

Gospel and Culture after Christendom

Books, Critics and Responses

In 2004 *Post-Christendom* was published, the first book in an ongoing series under the overall heading 'After Christendom'.¹ Various writers, all influenced by the Anabaptist tradition, have been exploring the ramifications of the transition within western societies from 'Christendom' to 'post-Christendom'. These freighted terms are becoming familiar but are still quite often misunderstood or their significance minimised. The conviction of the authors is that this transition impacts church and society in many and profound ways, just as the much earlier 'Christendom shift' did in the fourth and fifth centuries. Then, the church came in from the margins to the centre at the invitation of the Roman emperor, Constantine I, and his successors; now, the church is being pushed out to the margins and needs to reflect deeply on this new context and make all kinds of adjustments.

Each author of books in the series poses questions about beliefs and practices that have been common, maybe simply taken for granted, in many churches for many years. In conferences, seminars, classes, conversations and correspondence we have repeated these questions. Sometimes we have spoken with conviction and have tried to persuade others to reconsider long-held beliefs and re-examine cherished practices. More often we have asked questions and invited dialogue to subject our convictions to scrutiny and to explore other ways of looking at issues. Some conversation partners have found these discussions invigorating, even liberating, but others have found them disturbing.

One response we often encounter is some variation on the question: 'Aren't you allowing cultural changes to dictate what you believe?' This is not surprising. After all, our starting point is that post-Christendom is a very different cultural context than the Christendom era that is now drawing to a close. In light of this, we argue, we need to take a fresh look at how we read and interpret the Bible, how we understand and communicate the gospel, what we need to nurture and sustain discipleship, how we practise mission and respond to contemporary ethical questions, and what it means to be worshipping communities in this new environment. These are issues that go to the heart of our faith, so it is understandable that some find them uncomfortable, even threatening.

Do we really need to revisit these issues? Is the cultural upheaval all western societies are experiencing – however we describe and analyse this – really that significant? What if we hold our nerve instead and refuse to abandon or question beliefs and practices that have sustained us through many generations? What if we take the view that, despite initially struggling, the church has survived previous cultural shifts in western societies over the past twenty centuries and has eventually flourished in whatever new culture emerged? G. K. Chesterton famously commented on these culture shifts: 'At least five times...the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died.'² Perhaps our calling is to hold true to familiar beliefs and practices, to retain confidence in the gospel and to wait for the emerging culture to discover its need for this once more.

Of course, as most of our critics³ acknowledge, we may need to make some adjustments. Indeed, one of the glories of the gospel is its translatability into all cultures. We have no sacred language and no privileged culture. Cross-cultural missionaries have not always been true to this insight, too often imposing their own culture and confusing this with gospel values, but lessons have been learned and we are all so much more aware now in a global church of the need to distinguish between gospel and culture. In the changing and increasingly plural culture of western societies we will also need to engage in this kind of translation and adaptation. But this kind of contextualisation need not mean questioning foundational doctrines and practices or reopening debates about gospel and culture that our forebears settled generation ago, need it?

What is at issue, then, it seems, is the scope of contextualising we should encourage, the depth of questioning we should allow, and the boundaries we should or should not draw around doctrines and practices that are beyond debate. And if we can agree on guidelines about what we should or should not investigate, there is the further issue – summarised in the question we have so often heard – of what influence contemporary culture has on the discussion.

We want to take seriously the concerns of our critics. We recognise in many of them their integrity, their commitment to the authority of Scripture, their confidence in the power of the gospel, their watchfulness against heresy and illegitimate collusion with alien cultural or philosophical ideas, and their pastoral concern for us, fearful lest we be led astray. We want to remain open to their critique and open to the possibility that we are getting things wrong. We struggle with the tone of some of the criticism, but we do not want to let this distract us from hearing whatever we need to hear.

We acknowledge also the very real dangers of being co-opted by prevailing ideologies, colluding with changing cultural values and expectations, succumbing to the temptation to water down the gospel to give less offence in a society that prides itself on ‘tolerance’ and imbibing uncritically the iconoclastic and relativistic spirit of post-modern culture. And we may be even more prone to fall into these traps at a time when the church is not only grappling with cultural changes but declining in numbers and in social influence. Desperation may prompt some to try to save the day by reinventing the Christian faith in the hope that they can present a more amenable version that will be congenial to more people.

This strategy will be familiar to those who have studied European church history during the past two centuries. While some churches set their faces against the technological and philosophical changes associated with the Enlightenment, reasserting familiar belief and practices and resisting ‘modernisation’, others chose to adjust and adapt their beliefs and practices so that they fitted more easily into the culture that was emerging. By the middle of the last century this latter strategy was widely discredited. What became known as ‘liberal’ Christianity seemed to have power neither to retain the allegiance of the faithful nor to convince others that the Christian faith had anything to offer. Lest this paints too polarised a picture, we should add that modernisation and secularisation impacted the

more traditional churches (especially the Evangelicals) far more than most recognised at the time; and some of the perspectives adopted by more liberal churches have helpfully informed other traditions.

Questions, Suspicions and Assumptions

But the tradition out of which the ‘After Christendom’ authors write is not ‘liberal’ but ‘radical’. Our historical reference point is the Anabaptist movement that represented a more radical reformation than any other during the culture shift of the early sixteenth century. Not adequately categorised as Protestant or Catholic then or as Evangelical or Liberal now, this movement has generally been regarded as counter-cultural or hostile to contemporary cultural norms rather than tending to collude with or be unduly influenced by the surrounding culture. There are many examples of cultural non-conformity within the Anabaptist movement, some of which are much more unyielding to cultural changes and pressures than most of our critics would countenance. So it is a little disconcerting, and occasionally amusing, to be accused of allowing cultural changes to dictate what we believe. This is certainly not what we understand ourselves to be doing.

Rather, in continuity with the early Anabaptist communities, we welcome the opportunity that the end of Christendom affords to re-examine a range of theological, ecclesiological, ethical and missional issues. The early sixteenth century witnessed the fragmentation of the monolithic Christendom culture that had dominated Europe for a millennium. Across Europe Anabaptists and others had access to the Bible as never before and studied it with a passion. What they discovered was a huge discrepancy between what they read there – especially in the teaching of Jesus – and the beliefs and practices of the churches. And this discrepancy was much greater than the Protestant reformers recognised and affected many more aspects of discipleship, mission, social ethics and church practice than these state-supported theologians dared admit. The culture shift they were living through gave them the opportunity and incentive to revisit foundational beliefs and familiar practices – and to question how much of the mainline church’s theology, ethics and ecclesiology was actually the result of previous collusion with the prevailing culture.

Our motivation and concern is the same. Our suspicion is that there are many dimensions of theology, ethics, ecclesiology and missiology that owe much more to the culture, ethos and political arrangements of Christendom than to Scripture. We believe the Anabaptists identified quite a number of these in the sixteenth century but many more are coming to light as the Christendom era moves beyond fragmentation to disintegration. When we ask questions about the beliefs and practices of the churches, our purpose is not to advocate conformity to contemporary culture but to critically review the ways in which previous generations wittingly or unwittingly colluded with the norms of their cultures. The end of Christendom gives us a vantage point from which to see instances of this more clearly.

Some examples might be helpful at this point. We know these are all highly contentious issues (and not all the authors of the ‘After Christendom’ books necessarily hold identical

positions on them), but our intention here is not to raise the stakes or assert our views, but to illustrate our approach.

- We question the ‘penal substitution’ interpretation of the atoning work of Christ – not primarily because contemporary culture finds this ethically offensive or even incomprehensible, but because we are unconvinced that biblical teaching supports this analysis and we believe it resulted from the influence of the medieval feudal context in which the ‘satisfaction’ theory was formulated and the juridical ideas of early modern Europe in which the ‘penal substitution’ theory gained prominence.
- We question the ‘just war’ approach to discussions about the legitimacy of church support for wars declared by the nation in which they are located – not primarily because of scepticism in contemporary culture about the motivation behind recent conflicts or the difficulty of applying principles formulated centuries ago to very different forms of warfare today, but because we cannot square this approach with the teaching of Jesus or the developing story the Bible tells, and we believe it was adapted from pagan philosophy in the fourth and fifth centuries so that the church could find a way of addressing issues of warfare as a partner of the empire.
- We question the central role and monologue style of preaching in many churches – not primarily because emerging culture reacts badly to this or because evidence suggests it is far less effective than most preachers believe, but because we do not believe there is biblical warrant for this over-emphasis and we believe it resulted from the church in the early years of the Christendom era adopting cultural norms as it adjusted to its newly favoured status in the empire.
- We question the advocacy of tithing as the biblically mandated mechanism for determining levels of giving and addressing issues of stewardship – not primarily because this distracts attention from deeper issues of lifestyle and discipleship or because it is good news to the rich and bad news to the poor, but because this was not the practice of Christians in the New Testament or the early centuries and we believe it was adopted on the basis of poor exegesis of Old Testament texts in the early Christendom era as a way of funding an increasingly expensive hierarchical church structure.

We are raising these and other questions, not primarily because of the culture shift which we are currently experiencing at the end of Christendom (although this opens up space for such reflection), but because we believe that the Christendom shift that ushered in the Christendom era resulted in multiple compromises with culture and serious distortions in how the gospel and its implications were understood.

We repeat: what we are engaged in and advocating is no different from the process of theological reflection on the relationship between gospel and culture that cross-cultural missionaries have practised over the centuries. As we experience a significant shift in our culture, this kind of theological reflection is vital. So why does this provoke suspicion? It seems that some Christians in western societies are much more reluctant to explore this relationship, maybe assuming that there is no need to open up questions about gospel and culture in our own societies, because these were satisfactorily resolved during the era in which Europe was a ‘Christian’ culture. This assumption, we suggest, is itself a legacy of

the Christendom mindset and an expression of western arrogance (as theologians from other parts of the world point out).

Why should we assume the Christendom synthesis of gospel and culture is normative and beyond critique, rather than a way of contextualising the gospel into a particular social, political and cultural setting? This synthesis has been exported in imperialistic fashion to many other societies, so one of the crucial tasks of post-colonial theology is to break free of this imposition and develop indigenous approaches to the relationship between gospel and culture. The assumption that the Christendom synthesis is normative also discourages theological reflection on the relationship between gospel and culture in post-Christendom western societies, especially when this reflection probes too deeply into certain issues.

Perspectives, Principles and Conversation Partners

The perspective from which the 'After Christendom' series is written can be summarised as follows. We reject the assumption that the Christendom synthesis of gospel and culture should be regarded as normative and will resist any discouragement from critiquing this. We suspect that this synthesis between gospel and culture was a mixture of compromise and authentic contextualising. We note the persistence of alternative approaches to issues of gospel and culture in renewal movements and on the margins of Christendom and want to learn from these. We regard the demise of Christendom and the accompanying shifts in our culture as an opportunity to revisit decisions made in that era about the relationship between gospel and culture, and an opportunity to open up afresh a range of theological, ethical, missional and ecclesial questions. We will not discount the wisdom of the past or reject beliefs and practices just because they emerged during the Christendom era, and we will not uncritically embrace perspectives that may owe as much to collusion with post-Christendom and post-modern culture as earlier perspectives owed to collusion with the cultures of Christendom and modernity.

It might be helpful if we also identify the principles which guide us and the resources on which we draw. In common with the early Anabaptists, we are committed to the authority of Scripture and its interpretation within the Christian community. This means we expect to hear the interpretive voice of the Spirit through multi-voiced interaction between those who reflect together on the text. The books we write may have named authors but they all benefit from the input of others throughout the writing process. We are committed also to operating with a consistent hermeneutic that challenges our presuppositions, prejudices and preferences. Because of the culture shift we are currently experiencing and in light of our own limitations, we are further committed to provisionality in our understanding and openness to fresh insights (another historic Anabaptist trait).

And, as indicated above, we do not regard any subject, formulation of doctrine, ethical approach, ecclesial practice or missional perspective as off-limits or sacrosanct. This does not, of course, mean that we expect to reach new or different conclusions on every issue. We may find ourselves reaffirming established views and resisting challenges to these. But we want to do this after examining closely the arguments for and against such views,

rather than retreating from such discussions or immediately labelling other perspectives as heretical. Consequently, we are unafraid of exploring controversial issues: two current examples are homosexuality and universalism, but there will be others.

We are grateful for several conversation partners. In addition to the Scriptures, we value also the witness of the early Christians. While we do not equate post-Christendom with pre-Christendom, we suspect that there are insights from the pre-Christendom churches and their literature that will help us engage critically with what we have inherited from the Christendom era. We want to learn from the experience of the Anabaptists and other movements that were critical of the Christendom system and developed alternative ways of interpreting Scripture, building Christian communities, engaging in mission, making ethical choices and understanding the relationship between gospel and culture. We are grateful also for opportunities to learn from the global church and from the experience of cross-cultural missionaries as we reconsider issues of gospel and culture, anticipating that insights from elsewhere will help us to critique our own presuppositions and conclusions. We appreciate the work of others who are also attempting to draw on the past in order to engage with contemporary challenges, although we are concerned that some of these (for instance the 'deep church' perspective) seem inadequately attuned to the influence of the Christendom shift. And we are open to the possibility, perhaps the likelihood, that there will be ways in which the emerging culture can help us recover dimensions of the gospel that have been obscured in the culture that is now fading. This we regard not as colluding with culture or uncritical co-option but confidence that the Spirit is at work beyond the churches as well as within them.

¹ Books published to date are Stuart Murray: *Post-Christendom* (2004), Stuart Murray: *Church after Christendom* (2005), Jonathan Bartley: *Faith and Politics after Christendom* (2006), Jo Pimlott & Nigel Pimlott: *Youth Work after Christendom* (2008), Alan Kreider & Eleanor Kreider: *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (2009) and Lloyd Pietersen: *Reading the Bible after Christendom* (2011). Several further books are being written. All are published by Paternoster in the UK and some also by Herald Press in North America.

² In *The Everlasting Man* (1925), part II, chapter 6.

³ Who are these critics? Most are identified with the conservative wing of Evangelicalism and with a Reformed or Neo-Reformed theology; although on some issues our approach is questioned by a wider range of Evangelicals and others. Some regard our emphasis on the influence of the Christendom shift and the subsequent demise of Christendom as excessive; others argue for a return to Christendom in some form or other. A recent example is Peter Leithart: *Defending Constantine* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010).