have bought into another grand narrative. That, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, has been the narrative of Western economic and democratic power. We have believed in our own ability to make and change the world and have assumed that the more powerful we become the more effective we will be.

This is not to say that we should not be responsible “stewards” in our world or make major contributions in every sphere of life, but we have the wrong narrative. The biblical narrative has a very different theme to that of Western pragmatism and utilitarianism. Kraybill is right when he speaks of “the upside down nature of the Kingdom of God.” And Brueggemann in his *The Prophetic Imagination* suggests that we should not follow the way of “royal consciousness and power,” but the way of the prophets in seeking the shalom and justice and mercy of God.

The grand narrative of the Bible with its theme of the goodness of creation, the tragedy of the fall, and the grace of the new creation in Christ, calls us to a way of life not based on power *over* but power *for*. It reminds us that reconciliation, healing and forgiveness is a way of life, and not exploitation, marginalization and oppression.

Having come home to the grace of God in Christ, we are called to come “home” to each other and to the world we inhabit. Home-coming involves “Christification.” This means Christ taking form in us, living in the way of Christ, and giving “birth” to Christ anew in lives of others and in the places we inhabit and where we work. Thus the grand narrative of scripture is *the Christification of our world*.

Overcoming Dualism

Our world has long been plagued with social stratification – the powerful and the neglected. And the Christian church has long been infected by another form of stratification – the saint and the sinner, the monk and the ordinary Christian, the clergy and the laity, the missionary and the person working at the stock exchange.

If the church in the West is to recover, it will need to rediscover and practice the vision of “the whole people of God.” It will need to find a new sense of community and common participation. As such, a new form of church will need to come into being. The church will need to become a sisterhood/brotherhood in the following of Christ. In terms of Benedictine spirituality it will have to become a “school of learning” in the way of Christ. And in the words of Bonhoeffer the church is “Christ taking form in our world.”

Our present day church looks nothing like this. For the enthusiastic, it has become the place of entertainment. For the majority, it is the place of the psychological pep-talk. For others, it is a liturgical re-enactment. And for all of us, it is the duty to get our spiritual “boost.”

Not only does dualism in the church need to be overcome, but other forms of dualism need to be rejected as well. One form is the erroneous doctrine of the “two kingdoms.” Simply stated: Christ has relevance only for our personal spirituality, but not for our work-a-day world. In the latter, we are to conform to what is asked of us in the public dimensions of life. This clearly relegates Christianity to the private sphere. But the biblical narrative sets out a vision for all of life. In the words of Wolterstorff: we need to recover a “world-formative” Christianity.

Learning to Sing the Songs of Lament

This is no easy time for us in the Western church. There are no neat answers. And importantly, we need to be careful with easy solutions. It is easy, in a time such as this, to go down all sorts of rabbit trails.

But this *is* a time for us to grieve. Maybe, by way of metaphor we can see ourselves in “Babylonian captivity” like the Old Testament people of God. Or like the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Christian era, we can see ourselves in the “desert” needing to pray for the renewal of our lives, our church and world, and to wrestle with the devil.

But whatever images work for us, it is appropriate that we learn how to sing the Lord’s song in an alien land. And in this time of a corporate “dark night” of the soul, we need to cry out to God our sense of loss, uncertainty, abandonment, and lack of consolation. Here the Psalms can be a model for us. And who knows how long we will need to grieve and cry?

Drinking from Deep Wells

If there is anything that we have done to weaken the church in the West, it has been the encouragement of an easy believism. The church has not formed its members in the way of Christ. Superficiality has been our key characteristic. Unlike the church in the early centuries of Christianity

where “seekers” had a year of catechesis, then professed their faith, were baptized in water, experienced exorcism, received the infilling of the Spirit and were anointed with healing oil, in the West one simply raises one’s hand at an evangelistic event. Little wonder that Christ, for many, is merely a “tuck-on.”

Thus it is time for us to go deeper. We need to indwell the biblical story. We need understand “the faith of the church.” We need to be formed in the spiritual disciplines and begin to live a life of prayer.

There are many who are seeking to make Benedictine or Franciscan spirituality intrinsic to their daily lives as farmers, doctors, parents, and motor mechanics. There are many who, like the monks of old, are seeking to set time aside to be with God three or four times a day. Many are exploring Celtic spirituality. Others are taking a second look at the Anabaptist and Wesleyan tradition. And others again are discovering that Calvin had a more profound understanding of living the Christian life than later Reformed orthodoxy.

This is not the time to become shallower, but to go deeper. And what does this have to do with first-world re-evangelization? Everything. We are to be, in small way, a *second incarnation* of Christ. We are the bearers of good news and our biggest challenge is to begin to live this good news in every sphere of our lives.

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