

ONLY THIS

1 Corinthians 2:2

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. [TNIV]

A while ago I read the book “The God Delusion” by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins is an atheist and scientist. He has written other books – “The Selfish Gene” and “The Blind Watchmaker” among them. His expressed purpose in this book is to show that people do not need a religion focussed on a supernatural being –i.e., God. All the religion they need is a clear, scientific understanding of the universe (and nature) and how it works.

That’s an over-simplification of his book. But that’ll do, because I don’t really want to talk about his ideas.

But his book did spark a thought that I want to share with you today; and it’s this:

What the church needs for the future are a lay people who are well-versed in the Scriptures, and pastors who conduct truly Christ-centred training of the people.

I’ll explain this a bit more soon. But first let’s start with a look into the future. I don’t know if these will turn out to be prophecies or just wild guesses. Time will tell.

Prophecies

When I think of the future of congregations and pastoral ministry, it strikes me that we are at a watershed – a time of significant change for the church. There are two big changes happening that will mean a change in how congregations (members) and pastors function.

The first is the pastor shortage.

The second is our society’s increasing dependence on science and technology.

A few words about each.

The pastor ‘shortage’. Most main stream denominations are struggling to have enough pastors to minister to the congregations. I think it was said at General Synod that in the next five to ten years there will be something like 70 pastor vacancies in the LCA.

I actually think this is a good thing! And for the simple fact that the ministry of a congregation has to fall back on the members of the congregation.

We are changing from a post-WWII church where congregations could afford to have a pastor (and deaconess, and youth worker etc.) do the ministry of looking after the members, and mission was done somewhere

else (PNG for example). We are changing to a new millennium church, which in fact really gets back to the Body of Christ model that the Apostle Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians: Each part of the body, no matter how humble, is needed to do its part.

A religion of science. The second big influence in the near future is that people in rich western cultures like Australia will indeed have a religion of science, just as Dawkins is hoping for. Already people expect that science and technology will always be the source of the good life: of everything healthy, wealthy and wise.

Cancer? The genome project will lead to a cure for every form of it.

Global Warming? Technology will develop earth-friendly energy sources for our high-energy consuming society.

Water Shortage? We just need to be taught how to be water-wise and we'll be automatically responsible water users.

This also raises a good challenge for Christianity. We need to rediscover what relevant message we have for the world.

And if all we can peddle is a 'gospel' of healthy, wealthy and wise, which so many tv evangelists do! then we have nothing to offer.

The greatest threat. To put the thought in sharp relief: What is the greatest threat to the future of Christianity and its churches?

I would answer that the greatest future threat to Christianity is not Islam as some people espouse. I don't think that's a threat at all; or any other religion for that matter, not even a religion of science.

No, the greatest danger would be a laity that doesn't know God's Word very well, and so can't give an answer for the hope they have within them when their neighbours ask what they're doing on Sunday morning; and a pastorate that doesn't lead the laity into God's Word, but chases after peripherals (social work and counselling, etc.)

Only Jesus!

In the movie "Superman Returns" Superman has taken Lois Lane far up above the city in response to her saying that the world doesn't need a saviour. He asks her, "What do you hear?" And she answers, "Nothing." He replies, "I hear everything! So many people needing saving in some way."

Dawkins hopes, and believes, that science is all that is needed. It can explain and help with every human situation. Time will tell if his philosophy is true.

But we preach Christ crucified.

The core of the Christian faith is Jesus, only Jesus.

So I'll put the thought an odd way:

The scientism that Dawkins promotes may seem to explain away all religion. But if the Gospel message is true – that our only hope is salvation in Jesus Christ – then no amount of scientific methods and discoveries will

explain away this most basic Christian truth. Science will never be a threat to true Christian belief.

But what this implies is that Christians need to know God's word well so that they can hold onto the core truth without it getting messed up with a lot of human traditions and cultural baggage. I'm not going to explain this any further: the baggage really shows up when digging into the scriptures – an example that often comes up is what are our beliefs about life after death compared with what the scriptures actually say.

The thing is, it strikes me that a lot of what we think is Christian belief is more our traditions and baggage than word of God. We need a genuine Christianity, a Christ-centred belief, free from the baggage. For it this that, I believe, can genuinely address all human societies and cultures.

That's not to say people are *bound* to believe if only we proclaim the Gospel rightly. The Gospel is still foolishness to Greeks and an offence to Jews. But it is the message of the Saviour this world will always need.

So how can the laity meet the mission and ministry needs of the church and its contact with society in the years ahead with a genuine Christianity? And therefore what sort of pastors does the church need? For these two questions go together.

We need pastors who 'preach and lead "Jesus"'. Who can do so without 'wheelbarrow' words, but also without 'babying' the message, so that the laity is solidly grounded on the word, with Christ at the centre. And we need pastors who have a passion to train and equip the saints (that is, Christians) for works of service.

In this way we will have parishioners who are able to give an account for the hope they have in Christ, and not with 'babyish' talk or a dismissive "That's just what I believe", but with a solid account of the Gospel; certainly in their own words and in their own way, but solid none-the-less.

And we will have a church where people are nurtured and mentored within the Body of Christ; and so we will come closer to Christ's commission to go into the world making disciples for him by baptising and teaching.

The Way of the Cross

Now I can get to the point that I want to leave you with today.

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

The Bible text I chose is one which many Christians don't like because it sounds so maudlin – too much focus on death and not on life. 'You should preach the resurrection,' is often a response.

Our real, sure hope is to be with Christ in his glory.

But that glory comes via the cross. The resurrection affirms and completes Christ's conquering of sin, death and hell.

So to me the message of the cross is the power behind the Christian's life while here on this earth; and the power behind the pastor's ministry.

And it is not at all a doom-and-gloom message. To me the cross doesn't cast a shadow, rather it sheds a wonderful light! It tells me of the Saviour's love, and therefore God's love, in all of life's situations.

The cross gives us a reality check about being human: we are not perfect creatures. We sin. We need reconciliation. We need peace.

The cross blesses our births, marriages, deaths and all other significant events in our lives. Since it is true that Christ died for all the world, then everything is marked with the love and forgiveness and peace that the cross of Christ has brought into the world.

The cross, that act of total self-giving love, directs our works of service, our charity, and so on.

And most precious of all, when someone is absolutely at the end of their strength and ability, the cross is their strength. And how wonderful it is as a pastor to be able to direct struggling souls, not to some hidden resource within or some vague hope in science and technology, but to a Saviour who long ago bore all that wrong on the tree of suffering and death, and conquered it all and won everything for us!

Here is a truth that stands out there for all time. It doesn't depend on whether or not one believes it for it to be true. It doesn't depend on science to back it up. It's just there, an event from 2000 years ago. Something God did in the world. And it makes all the difference in the world – take it or leave it.

So of all the things I have said today, let me pin it all down to this: What does the world need? What should the church be in the future? What should pastors do?

We need pastors who preach Christ crucified so that we will always follow Christ in the way of the cross.

Amen.