

State of Affairs

by Ian Hodge, Ph.D.

CHRISTIANITY IS IN DISARRAY. Let me be careful here, however, and make sure we understand what is being said. This statement does not mean that all Christians are in disarray. What it does imply is that in a general sense, Christianity, and therefore Christians, are in disarray. Not every Christian, but enough of them to argue that Christianity is in disarray. At least this is my view in 1998.

For example, one major Protestant denomination in Queensland (Australia) has only three students in its ministerial training college. In a recent discussion with a senior representative from this denomination, he claimed the low enrolments reflected a spiritual malaise among the members of the congregations. When I asked how he knew it was a spiritual malaise rather than a practical malaise, he did not seem to comprehend the difference. This is why there is disarray in the Christian community. There is no common diagnosis of the problem. Protestantism, by the way, is not alone here. A Roman Catholic training college in Brisbane is about to close for lack of students.

It may well be argued that for decades the standard training mechanism for the ministry has been wrongly based. Some of us would like to see apprenticeship type training at the local level. But this, I do not think, explains the inability of denominations to raise enough pastors to keep their faculty members fully employed. There is a far deeper problem here.

Low Class Theology

ONE OF THE WAYS we might explain the disarray within Christianity is to look at the problem from a sociological angle rather than a theological one. I have made comment in previous essays about Edward Banfield's perceptive analysis of economic classes in terms of their future orientation, their time perspective.¹ This orientation manifests itself in attitudes towards such things as one's self, the community, the nation and "mankind." In turn, this leads to particular activities that flow out of the person's orientation towards the future. Thus, according to Banfield, "the upper-class individual feels a strong attachment to entities (formal organizations, the neighborhood, the nation,

¹Edward Banfield, *The Unheavenly City* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Company, 1968).

the world) toward which he stands, or wants to stand, in a relation of fellowship. He sees the 'community' (or 'society') as having long-range goals and the ability to shape the future. He tends to feel that it is one's responsibility to 'serve' the community by assisting in efforts for its improvement. . . ." (P. 50)

Look at the community service organizations around about. Who are its members? What social groups tend to support organizations such as Rotary or Lions? Who are the folk who support the fund-raising activities at the local hospital? To be sure, we can find all kinds, but is there a predominance of one particular economic class? Without proper study, we cannot be sure, but cast your mind around and come to your own conclusions. In the observations of this writer, there is a *tendency* for the wealthier types to be more actively involved in charitable causes. There is a tendency to think that monied folk have more capacity for charitable work, and that is true. But Banfield's observations do not include this. Rather, he argues, people in the higher economic brackets act charitably because of their underlying perspective about themselves in relation to the future.

We need only consider education to illustrate this point. In a recent conversation with the chairman (or is it chairperson?) of a group of church-related schools, comment was made about a parent who had phoned asking the chairman to intervene at a particular school. Her 7-month old child had not been guaranteed a place in one of the schools. Since the particular school only commences with 10-year olds, this call for help is even more remarkable. How many schools have 10-year waiting lists? Of those schools with such long waiting lists, where are they placed in the hierarchy of fee-levels of private schools? Having been involved in Christian school groups that charged the lowest possible fees, I do not recall *any* of these schools having a 10-year waiting list. In fact, to the contrary, many of them were struggling to keep alive, and a majority of them closed over time.

What, then, explains the extraordinary demand for high-priced schools? Parents often make great sacrifices to send their children to these schools, even though there is some evidence that the level of education may not be superior to other schools in the community. And which geographical locations are these schools to be found in? It is the time-perspective of the parents, willing to make huge sacrifices to ensure their offspring get ahead in life further than their parents have.

We can take another example, the world of business. It is rare to find businesses whose owners are located in the lower economic groups that conduct long-term planning for their businesses. The moment they do, they

cease to be smaller and less successful. Instead, they take on the appearance of wealthier businesses. They usually put their fees or prices up, because with long range planning, they now realize what it *really* takes to capitalize a business for the longer term. Strangely, with the higher prices often comes an increase in sales and an improved ability to expand since it now has better working capital.

This long term planning in business, requires a particular view about the future. It does not usually come about because the business has been highly successful. Rather, success comes as people apply certain practices to business and these practices, in turn, reflect the time perspective of the owners and those managing the business.

There are also differences in management practices that manifest themselves according to class. At the higher end of the scale, individual responsibility is more likely to be emphasized, and an environment created where individual initiative can be exercised. The lower classes, on the other hand, are more likely to want to maintain control.

Within certain Christian communities this can be taken to an extreme. Directors of a fundamentalist “Christian” company delivered a paper once that argued that employees of the organization were not employed on a contractual basis (even though each of them could resign or be fired with a month's notice on either side). Instead, it was argued, employees were “slaves” of the employers.² That they used Ephesians 6:5-9 to support their argument indicates the incapacity of the directors to correctly interpret Scripture.

Of more relevance to our discussion, however, is the economic location of the organization offering such views. Certainly not from the upper economic strata of society. Instead, it emanates from the conservative and so-called “fundamental” wing of Christianity. One thing missing from upper-economic suburbia is, of course, the “fundamental” church, with its emphasis on democratic voting rights in the local congregation, autonomous churches, and pastors who act with the power of a local “Pope.” To say that monied folk reject the fundamentalist view because of sin is only one possible answer to the lack of fundamental churches in certain economic segments of society. Another possible answer is that fundamental theology cannot provide the correct eschatological view that flows with success. In short, fundamental

²They actually argued that the employees were slaves of the board, rather than the company. This is wrong in fact and in law, since all employees, including the directors, serve the company, not the board.

theology is seriously flawed, since its time perspective does not match with reality.³

In 1994 I wrote three articles offering a biblical view of management. These were, in some quarters, controversial. They became the subject of intense discussion in certain fundamentalist quarters. They were attacked by clergymen, by housewives, and even a salesman had an attempt to discredit them. Not one person in senior management, however, offered any criticism of the articles at the time. This should not be surprising, since the articles endeavored to deal with *real* issues that *real* managers and senior executives must deal with in *real* organizations. The point here, is that the articles were criticized by those in a particular *economic* class because they apparently did not fit the *theological* perspective of that class.

None of the critics attempted to provide *practical* alternatives for management practice. And, like the directors mentioned above who wanted to define employment as slavery, they offered no practical advice that any serious manager could implement in a business environment.

This raises an interesting point. Is theology itself a product of class, or the other way round? According to Banfield, and I think he is on safe ground here, economic status is determined by time perspective which, in turn, is governed by one's theology. In short, it is certain religious views that form class, even within a so-called Christian society. That certain "fundamentalist" ideas pertain in churches that are found in lower socio-economic areas should not surprise us, because these churches have for decades sold a message of short time perspective. The world is about to end, don't plan for the future, live for the moment, for at any moment the Lord will return.

Other churches, less dogmatic in their eschatological perspective because, perhaps, they were less inclined to read the Bible with such literalism, were not infected by the short time span. In these churches we find economic status and class, a position that results from the way they acted; and their actions, in turn, were governed by their perspective on time.

Let's put this another way. In suburbia, see which denominations are represented in the particular socio-economic areas of the city. In the country towns, which people from the community are most likely to attend the

³See Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), Ch. 5, "The Intellectual Disaster of Fundamentalism."

Anglican church, and which folk the local "fundamentalist" church? While the answer here is not universal, there are generalizations that stand.

Spiritual Malaise?

DO WE, THEN, have a spiritual malaise? The answer is clearly yes. But our definition of this malaise may not be the same as other people's at this point. Take the pastor mentioned above who saw the lack of student numbers as indicating a spiritual malaise. How would he solve this problem? More Bible reading? More prayer? More church attendance? If the folk in the churches prayed more, read their Bible more, sang more hymns and spiritual songs, would this of itself bring more students to the college?

I know I have used this example before, but it is worth using again because it so aptly illustrates the point. Imagine two farmers, one prepared the soil as best he could, watered and tended the crop during its growth until harvest time. The other prepared his soil less and tended the crop less, because, as a religious man, he wanted to spend more time reading his Bible, praying, communing with God. In return, he trusted that God would bless him and his crop would be as good as the other man's.

This same illustration can be used in other commercial businesses. Some people instill budget and planning disciplines into their business ventures, they conduct marketing and advertising campaigns to attract customers. Others try to spend less time in some of these areas, for they want to pray more, read their Bible more, attend more church functions, and trust that God will somehow make up their shortfall in activity by blessing them with results that are more than their efforts might humanly deserve.

Not surprisingly, we can find examples in real life, and in the Bible, of God blessing where human effort was not all it could be, and at other times failure occurred despite the greatest of human efforts for success. But underlying these two views is a view about the miraculous that requires further thought.

Depending on Miracles

WE ARE ACCUSTOMED in many areas to continue to seek and depend upon the miraculous. Miraculous as used here, relates to that which occurs outside the realm of normal expectation. For example, if I failed to eat and I did not die from starvation, this would be a miracle. If I conduct a successful business without adopting prudent business practices, this would be

miraculous. If a child became educated without ever reading a book or listening to a teacher, this would be a miracle.

Curiously, while the Bible contains many examples of miracles, we are *not* told to expect them continually. Did Jesus, for example, fill the water pots with wine at every feast He went to? Did He heal *every* person alive in Israel during His time on earth? No, He did not, and He even warned His hearers not to expect the miraculous all the time. After His reading from the book of Isaiah in the Synagogue, Jesus illustrated the point about his non-acceptance with the fact that in the time of Elijah, God sent Elijah to only one widow to feed her, while only one leper, Naaman (a foreigner, too), was healed.

For some of us, the emphasis in life has been to abandon "practical" living for "living by faith", meaning depending upon the miraculous. Yet is it not surprising just how many "Christian" businesses fail because the owners depended upon "faith" rather than learning practical business and management skills.

Unfortunately, it is not just our businesses that are failing. So too are our churches, some of which are declining in numbers and influence. Three students in a mainstream denomination are a disaster of the highest order, for it spells the eventual death of the denomination unless a solution is found to the problem. More prayer? For certain. More Bible reading? We can never have enough. But what about a marketing plan by the theological college or denomination that would seek to recruit students and future pastors?

Such a plan we are unlikely to see in the near future. The denominations are governed by a generation of men (and, in some cases, women) who lack the practical experience of managing a multi-million dollar organization. They operate by committee, and confuse the role of the governing board with that of an administrative or executive office. Consequently, because the governing committees don't know their own role and purpose in life, they get involved in the administrative activities of the organization. But an organization, to have real life, needs a full-time administrator, not 16 men and women who meet once a quarter, or maybe once a month. A theological college with only three students had better soon get someone into full-time promotional activities for the college, and not depend upon the donated time of a part-timer who might give 25 hours this week, and nothing for the next three weeks. An organization in these dire straits needs someone in promotion 25 hours each week until the student numbers build, or the recognition is made that in spite of the best efforts, results are not forthcoming, which probably indicates God wants our efforts elsewhere.

Are our churches in disarray? Yes they are. I have worked with several church leadership groups and am constantly amazed that senior business executives, as soon as they step into the church leadership role, or any leadership function within a non-profit organization, willingly abandon nearly every principle and practice they use in business to sustain it as an ongoing organization. For example, well-managed businesses use numbers to determine goals and objectives. They want a percentage return for shareholders, or a minimum bottom line surplus which might be used for expansion purpose if not distributed to the owners. Now good men and women will use these numbers very effectively in managing successful businesses, but as soon as they step into the non-profit sector of the church and its related activities, they abandon these principles and substitute something else. What is it they substitute? Poor management. Because that is the *only* alternative to good management. "We are not governed by numbers," they say. We have other "higher" goals. But these goals and objectives while real in *any* organization, are so intangible as to be useless to be used properly to set measurable goals and activities so that the organisation *can* achieve its higher ideals.

In business they will view monthly a Profit and Loss report *and* a Balance Sheet. But they think nothing of running the local church or a church organization without one or more of these.

In business they would demand budgets and business plans to explain how the company's funds will be spent. But in the local church we will get a budget with no clear indication how the money will ensure the ongoing viability of the organization.

In business, staff will be held accountable for the way they budget and use the assets of the company. But in the local church, the leadership of the church will not hold itself accountable, nor demand accountability from the finance committee, the planning committee, or the pastor.

And we wonder why we are failing.

A spiritual Malaise? To be certain. Do we need more prayer? We sure do, just as we need more Bible study. But if we have these without a corresponding improvement in the way we do *things around here*, then I think we are doomed to failure. We are not commanded to depend upon the miraculous all our lives. In fact, in some way we can say the miraculous is often a sign of immaturity for those who doubt and falter on the way. Our dependency upon the miraculous, therefore, is misplaced. It is this

dependency which is *one of the signs* of the spiritual malaise within our Christian communities.

I do not mean by this, for example, that when we preach the Gospel we can simply achieve better results by better planning. Nor do I suggest that we can simply get better business results by better planning and management. The Bible clearly indicates that God blesses our activities as He sees fit. This is not the issue here. The issue is this: When we get out of bed each morning, should we plan the day, and have already in place a plan that covers tomorrow, the next day, the next week, month, years, and even decade? Will God bless us without these activities. Will He bless us *more* if we have these work practices?

We have a long way to go. Many of our fine pastors preach us fine sermons on the doctrines of the Bible. They help us develop correct theology. But do they translate these into practical activities? When was the last time your pastor gave you a sermon or even a bible-study on a Christian view of money management, staff management, business theory, or something similar? And I mean a sermon that had at least *one* idea that could be put into practice. The trouble is, most pastors don't see the need for this, don't take the effort to work out how to apply the Bible in these areas, thereby failing to deal with the practical issues of life.

The local evangelical church has become a frustration to those within its community who have been pushed and pulled in business and therefore into a longer view of the future. Successful people have adopted the necessity of planning, of sound management, and the other practices that attend these. Is it any wonder that people who are successful in business often drop out of their local church and find greater affinity with the Rotary or Lion's Club?

We fail to recognize the issues unless we see it in terms of a theological perspective about time and how that results in different attitudes and practices to that which occupies most of our time each day, our vocational callings.

We fail to recognize why it is that certain "fundamentalist" beliefs remain entrenched in the lower socio-economic areas of our cities and towns. What happens when people become wealthy? Do they really become less spiritual? Some fundamentalist would have us believe so. Perhaps they realize their long-term behavior during the week does not fit with their short-term theology they hear on Sunday, so they find a church more closely aligned to their view of life. The need to plan longer term is greater as our businesses grow, and

this, in turn, plays havoc with our short-term eschatological view, even at a subconscious level.

Unfortunately, the "fundamentalist" areas of Christianity have taken a low view of wealth, discouraging the pursuit of it in favor of pursuing "spiritual" values instead. This hostility towards wealth in these churches, however, is more than just an antagonism towards wealth. Underneath it lies a hostility towards the Biblical view of time, which is a *long term view*. The pervasive view in "fundamental" churches has been a short time frame, an any-moment rapture (or at least rapture in our lifetime), resulting in work practices that accompany such a view. These include little or no long range planning. It also includes constant diatribes against wealth and a radical failure to seriously address the legitimate concerns of business. It conducts critiques of those who do offer biblical views of these things while offering no substitute. It lacks the ability, in other words, to engage in common debate and social intercourse with those outside its fold. This is why its demise is on the horizon.

Is it any wonder that the growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches is fueled by dissatisfied members from historically orthodox and "fundamental" churches? While most of them do not pretend to even desire a healthier theology, they at least recognize the paucity of the teaching they receive week after week.

Conclusion

THERE IS AN URGENT need to rethink our view of "practical" theology, and get it outside of the limits of personal or family practices. These, too, are in need of constant reform, but if we fail to get our faith outside of our personal and family closets, we are doomed, I believe, to constant frustration and failure.

The frustration for many is that the local church leadership is unwilling to entertain these ideas. They are either too "unspiritual", or else deemed to be irrelevant. A part of this is also related to the job types that people hold. Those who work for the government, who are not subject to normal market forces, often do not see the need for proper practical management since they do not experience these things in their daily work environment. Where our churches are governed by bureaucrats, we can expect bureaucracy to reign and we should expect failure.

If we have correctly identified the problem, then the way forward is very clear. We may not need more books on millennial theory, political theory, the

Five Points of Calvinism, nor even more books on prayer and how to study the Bible. But we do need an action plan that can be implemented and adjusted as we gain the necessary practical experience that sharpens our judgement, tests our resolve, while providing immense satisfaction that, at long last and with God's blessing, we are on the way to reform.

-- E N D --