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Mark Noll, author of *The Rise of Evangelicalism*

“I have long benefited from the work of John Stott because of the way he combines rigorous engagement of the biblical text and careful engagement with the culture of his day. The God’s Word for Today series presents Stott at his very best. This series displays his commitment to biblical authority, his zeal for the mission of the church, and his call to faithful witness in the world. Stott’s reflections here are a must-read for church leaders today.”

Trevin Wax, director of Bibles and reference at LifeWay Christian Resources, author of *This Is Our Time* and *Eschatological Discipleship*

“Imagine being a child overwhelmed by hundreds of jigsaw puzzle pieces—you just can’t put them together! And then imagine a kindly old uncle comes along and helps you put the whole thing together piece by piece. That is what it felt like reading John Stott’s *The Contemporary Christian*. For those of us who feel we can’t get our head around our Bible, let alone our world, he comes along and, with his staggering gifts of clarity and insight, helps us step by step to work out what it means to understand our world through biblical lenses. It’s then a great blessing to have Tim Chester’s questions at the end of each chapter, which help us think through and internalize each step.”

Rico Tice, senior minister for evangelism, All Souls Langham Place, London, coauthor of *Christianity Explored*

“Vintage Stott, with all that that implies. In it, as usual, we find him digesting and deploying a wide range of material with a symmetry matching that of Mozart, a didactic force like that of J. C. Ryle, and a down-to-earth common sense that reminds us of G. K. Chesterton. It is really a pastoral essay, a sermon on paper aimed at changing people . . . an outstandingly good book.”

J. I. Packer, in *Christianity Today*

“In my formative years as a young Christian, I was acutely aware of the fact that I faced many challenges to Christian thinking and behavior. Few writers helped me understand how I should respond to these challenges and think and live as a Christian as much as John Stott did. The challenges of faithfulness to God’s way are more acute and complex today than when I was a young Christian. In these little books you find the essence of Stott’s thinking about the Christian life, and it is refreshing to read again and see how relevant and health giving this material is for today. I’m grateful to InterVarsity Press and to Tim Chester for making Stott’s thinking accessible to a new generation.”

Ajith Fernando, teaching director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka

“It is always refreshing, enlightening, and challenging reading from the pen of John Stott. I am totally delighted that one of his most significant works will continue to be available, hopefully for more decades to come. The way Stott strives to be faithful to the Word of God and relevant to his world—secularized Western society—as the locus for the drama of God’s action is exemplary, especially for those of us ordained to the service of the church in our diverse contexts. I highly commend the God’s Word for Today series to all who share the same pursuit—listening intently to God’s Word and God’s world, hearing and obeying God.”

David Zac Niringiye, author of *The Church: God’s Pilgrim People*

“I am delighted that a new generation will now be able to benefit from this rich teaching, which so helped me when it first appeared. As always with John Stott, there is a wonderful blend of faithful exposition of the Bible, rigorous engagement with the world, and challenging applications for our lives.”

Vaughan Roberts, author of *God’s Big Picture*

“Technology has enabled more voices to clamor for our attention than ever before; while at the same time, people’s ability to listen carefully seems to have deteriorated like never before. John Stott’s speaking and writing was renowned for two things in particular. He taught us how to listen attentively to God in order to live faithfully for God, and he too modeled how to listen to the world sensitively in order to communicate God’s purposes intelligibly. He taught us to listen. That is why it is such a thrill to see *The Contemporary Christian* carefully revived in a new format as this series for a new generation of readers. As we read, may we listen well!”

Mark Meynell, director (Europe and Caribbean) of Langham Preaching, Langham Partnership, author of *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*

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with
TIM CHESTER

John Stott



The Church

GOD'S WORD FOR TODAY



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Contents

About the authors	viii
Preface	ix
A note to the reader	xi
Series introduction: the Contemporary Christian – the then and the now	1
<i>The Church</i> : introduction	9
1 Secular challenges to the church	11
2 Evangelism through the local church	25
3 Dimensions of church renewal	42
4 The church's pastors	55
Conclusion: the now and the not yet	72
Notes	82

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Tim Chester is Pastor of Grace Church, Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire, Chair of Keswick Ministries and the author of more than forty books.

Preface

To be ‘contemporary’ is to live in the present, and to move with the times without worrying too much about the past or the future.

To be a ‘contemporary Christian’, however, is to live in a present which is enriched by our knowledge of the past and by our expectation of the future. Our Christian faith demands this. Why? Because the God we trust and worship is ‘the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty’,¹ while the Jesus Christ we follow is ‘the same yesterday and today and for ever’.²

So this book and series are about how Christians handle time – how we can bring the past, the present and the future together in our thinking and living. Two main challenges face us. The first is the tension between the ‘then’ (past) and the ‘now’ (present), and the second the tension between the ‘now’ (present) and the ‘not yet’ (future).

The Introduction opens up the first problem. Is it possible for us truly to honour the past and live in the present at the same time? Can we preserve Christianity’s historic identity intact without cutting ourselves off from those around us? Can we communicate the gospel in ways that are exciting and modern without distorting or even destroying it? Can we be authentic and fresh at the same time, or do we have to choose?

The Conclusion opens up the second problem: the tension between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’. How far can we explore and experience everything that God has said and done through Christ without straying into what has not yet been revealed or given? How can we develop a proper sense of humility about a future yet to unfold without becoming complacent about where we are in the present?

In between these enquiries into the influences of the past and the future comes an exploration about our Christian responsibilities in the present.

Preface

This series is about questions of doctrine and discipleship under the five headings: ‘The Gospel’, ‘The Disciple’, ‘The Bible’, ‘The Church’ (the book you are holding in your hands) and ‘The World’, though I make no attempt to be systematic, let alone exhaustive.

In addition to the topic of time, and the relations between past, present and future, there is a second theme running through this series: the need for us to talk less and listen more.

I believe we are called to the difficult and even painful task of ‘double listening’. We are to listen carefully (although of course with differing degrees of respect) both to the ancient Word and to the modern world, in order to relate the one to the other with a combination of faithfulness and sensitivity.

Each book in this series is an attempt at double listening. It is my firm conviction that if we can only develop our capacity for double listening, we will avoid the opposite pitfalls of unfaithfulness and irrelevance, and truly be able to speak God’s Word to God’s world with effectiveness today.

Adapted from the original Preface by John Stott in 1991

A note to the reader

The original book entitled *The Contemporary Christian*, on which this volume and series are based, may not seem ‘contemporary’ to readers more than a quarter of a century later. But both the publisher and John Stott’s Literary Executors are convinced that the issues which John Stott addresses in this book are every bit as relevant today as when they were first written.

The question was how to make this seminal work accessible for new generations of readers. We have sought to do this in the following ways:

- The original work has been divided into a series of several smaller volumes based on the five major sections of the original.
- Words that may not resonate with the twenty-first-century reader have been updated, while great care has been taken to maintain the thought process and style of the author in the original.
- Each chapter is now followed by questions from a current bestselling Christian author to aid reflection and response.

Lovers of the original work have expressed delight that this book is being made available in a way that extends its reach and influence well into a new century. We pray that your life will be enriched as you read, as the lives of many have already been greatly enriched by the original edition.

Series introduction

The Contemporary Christian – the then and the now

The expression ‘the contemporary Christian’ strikes many as a contradiction in terms. Isn’t Christianity an antique relic from the remote past, irrelevant to people in today’s world?

My purpose in this series is to show that there is such a thing as ‘contemporary Christianity’ – not something newfangled, but original, historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity, sensitively related to the modern world.

Christianity: both historical and contemporary

We begin by reaffirming that Christianity is a historical religion. Of course, every religion arose in a particular historical context. Christianity, however, makes an especially strong claim to be historical because it rests not only on a historical *person*, Jesus of Nazareth, but on certain historical *events* which involved him, especially his birth, death and resurrection. There is a common thread here with the Judaism from which Christianity sprang. The Old Testament presents God not only as ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, but also as the God of the covenant which he made with Abraham, and then renewed with Isaac and Jacob. Again, he is not only ‘the God of Moses’, but is also seen as the Redeemer responsible for the exodus, who went on to renew the covenant yet again at Mount Sinai.

Christians are forever tethered in heart and mind to these decisive, historical events of the past. We are constantly encouraged in the

Series introduction

Bible to look back to them with thankfulness. Indeed, God deliberately made provision for his people to recall his saving actions on a regular basis. Supremely, the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion enables us to call the atoning death of Christ regularly to mind, and so bring the past into the present.

But the problem is that Christianity's foundational events took place such a long time ago. I had a conversation with two brothers some years ago – students who told me they had turned away from the faith of their parents. One was now an agnostic, the other an atheist. I asked why. Did they no longer believe in the truth of Christianity? No, their dilemma was not whether Christianity was *true*, but whether it was *relevant*. How could it be? Christianity, they went on, was a primitive, Palestinian religion from long ago. So what on earth did it have to offer them, living in the exciting modern world?

This view of Christianity is widespread. The world has changed dramatically since Jesus' day, and goes on changing with ever more bewildering speed. People reject the gospel, not necessarily because they think it false, but because it no longer resonates with them.

In response to this we need to be clear about the basic Christian conviction that God continues to speak through what he has spoken. His Word is not a prehistoric fossil, but a living message for the contemporary world. Even granted the historical particularities of the Bible and the immense complexities of the modern world, there is still a fundamental correspondence between them. God's Word remains a lamp to our feet and a light for our path.¹

At the same time, our dilemma remains. Can Christianity both retain its authentic identity *and* demonstrate its relevance?

The desire to present Jesus in a way that appeals to our own generation is obviously right. This was the preoccupation of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer while in prison during World War 2: 'What is bothering me incessantly,' he wrote, 'is the question . . . who

Christ really is for us today?² It is a difficult question. In answering it, the church has tended in every generation to develop images of Christ which deviate from the portrait painted by the New Testament authors.

Attempting to modernize Jesus

Here are some of the church's many attempts to present a contemporary picture of Christ, some of which have been more successful than others in remaining loyal to the original.

I think first of *Jesus the ascetic* who inspired generations of monks and hermits. He was much like John the Baptist, for he too dressed in a camel's hair cloak, wore sandals or went barefoot, and munched locusts with evident relish. But it would be hard to reconcile this portrait with his contemporaries' criticism that he was a party-goer who 'came eating and drinking'.³

Then there was *Jesus the pale Galilean*. The apostate emperor Julian tried to reinstate Rome's pagan gods after Constantine had replaced them with the worship of Christ, and is reported as having said on his deathbed in AD 363, 'You have conquered, O Galilean.' His words were popularized by the nineteenth-century poet Swinburne:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean;
The world has grown grey from thy breath.

This image of Jesus was perpetuated in medieval art and stained glass, with a heavenly halo and a colourless complexion, eyes lifted to the sky and feet never quite touching the ground.

In contrast to the presentations of Jesus as weak, suffering and defeated, there was *Jesus the cosmic Christ*, much loved by the Byzantine church leaders. They depicted him as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the creator and ruler of the universe. Yet, exalted high above all things, glorified and reigning, he seemed aloof from

Series introduction

the real world, and even from his own humanity, as revealed in the incarnation and the cross.

At the opposite end of the theological spectrum, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists of the Enlightenment constructed in their own image *Jesus the teacher of common sense*,⁴ entirely human and not divine at all. The most dramatic example is the work of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States from 1801 to 1809. Rejecting the supernatural as incompatible with reason, he produced his own edition of the Gospels, in which all miracles and mysteries were systematically eliminated. What is left is a guide to a merely human moral teacher.

In the twentieth century we were presented with a wide range of options. Two of the best known owe their popularity to musicals. There is *Jesus the clown of Godspell*, who spends his time singing and dancing, and thus captures something of the gaiety of Jesus, but hardly takes his mission seriously. Somewhat similar is *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the disillusioned celebrity who once thought he knew who he was, but in Gethsemane was no longer sure.

The late President of Cuba, Fidel Castro, frequently referred to Jesus as ‘a great revolutionary’, and there have been many attempts to portray him as *Jesus the freedom fighter*, the urban guerrilla, the first-century Che Guevara, with black beard and flashing eyes, whose most characteristic gesture was to overthrow the tables of the moneychangers and to drive them out of the temple with a whip.

These different portraits illustrate the recurring tendency to update Christ in line with current fashions. It began in the apostolic age, with Paul needing to warn of false teachers who were preaching ‘a Jesus other than the Jesus we [apostles] preached’.⁵ Each succeeding generation tends to read back into him its own ideas and hopes, and create him in its own image.

Their motive is right (to paint a contemporary portrait of Jesus), but the result is always distorted (as the portrait is unauthentic). The

challenge before us is to present Jesus to our generation in ways that are both accurate and appealing.

Calling for double listening

The main reason for every betrayal of the authentic Jesus is that we pay too much attention to contemporary trends and too little to God's Word. The thirst for relevance becomes so demanding that we feel we have to give in to it, whatever the cost. We become slaves to the latest fad, prepared to sacrifice truth on the altar of modernity. The quest for relevance degenerates into a lust for popularity. For the opposite extreme to irrelevance is accommodation, a feeble-minded, unprincipled surrender to the spirit of the time.

God's people live in a world which can be actively hostile. We are constantly exposed to the pressure to conform.

Thank God, however, that there have always been those who have stood firm, sometimes alone, and refused to compromise. I think of Jeremiah in the sixth century BC, and Paul in his day ('everyone . . . has deserted me'),⁶ Athanasius in the fourth century and Luther in the sixteenth.

In our own day we too need to resolve to present the biblical gospel in such a way as to speak to modern dilemmas, fears and frustrations, but with equal determination not to compromise it in so doing. Some stumbling-blocks are intrinsic to the original gospel and cannot be eliminated or soft-pedalled in order to make it easier to accept. The gospel contains some features so alien to modern thought that it will always appear foolish, however hard we strive to show that it is 'true and reasonable'.⁷ The cross will always be an assault on human self-righteousness and a challenge to human self-indulgence. Its 'scandal' (stumbling-block) simply cannot be removed. The church speaks most authentically not when it has become indistinguishable from the world around us, but when its distinctive light shines most brightly.

Series introduction

However keen we are to communicate God's Word to others, we must be faithful to that Word and, if necessary, be prepared to suffer for it. God's word to Ezekiel encourages us: 'Do not be afraid of them . . . You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious.'⁸ Our calling is to be faithful and relevant, not merely trendy.

How then can we develop a Christian mind which is both shaped by the truths of historic, biblical Christianity and also fully immersed in the realities of the contemporary world? We have to begin with a double refusal. We refuse to become either so absorbed in the Word that we *escape* into it and fail to let it confront the world, or so absorbed in the world that we *conform* to it and fail to subject it to the judgment of the Word.

In place of this double refusal, we are called to double listening. We need to listen to the Word of God with expectancy and humility, ready for God perhaps to confront us with a word that may be disturbing and uninvited. And we must also listen to the world around us. The voices we hear may take the form of shrill and strident protest. There will also be the anguished cries of those who are suffering, and the pain, doubt, anger, alienation and even despair of those who are at odds with God. We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.

Everybody finds listening difficult. But are Christians sometimes less good at listening than others? We can learn from the so-called 'comforters' in the Old Testament book of Job. They began well. When they heard about Job's troubles, they came to visit him and, seeing how great his sufferings were, said nothing to him for a whole week. If only they had continued as they began, and kept their mouths shut! Instead, they trotted out their conventional

Series introduction

view – that every sinner suffers for his or her own sins – in the most insensitive way. They did not really listen to what Job had to say. They merely repeated their own thoughtless and heartless claptrap, until in the end God stepped in and rebuked them for having misrepresented him.

We need to cultivate ‘double listening’, the ability to listen to two voices at the same time – the voice of God through the Bible and the voices of men and women around us. These voices will often contradict one another, but our purpose in listening to them both is to discover how they relate to each other. Double listening is indispensable to Christian discipleship and to Christian mission.

It is only through this discipline of double listening that it is possible to become a ‘contemporary Christian’. We bring ‘historical’ and ‘contemporary’ together as we learn to apply the Word to the world, proclaiming good news which is both true and new.

To put it in a nutshell, we live in the ‘now’ in the light of the ‘then’.

The Church

Introduction

John Wesley was right when he described Christianity as essentially a ‘social’ religion, and added that to turn it into a ‘solitary’ religion would be to destroy it. This is not to deny that it offers individual salvation and calls people to individual discipleship. It is rather to affirm that the church lies at the centre of God’s purpose. Christ gave himself for us, we are told, not only ‘to redeem us from all wickedness’, but also ‘to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good’.¹

The problem we have when we think about the church is the tension between the ideal and the reality. The ideal is beautiful. The church is the chosen and beloved people of God, his own special treasure, the covenant community to whom he has committed himself for ever. It is engaged in continuous worship of God and in compassionate outreach to the world, a haven of love and peace, and a pilgrim people headed for the eternal city. But in reality we who claim to be the church are often a motley rabble of rather scruffy individuals, half-educated and half-saved, uninspired in our worship, constantly bickering with each other. We are concerned more for our maintenance than our mission, struggling and stumbling along the road, needing constant rebuke and exhortation, which are readily available from both Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles.

This distinction between the ideal and the reality means that people’s opinions of the church vary enormously. On the one hand, P. T. Forsyth could write that ‘the church of Christ is the greatest and finest product of human history . . . the greatest thing in the universe’.² On the other, Thomas Arnold wrote, ‘The church as it now

The Church: introduction

stands no human power can save . . . When I think of the church, I could sit down and pine and die.³

My purpose in this book is to focus on the ideal, on what God intends his church to be, while all the time keeping in view the reality, so that we can grasp the changes which need to be made. The first two chapters are complementary, since we consider in chapter 1 the world's challenge to the church and in chapter 2 the church's mission in the world. In chapter 3 the renewal the church's needs will be seen to include, as Jesus prayed, not only one area (e.g. its unity or its spirituality), but every area of its life. And to this end, those of us who have been ordained to the pastoral ministry of the church need ourselves to be renewed according to God's purpose, which is the topic of chapter 4.

1

Secular challenges to the church

One of the church's greatest needs is a sensitive awareness of the world around us. If we are true servants of Jesus Christ, we will keep our eyes open (as he did) to human need, and our ears alert to cries of anguish. We will respond compassionately and constructively (as again he did) to people's pain.

This does not mean that in every respect we 'let the world set the agenda for the church', as people used to say, or that we trot like a little dog at the world's heels. To behave like that would be to confuse service (which is our calling) with servility (which is not), and to interpret sensitivity (which is a virtue) as conformity (which is a vice). No, first and foremost we have to declare and do what God has sent us to declare and do. We are not to pay fawning homage to the world.

At the same time, unless we listen attentively to the voices of secular society, struggle to understand them, and feel with people in their frustration, anger, bewilderment and despair, we will lack authenticity as the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. We will run the risk of answering questions nobody is asking, scratching where nobody is itching, supplying goods for which there is no demand – in other words, of being totally irrelevant, as we began to see in our Introduction.

This chapter explores the threefold quest of modern, secular people, which in fact reflects universal human aspirations. They are hopes which Jesus Christ himself arouses in people, which he alone can satisfy, and which challenge the church to present him to the world in his fullness.

The quest for transcendence

Until quite recently, many assumed that secularism would gradually expel any religious sensibilities from society. 'Transcendence' was seen as a rather obscure word whose use was limited to institutions of theological learning. There students were introduced to the distinction between 'transcendence' (meaning God above and outside the created world) and 'immanence' (meaning God present and active within it). But increasingly people are recognizing that even in modern cultures the quest for transcendence goes on. This quest is a kind of protest against secularization, that is, against the attempt to eliminate God from our own world. Human beings do not 'live on bread alone', for materialism cannot satisfy the human spirit. Consider some examples of the recent disillusionment with secularism and the persistent search for transcendence.

First, there was *the collapse of European Marxism* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Marxism was originally presented as a substitute for outmoded religious faith. But converts were few and far between. As Canon Trevor Beeson wrote about Eastern Europe, 'the basic doctrines of Communism have neither convinced the minds, nor satisfied the emotions, of the intelligentsia or of the proletariat. On the other hand, religious life has displayed remarkable resilience and, far from disappearing, has in many instances found new vitality and power.'¹ The Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn drew attention to something which the leaders of the former Soviet Union had not expected:

that in a land where churches have been levelled, where a triumphant atheism has rampaged uncontrolled for two-thirds of a century, where clergy are utterly humiliated and deprived of all independence, where what remains of the church as an institution is tolerated only for the sake of propaganda directed at the West, where even today people are sent to the labour

Secular challenges to the church

camps for their faith, and where, within the camps themselves, those who gather to pray at Easter are clapped in punishment cells – they [i.e. the Soviet leaders] could not suppose that beneath this communist steam-roller the Christian tradition could survive in Russia! But there remain many millions of believers; it is only external pressures that keep them from speaking out.²

The second sphere in which people are seen to be disillusioned with secularism is *the desert of Western materialism*. Secularism is no more satisfying to the human spirit in its capitalist, than in its communist, guise. Theodore Roszak is an eloquent American exponent of its emptiness. The significant subtitle of his book *Where the Wasteland Ends* is *Politics and Transcendence in a Post-Industrial Society*.³ He laments what he calls the ‘coca-colonization of the world’.⁴ We are suffering, he writes, from ‘a psychic claustrophobia within the scientific worldview’ in which the human spirit cannot breathe.⁵ He castigates science (pseudo-science, I think he means) for its arrogant claim to be able to explain everything, its ‘debunking spirit’,⁶ its ‘undoing of the mysteries’. ‘For what science can measure is only a portion of what man can know.’⁷ This materialistic world of objective science, he goes on, is not nearly ‘spacious enough’ for us.⁸ Without transcendence ‘the person shrivels’.⁹ His prescription (the recovery of Blake’s ‘visionary imagination’) is woefully inadequate, but his diagnosis is right on target. Human beings know instinctively that Reality cannot be confined in a test tube, or reduced to data in server farms, or apprehended through cool scientific detachment. For life has another and transcendent dimension, and Reality is ‘awesomely vast’.¹⁰

Third, the quest for transcendence is seen in *the epidemic of drug abuse*. There are, of course, a number of different interpretations of this almost worldwide phenomenon. In part, it can be an innocent experimentation, or a protest against conventional mores, or even an

Secular challenges to the church

attempt to escape the harsh realities of life. But it can also be a genuine search for a 'higher consciousness', and even for an objective transcendent reality. Carlos Castaneda, for example, describes how he used drugs as a form of 'divination', bodily flight or bodilessness, adopting alternative bodies, and moving into and through objects. Clearly not every drug user is pursuing such a distinctive path, but many are trying to escape the boredom of the mundane.¹¹

The fourth example of the quest for transcendence is *the proliferation of religious cults*. Alongside the resurgence of ancient faiths has gone the emergence of new religions. The American clinical psychologist, Professor Margaret Singer, estimates that 2 million people are involved in around 5,000 separate cults in the United States alone.¹² A leading article in *The Economist* warned that 'a groping has begun for new forms of spiritual experience'. It added, 'In that search for God, it is all too easy to blunder into the arms of Satan instead.'¹³ Peter Berger, the sociologist, has given a similar explanation: 'The current occult wave (including its devil component) is to be understood as resulting from the repression of transcendence in modern consciousness.'¹⁴

Most striking of all recent religious trends is the rise of the New Age movement. It is a bizarre assortment of diverse beliefs, religion and science, physics and metaphysics, ancient pantheism and evolutionary optimism, astrology, spiritism, reincarnation, ecology and alternative medicine. One of the movement's leaders, David Spangler, writes in his book *Emergence: The Rebirth of the Sacred* that 'from a very early age' he had himself been 'aware of an extra dimension' to the world around him, which as he grew older he came to identify as 'a sacred or transcendental dimension'. 'The rebirth of the sense of the sacred,' he adds, 'is at the heart of the new age.'¹⁵

Here, then, are four contemporary pieces of evidence that materialism does not satisfy the human spirit, and that as a result people are looking for another, a transcendent, reality. They seek it everywhere – through yoga and the Eastern religions, through sex

Secular challenges to the church

(which Malcolm Muggeridge used to call ‘the mysticism of the materialist’), through music and the other arts, through a drug-induced higher consciousness, through modern cults, New Age speculations, the fantasies of science fiction, and the immersive experience of online gaming and virtual reality.

The immediate Christian reaction to this complex phenomenon should be one of sympathy. For we surely understand what is going on, and why. In the words of the apostle Paul before the Athenian philosophers, men and women are ‘feeling after God’, like blind people in the dark, groping after their Creator, who leaves them restless until they find their rest in him.¹⁶ They are expressing the human quest for transcendence.

This quest for transcendence is a challenge to the quality of the church’s public worship. Does it offer what people are craving – the element of mystery, a sense of holiness, in biblical language ‘the fear of God’, in modern language ‘transcendence’? My answer is, ‘Not often.’ The church is not always conspicuous for the profound reality of its worship. In particular, we who call ourselves ‘evangelical’ do not know much how to worship. Evangelism is our speciality, not worship. We seem to have little sense of the greatness and the glory of Almighty God. We do not bow down before him in awe and wonder. Our tendency is to be cocky, flippant and proud. We take little trouble to prepare our worship services. Sometimes they are slovenly, mechanical, perfunctory and dull. At other times they are frivolous to the point of irreverence. No wonder those seeking Reality often pass us by!

We need to listen again to the biblical criticism of religion. No book, not even by Marx and his followers, is more scathing of empty religion than the Bible. The prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries BC were outspoken in their attack on the formalism and hypocrisy of Israelite worship. Jesus applied their critique to the Pharisees of his day: ‘These people . . . honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’¹⁷ And this indictment of religion by the

Secular challenges to the church

Old Testament prophets and by Jesus is uncomfortably applicable to us and our churches today. Too much of our worship is ritual without reality, form without power, fun without fear, religion without God.

What is needed then? Here are some suggestions. First, we need such a faithful reading and preaching of God's Word that through it his living voice is heard, addressing his people. Second, we need such a reverent and expectant administration of the Lord's Supper that (I choose my words carefully) there is a Real Presence of Jesus Christ, not in the elements, but among his people and at his table. There should be a sense of Jesus Christ himself, objectively and really present, coming to meet us, ready to make himself known to us through the breaking of bread, and anxious to give himself to us, so that we may feed on him in our hearts by faith. Third, we need such a sincere offering of praise and prayer that God's people say with Jacob, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it',¹⁸ and unbelievers will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'¹⁹

In summary, it is a great tragedy that people today who are seeking transcendence turn to drugs, sex, cults, mysticism, the New Age and science fiction, instead of to the church, in whose worship services true transcendence should always be experienced, and a close encounter with the living God enjoyed.

The quest for significance

There is much in the modern world which not only smothers our sense of transcendence, but also undermines our sense of personal significance, our belief that life has any meaning.

First, there is the effect of *technology*. Technology can be liberating, of course, insofar as it frees people from domestic or industrial drudgery. But it can also be dreadfully dehumanizing, as people feel they are no longer persons but things, their lives processed by inanimate computers and their personalities reduced to data sets.

Secular challenges to the church

Second, there is *scientific reductionism*. Some scientists argue that a human being is nothing but an animal (what Dr Desmond Morris calls the 'naked ape'), or nothing but a DNA sequence, programmed to make automatic responses to external stimuli. Statements like these prompted Professor Donald MacKay to popularize the expression 'nothing buttery' (human beings are 'nothing but . . .') as an explanation of what is meant by 'reductionism', and to protest against this tendency to make human beings less than the fully personal.

To be sure, our brain is a highly complex machine, and our anatomy is that of an animal. But that is not a complete account of our humanness. There is more to us than a brain and a body.

Third, *existentialism* diminishes people's sense of significance. Radical existentialists differ from other humanists in their resolve to take their atheism seriously and face its terrible consequences. Because (in their view) God is dead, everything else has died with him. Because there is no God, there are now no values or ideals either, no moral laws or standards, no purposes or meanings – except those which individuals create for themselves as they go along. There is nothing that gives my existence any significance except my decision to seek the courage to be. Meaning is found only in despising my own meaninglessness. There is no other way to authenticate myself.

Bleakly heroic as this philosophy may sound, there must be few people able to perform the conjuring trick of pretending to have significance when they know they have none. For significance is basic to survival. This is what Viktor Frankl found in the Auschwitz concentration camp. He noticed that the inmates most likely to survive were those 'who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfil'.²⁰ Later he became Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology at the University of Vienna and founded the so-called 'Third Viennese School of Psychiatry'. He claimed that, in addition to Freud's 'will to pleasure' and Adler's 'will to power', human beings have a 'will to meaning'. Indeed, 'the striving to find a meaning in

Secular challenges to the church

one's life is the primary motivational force in man'.²¹ 'The mass neurosis of the present time', he wrote, is 'the existential vacuum',²² that is, the loss of a sense that life is meaningful. He would sometimes ask his clients, 'Why don't you commit suicide?' (an extraordinary question for a doctor to put to a patient!). They would reply that there was something (perhaps their work or marriage or family) which made life worthwhile for them. Professor Frankl would then build on this.

Meaninglessness can lead to boredom, alcoholism, delinquency and suicide. Commenting on Viktor Frankl's work, Arthur Koestler wrote,

It is an inherent tendency in man to reach out for *meanings* to fulfil and for *values* to actualize . . . Thousands and thousands of young students are exposed to an indoctrination . . . which denies the existence of values. The result is a worldwide phenomenon – more and more patients are crowding our clinics with the complaint of an inner emptiness, the sense of a total and ultimate meaninglessness of life.²³

According to Émile Durkheim, in his classic study of suicide, the greatest number of suicides are caused by 'normlessness' or 'meaninglessness', when somebody either has no goal in life or pursues an unattainable goal. 'No human being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means.'²⁴

If the quest for transcendence was a challenge to the quality of the church's worship, the quest for significance is a challenge to the quality of the church's teaching. Millions of people do not know who they are, nor that they have any significance or worth. Hence the urgent challenge to tell them who they are, to enlighten them about their identity. We need to teach without compromise the full biblical doctrine of our human being – its depravity, yes, but also its dignity.

Secular challenges to the church

Christians believe in the intrinsic worth of human beings, because of our doctrines of creation and redemption. God made humanity in his own image and gave us a responsible stewardship of the earth and its creatures. He has endowed us with rational, moral, social, creative and spiritual faculties which make us like him and unlike the animals. Human beings are Godlike beings. As a result of the fall, our Godlikeness has been distorted, but it has not been destroyed. Furthermore, 'God so loved the world' that he gave his only Son for our redemption. The cross is the chief public evidence of the value which God places on us.

Christian teaching on the dignity and worth of human beings is of the utmost importance today, not only for the sake of our own self-image and self-respect, but even for the welfare of society as a whole.

When human beings are devalued, everything in society turns sour. Women are humiliated, and children despised. The sick are regarded as a nuisance, and the elderly as a burden. Ethnic minorities are discriminated against. The poor are oppressed and denied social justice. Capitalism displays its ugliest face. Labour is exploited in the mines and factories. Criminals are brutalized in prison. Opposition opinions are stifled. Concentration camps like Belsen are invented by the extreme Right, and forced labour camps like the Gulag by the extreme Left. Unbelievers are left to live and die in their lostness. There is no freedom, no dignity, no carefree joy. Human life seems not worth living, because it is scarcely human any longer.

But when human beings are valued as persons, because of their intrinsic worth, everything changes. Men, women and children are all honoured. The sick are cared for, and the elderly enabled to live and die with dignity. Dissidents are listened to, prisoners rehabilitated, minorities protected and the oppressed set free. Workers are given a fair wage, decent working conditions and a measure of participation in both the management and the profit of the enterprise. And the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth. Why? Because

people matter. Because every man, woman and child has worth and significance as a human being made in God's image and likeness.

The quest for community

The modern technocratic society, which destroys transcendence and significance, also destroys community. We are living in an era of social disintegration. People find it difficult to relate to one another. Yet we go on seeking the very thing which eludes us – love in a loveless world. I summon as my witnesses three very different people.

The first is Mother Teresa. Born in Skopje, the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, she left for India when she was only seventeen years old. Then, after about twenty years of teaching, she began to serve the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. The same year (1948) she became an Indian citizen, and two years later founded her own order, the 'Missionaries of Charity'. So India was her home for over sixty years. This is what she wrote about the West:

People today are hungry for love, for understanding love, which is . . . the only answer to loneliness and great poverty. That is why we [i.e. the sisters and brothers of her order] are able to go to countries like England and America and Australia, where there is no hunger for bread. But there people are suffering from terrible loneliness, terrible despair, terrible hatred, feeling unwanted, feeling helpless, feeling hopeless. They have forgotten how to smile, they have forgotten the beauty of the human touch. They are forgetting what is human love. They need someone who will understand and respect them.²⁵

I remember that when I first read this assessment of the Western world, I was a bit indignant and considered it exaggerated. But I

Secular challenges to the church

have since changed my mind. I think it is accurate, at least as a generalization.

My second witness is Bertrand Russell, the brilliant mathematician and philosopher, and uncompromising atheist. He wrote with moving candour in the Prologue to his autobiography:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair. I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy . . . I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness – that terrible loneliness in which one’s shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss . . .²⁶

Woody Allen is my third witness. Most people think of him as a comedian (he was selling jokes to the press while he was still at high school), but ‘inside the clown there’s a tragedian’.²⁷ For all his acclaimed brilliance as an author, director and actor, he never seems to have found either himself or anybody else. He describes love-making as ‘two psychopaths under one quilt’. In his film *Manhattan* (1979), he quips that he thinks people ought to ‘mate for life, like pigeons or Catholics’, but he appears unable to follow his own precept. He confesses that all his films ‘deal with that greatest of all difficulties – love relationships. Everybody encounters that. People are either in love, about to fall in love, on the way out of love, looking for love, or a way to avoid it.’²⁸ His biographer ends his portrait of him with these words: ‘He is struggling, as *we* are surely struggling, to find the strength to found a life upon a love. As the character says in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, “Maybe the poets are right. Maybe love is the only answer.”’²⁹

Secular challenges to the church

Here are three people of very different backgrounds, beliefs, temperaments and experiences, who nevertheless agree with one another about the paramount importance of love. They speak for the human race. We all know instinctively that love is indispensable to our humanness. Love is what life is all about.

So people are seeking it everywhere. Some are breaking away from Western individualism and experimenting with communal styles of living. Others are repudiating the age-long institutions of marriage and the family in an attempt (vain and foolish, Christians believe) to find the freedom and spontaneity of love. Everybody is searching for genuine community and the authentic relationships of love. The well-known words of 'Love, love changes everything' from Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Aspects of Love* say it all.

The world's third challenge, then, concerns the quality of the church's fellowship. We proclaim that God is love, and that Jesus Christ offers true community. We insist that the church is part of the gospel. God's purpose, we say, is not merely to save isolated individuals, and so perpetuate their loneliness, but to build a church, to create a new society, even a new humanity, in which racial, national, social and sexual barriers have been abolished. Moreover, this new community of Jesus dares to present itself as the true alternative society, which eclipses the values and standards of the world.

It is a high-sounding claim. But the tragedy is that the church has consistently failed to live up to its own ideals. Its theological understanding of its calling may be impeccable. But, comparatively speaking, there is little acceptance, little caring and little supportive love among us. People searching for community ought to be pouring into our churches. Instead, the church is the one place they do not bother to check out, so sure are they that they will not find love there.

It would be unjust, however, to be entirely negative in our evaluation of the contemporary church. For there are Christian communities all over the world where true, sacrificial, serving,

Secular challenges to the church

supportive love is to be found. Where such Christian love flourishes, its magnetism is almost irresistible. Bishop Stephen Neill expressed it well:

Within the fellowship of those who are bound together by personal loyalty to Jesus Christ, the relationship of love reaches an intimacy and intensity unknown elsewhere. Friendship between the friends of Jesus of Nazareth is unlike any other friendship. This ought to be normal experience within the Christian community . . . That in existing Christian congregations it is so rare is a measure of the failure of the church as a whole to live up to the purpose of its Founder for it. Where it is experienced, especially across the barriers of race, nationality and language, it is one of the most convincing evidences of the continuing activity of Jesus among men.³⁰

Here, then, is a threefold quest on which human beings are engaged. Although people might not articulate like this, we may say that in looking for transcendence they are trying to find God, in looking for significance they are trying to find themselves, and in looking for community they are trying to find their neighbour. This is humankind's universal search for God, our neighbour and ourselves.

Moreover, it is the Christian claim (confident I know, humble I hope) that those who seek will find – in Christ and in his new society. The contemporary secular quest seems to me to constitute one of the greatest challenges – and opportunities – with which the church has ever been presented: people are openly looking for the very things that Jesus Christ is offering!

The only question is whether the church can be so radically renewed by the Spirit and the Word of God that it offers an experience of transcendence through its worship, of significance through its teaching, and of community through its fellowship. If it can, then

Secular challenges to the church

people will turn to it eagerly, and our proclamation of the good news will have a credibility which otherwise it lacks.

Reflection questions from Tim Chester

- 1 What are the hopes, fears and frustrations of the people around you?
- 2 How are these hopes and fears met in Christ and his people?
- 3 What signs of a desire for transcendence do you see in our culture?
- 4 How can we ensure that a sense of transcendence is a feature of the worship of our churches?
- 5 Where do the people around you look for meaning? How does the gospel confirm, complete or challenge these attempts to find meaning?
- 6 Which practical steps could you take to ensure your church or small group is a community of magnetic love?