

Watchful and Steadfast: Christian Leadership in Uncertain Times

This is the transcript of a lecture delivered by Dr Roland Chia at the National Conference of the International Students Inc on 20 June 2023.

Let me draw your attention to some words of the apostle Paul found in his second letter to his young protégé, Timothy. In 2 Timothy 4:1-5, Paul writes:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.

With penetrating discernment, the apostle Paul presents what may be described as a spiritual diagnosis of the culture of his day. He speaks of the stubborn indifference to the truth. He speaks of the truth being subjectivised and reshaped according to the dictates of the prevailing culture. He speaks of people who will turn from being truth-seekers to being myth-makers, constructing 'realities' of their own to suit their peculiar predilections and tastes. He speaks of a flippant and restless religious consumerism as people try to quench their insatiable thirst for novelty.

There is a sense in which these words – which were written about two millennia ago – still ring true in our modern or postmodern world. For we too live in a time of confusion and chronic anxiety. The old truths that have shaped a civilisation are now being called to question and left behind – the old certainties dismissed and abandoned. The worldviews that have

held societies together have come under the merciless scalpel of the deconstructionists and revisionists.

It has become quite fashionable these days to describe the era in which we inhabit with the prefix, post: post-modern, post-liberal, post-colonial, post-truth, post-Christian and even post-human. But what is disturbingly ambivalent is what it is precisely that has taken the place of the old order that we have now left behind? Do we have something really life-giving and nourishing? Or is it the case that when the old demon is exorcised, and the house swept clean, ‘seven other spirits more wicked than [the original demon]’ have now entered and taken residence (Matthew 12:45)?

More than 100 years ago, the great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, penned these words in what must be the most apocalyptic of his poems, ‘The Second Coming’:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Perhaps Yeats himself did not realise how prescient they are, but these words describe to a tee the world in which we live.

Yet, it is *in* just such a world – my brothers and sisters in Christ – that we are placed as God’s co-workers. It is *to* such a world that we have been given the awesome privilege and responsibility to bring the Good News that salvation can be found in Jesus Christ. And it is *for* this world that God has called us to leadership so that we may encourage his people to declare clearly and boldly, by word and deed, ‘the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Peter 2:9).

THE SIGNS OF OUR TIMES

The passage that we have read from 2 Timothy 4 falls naturally into two parts. Firstly, as we have seen, Paul provides a diagnosis of the culture of his time, its sensibilities and temperament. And secondly, he instructs Timothy on how he is to be a Christian leader, a pastor, a preacher, God’s

servant in such a culture. I will follow, in my remarks, this two-fold approach of the apostle.

We turn our attention firstly to our contemporary society and culture, and try to discern – as it were – the signs of our times. I believe that the precariousness of our culture is brought about by three crises: the epistemic crisis, the moral crisis and the social crisis. Let's take a look at each of them in turn.

Epistemic Crisis

The first crisis that confronts us today is what I will call the epistemic crisis. The apostle Paul speaks of a time when 'people will not put up with sound doctrine'. Instead, they would only embrace those truth-claims that 'suit their own desires', and will listen only to those who say 'what their itching ears want to hear' (2 Timothy 4:3). In other words, the apostle warns of a time when objective truth-claims will be dismissed and only that which suits the subjective needs and sensibilities of people will be entertained. The apostle warns of an epistemic crisis, which is the crisis of knowledge brought about by the eclipse of the truth.

Many philosophers and commentators tell us that a seismic shift has occurred in Western culture since the middle of the last century. They describe the period that we inhabit as *post* the modern because we claim to have freed ourselves from the fetters of modernity. Postmodernism eschews the Enlightenment assumption of an objective world around us. It has replaced this outlook with what has been aptly described as a *constructionist* view of reality. According to postmodern thinkers, there is no world 'out there', no objective reality that we can encounter or access – 'there is no there, there'. Instead, reality as we know it is something which we ourselves have fashioned using the concepts we bring to it. Furthermore – and this is an extremely important point – we are so much a part of that constructed reality that we are unable to step out of it.

Postmodern thinkers reject as hubris the claim by moderns that they are no longer dependent – as pre-moderns were – on myths because they are able to apprehend the world through the instrumentality of the natural sciences. Postmodernists argue that the totalising narratives that moderns present that are purportedly based on some objective knowledge of reality are in fact legitimising myths themselves. At the very heart of the postmodern project, therefore, is the rejection of the metanarrative of the

Enlightenment – indeed, of all metanarratives – which claim to provide a definitive and authoritative account of the way things are. As the French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard, has famously put it, the postmodern is ‘incredulity towards metanarratives.’¹ But it is the inimitable English literary critic, Terry Eagleton, who has brought out the true force of the postmodern revolt when he wrote: ‘Postmodernism signals the death of such “metanarratives” whose secretly terroristic function is to ground and legitimate the illusion of a “universal” human history’.²

The postmodern revolt against the totalising myths of modernity also signals its disdain for any objective truth-claim. In his book *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* Os Guinness captures the postmodern attitude towards truth well when he writes:

There is no truth; only truths. There is no grand reason; only reasons. There is no privileged civilisation (or culture, or belief, norm and style); only a multiplicity of cultures, beliefs, norms and styles. There is no universal justice; only interests and competition among interest groups.³

This has led some commentators to describe our society as ‘post-truth’, a term which the Oxford English Dictionary declared as its word of the year in 2016. Applied mostly but not exclusively to the political culture, post-truth signifies a shift in paradigm that is characterised by ‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’, conspiracy theories and the deliberate propagation of misinformation. Whether the blame for this new phenomenon can be laid at the door of postmodernism is still being debated. But it is not too unreasonable to connect it, in some significant way, to the epistemic crisis that postmodernism has brought in its wake.

The rejection of objective truth and the relativisation of all truth-claims has resulted in what some writers have described as ‘the clash of orthodoxies.’ Since there is no objective truth, I have my truth and you have yours. And my truth is as valid as yours. The description ‘clash of orthodoxies’ is of course an adaptation of the title of the famous 1993 essay by Samuel Huntington. In that article, the Harvard political scientist spoke of the ‘clash of the civilisations’ of the West, the Islamic world and the

¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii-iv.

² Terry Eagleton, ‘Awakening from Modernity’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987, 194.

³ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), 105.

Confucian East.⁴ About a year after Huntington's essay was published, his former student James Kurth published an article called 'The Real Clash'.⁵ Kurth argues that the real clash is not among the world's great civilisations but among those who espouse the Judeo-Christian worldview and those who have abandoned that worldview and embraced the many "isms" of contemporary secular culture – feminism, gay liberalism, lifestyle liberalism, etc. In addition, Kurth stresses that this clash is not something that will occur in the future – it has already begun and will only intensify.

Kurth is right. The culture wars that are being ferociously fought in communities, the corridors of power, and the halls of learning are in some respects the result of the clash of orthodoxies. But the epistemic crisis, which has resulted in diverse truth-claims and orthodoxies jostling for attention, also signals the crisis of authority. This is especially pertinent to the Church and to individual believers, and presents considerable challenge to Christian leaders. We witness – especially in Protestant Christianity – a bewildering diversity of theologies: post-colonial theology, black theology, liberal theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, queer theology, the prosperity gospel, the new theology of grace (hyper-grace) – this list goes on and on. The explosion of the internet and digital religion exacerbates this already complex and messy state of affairs with more and more actors claiming to be 'experts' or 'authorities' in theological and spiritual matters. In the digital age, what constitutes authority and leadership and who is to be recognised as the gatekeeper is constantly being renegotiated.

Moral Crisis

The second crisis that confronts us is the moral crisis. In an earlier passage from the same letter to Timothy, Paul presents a striking catalogue of behaviours and attitudes that gives us a glimpse of the moral crisis that will characterise what he calls 'the last days.' People, he says, will be 'lovers of self', 'lovers of money', 'abusive', 'unholy', 'without self-control', 'lovers of pleasure', and so on. You can peruse the entire list in 2 Timothy 3:1-7. The moral condition that Paul describes in this passage accurately depicts what we see in society today – not just in the west, but globally.

On June 15, 2022, Gallup published a report which states that a record-high 50 percent of Americans rate the overall state of moral values in the

⁴ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilisations", *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Summer 1993).

⁵ James Kurth, "The Real Clash", *The National Interest* 3 (Fall 1994), 3-15.

United States as ‘poor’. Only about 12 percent think that it is ‘good’. In addition, 78 percent of Americans are of the view that morals are getting worse – the most pessimistic outlook in recent years.⁶ This dire situation did not emerge overnight – the current crisis has been long in the making. About twenty-five years ago, theologian David Wells reported that only 13 percent of Americans think that the Ten Commandments have moral validity. Seventy-four percent say that they would steal without compunction; 53 percent say that they would commit adultery, if they had the chance; 30 percent say that they will cheat on their taxes.⁷ According to Wells, 67 percent of Americans say they do not believe in moral absolutes.⁸

What these statistics make disturbingly obvious is that this crisis is not just found in the edges of society. It is ubiquitous. As Wells puts it: ‘it is not located in this or that pocket of depravity but is spread like a dense fog throughout society’.⁹ What has led modern and postmodern societies to this significant decline into the current moral crisis? Some theologians and philosophers have laid the blame at the door of secularisation. Even though the secularisation theory¹⁰ that once caught the attention of so many scholars has been somewhat debunked, the effects of secularisation on society must not be underestimated. Some theologians are of the view that secularisation has decimated the moral consensus that once prevailed. It has in some profound ways also hollowed out the public square of transcendental meaning. The old moral map on which we once depended to navigate the world has faded, and no viable alternative has taken its place.

Once the moral map which once guided society has been set aside or discarded, the vacuum that it leaves is filled by the sovereign self or the enthroned self. As James Patterson and Peter Kim saw so clearly in the 1990s, we have become ‘the law unto ourselves’. We have made ‘ourselves the authority over the church and God’.¹¹ More recently, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes this reimagining of the self as an ‘expressive individualism’ which he rightly links with the corresponding

⁶ Megan Brenan and Nicole Willcoxon, ‘Record-High 50% of Americans Rate U.S. Moral Values as “poor”’, Gallup, June 15, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/393659/record-high-americans-rate-moral-values-poor.aspx>.

⁷ David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1988), 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰ Originally advanced by Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

¹¹ James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really Believe about Everything That Matters* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), 27.

culture of authenticity. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes this new sensibility like this:

each of us has his / her own way of realising humanity, and it is important to find and live out one's own, against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religion or political authority.¹²

Underlying expressive individualism and its quest for authenticity is the crude concept of freedom which has become ubiquitous in our times. Freedom is simply freedom to choose the life we want to live, the things we want to do, the values we wish to embrace. But this really means that there are no objective values external to us. Taylor has put his finger on this problem. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, he writes: 'This sets up a vicious circle that heads us towards the point where our major remaining value is choice itself.'¹³

The enthroned self of expressive individualism has therefore turned morality on its head. No longer is morality governed by external authoritative codes. Expressive individualism is driven by what the great moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls emotivism. 'Emotivism', MacIntyre explains:

is the doctrine that all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.¹⁴

Emotivism has psychologised morality and ethics reducing it to mere preferences, tastes and feelings. Expressive individualism is behind a number of cultural upheavals in our time such as the sexual revolution, transgender ideology and identity politics.

All this means that society is plunged into the abyss of moral relativism, where the only moral authority is the self. In 2005, the late Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) spoke eloquently about the 'dictatorship of

¹² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 475.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 69.

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd Ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), 11-12.

relativism' in our day in the homily he gave at the votive Mass for the election of the new pope.¹⁵ Ratzinger clearly saw that modern relativism is far from benign. He said: 'We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognise anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires'.¹⁶ While modern moral relativism is profoundly disconcerting, it was the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who captured its insidiousness when he prophesied about the 'transvaluation of values'. As Carl Trueman explains, the transvaluation of values insists that '[t]hat which was previously deemed good comes to be regarded as bad; that which was previously regarded as healthy becomes to be deemed sickness.'¹⁷

What is the root cause of the current moral crisis? To answer this question, we turn once again to Nietzsche, who saw it so clearly. 'What sets us apart', he writes in the *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, 'is not that we recognise no God, either in history or in nature or behind nature – but that we find that which has been revered as God not "godlike" but pitiable, absurd, harmful, not merely an error but *a crime against life* ... We deny God as God'.¹⁸ The root cause of the current crisis is best explained as the usurpation of God by the sovereign self.

Social Crisis

The third and final crisis that we will be considering is the social crisis. The apostle Paul underscores the fragmentation of society and the conflictual nature of human relationships 'in the last days' when he says that people will be 'lovers of self', 'proud', 'arrogant' and 'abusive'. They will be 'slanderers' and 'full of conceit' (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Commenting on this passage, the late John Stott writes that 'all this unsocial, anti-social behaviour – this disobedient, ungrateful, disrespectful, inhuman attitude to parents, together with this absence of restraint, loyalty, prudence and humility – is the inevitable consequence of a godless self-centredness'.¹⁹ The reimagined self that I've described as the enthroned or sovereign self, and which we have identified as the cause of the moral malaise, is also

¹⁵ Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, Homily, Mass "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice," April 18, 2005. https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 54-5.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003), 174-175.

¹⁹ John Stott, *The Message of Timothy & Titus*. The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 86.

responsible in some important ways for the current crisis in human sociality.

That societies in advanced economies are becoming more fragmented has for several years been documented in a number of studies. These divisions, which have been in existence for decades, were exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. A Pew Research Centre article published in June 2021 states that six in ten countries surveyed reported that ‘national divisions have worsened since the outbreak began’. ‘In 12 of 13 countries surveyed in both 2020 and 2021’, it adds, ‘feelings of division have increased significantly, in some cases by more than 30 percentage points.’²⁰ Philosophers, sociologists and theologians have offered a number of reasons why modern society is so fractured and divided. Time allows us to look very briefly at only a few of them.

There is an emergence of what some scholars call a ‘new tribalism’ in our societies which threatens to disturb social peace and unravel social cohesion. Part of the reason for this is that our societies are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural. Many western societies have not been very successful in managing ethnic and cultural diversity. Instead of fostering integration many have created enclaves and ghettos. The result is what Amartya Sen has aptly described as ‘plural monoculturalism’, where the different ethnic and cultural groups are arranged in silos, isolated from one another and from the larger society.²¹ Be that as it may, although racial and ethnic diversity is certainly one of the main factors behind tribal conflicts, there are other culprits as well. In the postmodern era, the ‘new tribalism’ is driven by numerous identity markers. For example, in the West in general and the United States in particular, there is a whole array of issues that fuel the culture wars – abortion rights, LGBTQI+ issues, gender issues, and, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, even life-saving measures such as vaccinations and mask-wearing.

To be sure, tribalism, which commentators such as Victor Davis Hanson have described as ‘the ancient narcotic’,²² has always been part of human

²⁰ Kat Devlin, Moira Fagan and Aidan Connaughton, ‘People in Advanced Economies Say Their Society is More Divided Than Before the Pandemic’, Pew Research Centre, June 23, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/23/people-in-advanced-economies-say-their-society-is-more-divided-than-before-pandemic/>.

²¹ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 156.

²² Victor Davis Hanson, *The Dying Citizen: How Progressive Elites, Tribalism, and Globalisation are Destroying the Idea of America* (New York: Basic Books, 2021).

society. But the 'new tribalism' is energised by the loss of a sense of the past, the dominance of the sovereign self, and the postmodern rejection of objective truth. Here, I wish to underscore the profound relationship between the eclipse of objective truth and the tribal mentality. Generally speaking, individuals tend to be biased about issues and information that are important to them or favour their particular group. But when the truth is either made ambiguous or eclipsed, tribal biases become more pronounced, divisive and powerful. The postmodern suspicion of objective truth-claims has therefore encouraged the creation of 'echo chambers' where only the 'truths' which support a particular tribe's agenda are accepted, and where any information that undermines the interest of the tribe is rejected or opposed. The postmodern understanding of truth has fuelled a new tribalism because it compels the tribe to sacrifice sound reasoning and judgement at the altar of tribal loyalty.

Inextricably bound to the new tribalism is also the rise of identity politics that has fractured many societies. The murder of George Floyd by a policeman in Minneapolis in 2020 has arguably triggered an international obsession with this subject. The Black Lives Matter campaign quickly gained international support and has even been heralded as the new civil rights movement. 'Identity politics', sociology professor George Yancey explains, 'is basically gearing our political choices based upon what we think is best for our chosen master identity'. 'Thus, if I saw being black as my master identity', Yancey continues, 'then I would make my political decisions based on what I thought was best for blacks'.²³ Although some of the protestations voiced by the different groups are legitimate, the problem with identity politics is that it tends to view everything through only one lens, that of power. This ideology is pervasive in many universities in the west today. Jonathan Haidt, professor of psychology at New York University, describes this succinctly in this way:

By the time I graduated ... I was given many lenses to apply to any given question or problem. [Now] many students are given just one lens – power ... Every situation is analysed in terms of the bad people acting to preserve their power and privilege over the good people. This is not education. This is induction into a cult. It's a fundamentalist religion. It's a paranoid worldview

²³ Heather Tomlinson, 'Identity Politics: Should Christians Get Involved?' Premier Christianity, 20 April 2018, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/identity-politics-should-christians-get-involved/2760.article>.

that separates people from each other and sends them down the road to alienation, anxiety and intellectual impotence.²⁴

While pride for one's identity is as old as humanity itself, identity politics weaponizes 'identity' in order to achieve the political aims of the group.

Time does not allow us to discuss other cultural developments that have contributed to the current social crisis such as Critical Race Theory, Cancel Culture, the phenomenon of microaggression, wokery (or wokeism) and the Culture of Victimhood. Like acid, these troubling phenomena can erode the social fabric of society in ways that create divisions and conflicts which are detrimental to the common good.

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP TODAY

In 1976, the Christian writer and apologist Francis Schaeffer published his famous book which examines the rise and fall of western culture. The book is entitled, *How Should We Then Live?* As we turn to the second part of our reflection this morning, I would like to tweak the question that Schaeffer posed some fifty years ago just a little. In light of the crises that we have been discussing, the question that becomes most pressing for Christian leaders today is: How then should we lead? How should we lead God's people who are immersed in a culture which has no place for truth? How are we to be Christian leaders in a society where religious authority is routinely jettisoned and mocked? What does Christian leadership look like in a society that has lost its moral bearings and that is governed instead by the dictates of the sovereign self? How can we fulfil our calling as Christian leaders and be witnesses of God's love in a world that is so polarised, fractured and conflicted?

What does it mean to be a Christian leader? What does it mean to be a Christian leader today?

To answer these questions, we must return to the text with which we began our reflection. In 2 Timothy 4:2, 5 the apostle gave his young protégé this instruction:

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season.
Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching ...

²⁴ Ibid.

be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.

Be Watchful

I will have much to say about this passage, but for now I would like to call your attention to the first part of verse 5. Paul instructs Timothy to ‘be watchful in all things.’ In these treacherous times characterised by social and cultural upheavals, the Christian leader must learn to be watchful. The theme of watchfulness pervades the New Testament, indeed the entire Bible. For example, in Mark 13, Jesus warned his disciples and the church of the many false Christs that will appear in the last days who will deceive even the elect. Then in verse 33, he urged his disciples to ‘Take heed, watch and pray ...’ The discipline of watchfulness is a central theme of the spiritual writings of the theologians of the Church throughout her history, especially those of the early Fathers of the Church.

What does it mean to be watchful?

To be watchful is to be spiritually alert and vigilant. It is to be attentive to the darkneses that lurk within our souls. It is to be aware of the spiritual dangers that surround us. Writing to the Christians of the diaspora in Asia Minor, the apostle Peter puts it like this: ‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking who he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith ...’ (1 Peter 5:8-9). There is an old 19th century hymn by Charlotte Elliot entitled ‘Christian, Seek Not Yet Repose’, which brings out this theme very well. Let me read the words of the first two stanzas.

Christian, seek not yet repose,
Cast thy dreams of ease away;
Thou art in the midst of foes:
Watch and pray.

Principalities and pow’rs,
Must’ring their unseen array,
Wait for thine unguarded hours:
Watch and pray.

Christian leaders must never let their guard down. We must, firstly, watch over and vigilantly guard our hearts. As Christian leaders, we must be

ruthless in shielding our hearts from sin. We must make no provision for the flesh and its various entrapments. Over the past few years, we have sadly witnessed a number of Christian leaders who have fallen because of some grievous sin or misconduct: Ravi Zacharias, Jerry Falwell, Ted Haggard, Brian Houston, and Bill Hybels – to name just a few. In an article published on the Gospel Coalition website in 2015, Garrett Kell discusses a study conducted by Dallas Theological Seminary’s Howard Hendricks which examined 264 men in full-time ministry who had experienced some sort of moral failure. In this study, Hendricks compiled four characteristics of their lives:

- None of the men has any real personal accountability.
- All of them have ceased having daily time of Bible reading and prayer.
- More than 80 percent of the men became sexually involved with women after spending extended time with them, often in counselling situations.
- All the men were convinced that that sort of moral failure would never happen to them.²⁵

As Christian leaders we must always watch our hearts. We must be alert to ‘the wiles of the devil’, as Paul puts it (Ephesians 6:11).

But Christian leaders are also required to be watchful in another sense. We are enjoined to be alert to the signs of the times and the subtle but significant shifts in society and culture. When accompanied by prayer for wisdom, this kind of watchfulness leads to discernment. Now spiritual discernment is both a gift and an acquired ability. It requires leaders to develop two kinds of literacy.

The first is biblical literacy. As theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has pointed out:

Scripture alone provides an authoritative account of what is in Christ. If we would follow Christ, we must follow the Scriptures that lead to Christ, present Christ, and teach Christ’s way. If we

²⁵ Garrett Kell, ‘The Pattern Among Fallen Pastors’, The Gospel Coalition, May 26, 2015. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-pattern-among-fallen-pastors/>.

would have the mind of Christ, we must be students of the Scriptures ...²⁶

Unfortunately, biblical illiteracy is sweeping across the evangelical churches in the United States like an epidemic. And since Scripture is the soul of theology, pervasive biblical illiteracy has resulted in a dangerous shallowness in doctrinal understanding and theological acuity. The second is cultural literacy. This has to do with the ability to make sense of what is happening in and to society, and critically evaluate cultural trends. The purpose of cultural literacy is to understand the developments that are taking place and discern the forces that are inspiring and shaping them. Discerning cultural development and trends, however, require immersion in the teachings of Scripture. It requires the development of what the Russian orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky calls 'the Scriptural mind'.²⁷ For a penetrating reading of culture can only be achieved when it is viewed through the lens of Scripture. Christian leaders must therefore take heed of the sound advice of the great Swiss German theologian of the last century, Karl Barth, who said: 'Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret the newspapers from your Bible.'

The Christian leader is a watchman, and his special duty is 'to watch everything.' He is to let nothing pass unnoticed. He must bring all of culture under the judgement of the Word of God.

In particular, the Christian leader must watch out for the distorting syncretism between Christianity and secular culture. In his book, *The Royal Priesthood* the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder uses the provocative expression 'bastard faiths' to refer to 'the spiritual miscegenation involved in trying to make a culture-religion out of faith in Jesus Christ.'²⁸ For example, in World War II many German Christians incorporated Nazi ideology into their understanding of Christianity, thereby creating a bastard faith which provided the justification for the persecution of Jews. The Christian leader must be constantly alert to the illicit marriage between Christianity and the prevailing ideologies of our times such as gender theory, wokery and identity politics. Christians can

²⁶ Kevin Vanhoozer, 'In the Evangelical Mood: The Purpose of the Pastor-Theologian', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 114.

²⁷ Georges Florovsky, 'The Lost Scriptural Mind', https://jbburnett.com/resources/florovsky/1/florovsky_1-1-scripmind.pdf.

²⁸ John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 61.

only prevent such alliances only if they are steeped in the teachings of the Bible and the Church, and alert to the forces that are at work in culture.

‘But you’, writes the apostle Paul to Timothy, ‘be watchful in all things.’

Be Steadfast

Paul did not only instruct his young protégé to be watchful. He also encouraged him to be steadfast. Thus, in this passage we read this unequivocal instruction:

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season.
Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching ...
be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an
evangelist, fulfil your ministry.

In 1939, as the United Kingdom was preparing for World War II, the British Government produced a motivational poster with this slogan: ‘Keep Calm and Carry On.’ As Europe stood at the edge of precipice and was about to plunge into the chaos and confusion of war, the British government issued a message that expresses the essence of British stoicism – the ‘stiff upper lip’, fortitude, and remaining calm in the midst of adversity.

Here we have Paul’s version of ‘Keep Calm and Carry On.’

What must the Christian leader do when truth is no longer taken seriously and religious authority shunned and despised? The Christian leader must do what he has been called to do: preach the word, convince, rebuke, exhort, teach, fulfil his ministry. In other words, he must ‘keep calm, and carry on!’ He must persevere. He must remain steadfast.

Some may be tempted to think that Paul’s advice is simply too cliché and pedestrian. But I can assure you that it requires profound faith and resolve on the part of the Christian leader to give heed to the apostle’s counsel. For the immense challenges that the Christian leader faces in these perilous times must never be trivialised. They may adversely affect him in two ways.

The first is the loss of confidence – in the Gospel, in the truth of God’s Word, in the Church, and ultimately in God himself.

There are many manifestations of this loss of confidence. One of the surest signs is the attempt to modify the Christian message in order to make it more palatable, more relevant, and less forbidding to its postmodern audience – to present, in the end, a reductionist, watered-down, culture-friendly version of Christianity, so that its message is less jarring, less offensive to its potential recipients. The aim is to tailor the Gospel so that it does not upset the sensibilities of those the Church hopes to reach. It is to make Christianity more appealing by trimming its message and by moderating its demands.

In doing so, the Church is offering what some authors have described as Christianity Lite. Or, to use the expression of Ralph Wood of Baylor University, a sub-Christian religion called ‘Kiddyanity’²⁹ – a ‘Christianity’ that is emptied of most of its substance, and that makes no demands on its adherents. Kiddyanity is the kitschification of the Christian faith. Churches that take this approach would willy-nilly also preach what the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, calls ‘cheap grace’. In his celebrated book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer describes cheap grace as ‘grace sold on the market like cheapjack’s wares ... Grace without price; grace without cost!’³⁰ Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer famously adds,

Is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.³¹

We see instantiations of this in some versions (though not all) of the worship services associated with the seeker-sensitive church movement, where the aim is to ‘do church’ in a non-threatening way. Thus, in seeker-friendly services the strangeness of the liturgy and other alienating elements of Christian worship are removed or toned down. This is done to ensure that there is nothing in the Christianity that it presents that is off-putting to the visitor or seeker. It is done to make the seeker feel at home. Commenting on this approach, the eminent church historian Robert Wilken writes:

²⁹ Ralph Wood, *Contending for the Faith: The Church’s Engagement with Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2003), 127.

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

I think seeker-sensitive churches use a completely wrong strategy. A person who comes into a Christian church for the first time should feel out of place. He should feel this community engages in practices so important they take time to learn. The best thing we can do for 'seekers' is to create an environment where newcomers feel they are missing something vital, that one has to be inculcated into this, and that it's a discipline.³²

The seeker-sensitive church is thoroughly consumerist in orientation. It seeks to pander to and accommodate the tempers of the prevailing culture, and to the consumer (the pre-believer) to whom it wishes to sell a product (the Gospel). But as D.A. Carson observes, 'The seeker-sensitive church is in danger of accommodating the gospel to the culture rather than vice versa'.³³ As a result it offers a reductionistic distortion of the Gospel. Or, as theologian Michael Horton has argued, it indulges in the needs of the consumer to such an extent that the Gospel is morphed into a therapeutic message that promises superficial self-actualisation. Horton writes: 'The gospel is reduced to a formula for personal success and happiness, rather than a message of repentance and forgiveness, of crucifixion and resurrection.'³⁴

Under the weight of a hegemonic and hostile culture which no longer has any regard for the truth – much less theological and spiritual truth – the Christian leader is tempted to lose confidence in the Gospel and in biblical truth. Some may even be secretly ashamed of the Gospel and embarrassed by the truth-claims of the Bible such as the incarnation, the resurrection, heaven and hell. They may even be embarrassed by the cross, which the world regards as foolish superstition and childish fables (think of the vitriolic attacks by the new atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens).

Christian leaders must be reminded of the words of Paul to the Christians in Corinth that 'the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:18). They must be assured of the sufficiency of Christ! That the truth of the Gospel is always relevant! And they must be reminded that the

³² Robert Wilken, 'Christian History Review – Roman Redux', *Christian History Institute*, 1998, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/interview-roman-redux-2>.

³³ D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 69.

³⁴ Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 87.

accommodation of Gospel truth to the whims and moods of culture will not make it more relevant or attractive. Christian leaders must be attentive to the words of the apostle to the Corinthian Church:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Corinthians 1:21-25).

In these uncertain times, the Christian leader must resolutely echo the words of Paul who wrote in Romans: 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation' (Romans 1:16).

If the first issue is the lack or loss of confidence, the second is the loss of courage. After I received the invitation to speak at this conference, I visited the ISI website to find out more about your ministry. I am very encouraged to find this statement about marriage and sexuality:

We believe that the term 'marriage' means the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union, as delineated in Scripture (Gen 2:18-25). We believe that God intends sexual intimacy to occur only between a man and a woman who are married to each other (1 Cor 6:18; 7:2-5; Heb 13:4) ...

We believe that any form of sexual immorality (including adultery, fornication, homosexual behaviour, bisexual conduct, bestiality, incest, and the use of pornography) is sinful and offensive to God (Matt 15:18-20; 1 Cor 6:9-10).

We live in a time where it takes considerable courage for even a Christian organisation to make a clear and uncompromising statement such as this one – and I applaud you for it. Some Christian leaders and organisations are finding it increasingly more difficult to stand firm due to the mounting pressure to conform to the dictates of culture and in the face of hostility and persecution.

In recent years, a number of evangelical scholars and leaders have succumbed to the pressures of culture and changed their position on same-sex relationship. A recent example is Eugene Petersen, a retired Presbyterian minister and award-winning author. In an interview with *Religious News Service* (RNS) on July 12, 2017, Petersen said: ‘I wouldn’t have said this 20 years ago, but now I know a lot of people who are gay and lesbian, and they seem to have as good a spiritual life as I do. I think that kind of debate about lesbians and gays might be over.’ When asked if he would perform a same-sex wedding ceremony if he was still an active pastor, Petersen replied, ‘Yes.’³⁵

Although Petersen retracted his statement the very next day,³⁶ the question why he had faltered in the first place stubbornly remains. Was it a case of a sudden and temporary loss of nerves? Other writers press this even further: Why did Petersen retract his statement? What is Petersen’s real position, anyway? As one writer puts it: ‘Was he against it, before he was for it? Is he really against it now?’³⁷ Petersen’s flipflop has caused confusion among his readers.

But the lack of courage on the part of church leaders has not only resulted in confusion, it can and has led to compromise. A recent example is arguably the decision by the Church of England to bless same-sex unions, but without withdrawing its view that homosexual relations are contrary to the teachings of Scripture and without modifying its traditional doctrine on marriage. This farcical and unavailing compromise is a blatant and irresolvable conflict between doctrine and practice. The church appears to be speaking out of both sides of its mouth!³⁸

Christians in general, and leaders in particular, come under tremendous pressure to conform to the dictates of culture. The pressure often comes in the form of hostility and ridicule from the media, academia, and the

³⁵ Medardo Perez, ‘Prominent Christian Leader Proclaims Support for Same-Sex Marriage’, NBC News, 15 July 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/popular-christian-author-retracts-support-same-sex-marriage-n782991>.

³⁶ ‘Popular author Eugene Petersen: Actually, I would not perform a gay marriage’, *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/07/13/popular-author-eugene-peterson-heres-what-i-actually-think-about-gay-marriage/?utm_term=.a41d1de34023.

³⁷ Al Mohler, ‘The Agonising Ordeal of Eugene Petersen – You Might be Next’, July 17, 2017, <https://albertmohler.com/2017/07/17/eugene-peterson>.

³⁸ Roland Chia, ‘A Farcical Compromise’, Ethos Institute for Public Christianity, Jan 25, 2023, <https://ethosinstitute.sg/a-farcical-compromise/>.

general public. In a sense, this should be of no surprise at all. Jesus warned his disciples and the church of this. In John 15, we read:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you (vv 18-19).

In the face of such hostility and hatred, the Christian leader must be courageous if he is to fulfil the ministry that the Lord has given to him. The apostle Paul understood all this very well. That is why he exhorted Timothy to ‘endure suffering or affliction’. But the Christian leader must also be courageous and strong. Writing to a church that was beset with all sorts of compromises, Paul exhorted the Corinthians to ‘Be on your guard; stand firm; be courageous; be strong’ (1 Corinthians 16:13). The Christian leader must be able to endure the hostility and opposition of the world and soldier on.

He must have the fortitude and strength to ‘Keep Calm, and Carry On’.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude my reflections by returning once again to our passage in 2 Timothy 4. Paul began this chapter with a deliberate and profound emphasis on Christian eschatology. He writes: ‘I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing and his kingdom ...’ (v 1).

This eschatological vision serves as the preface or preamble to Paul’s instructions to Timothy regarding the ministry. It frames the ministry of the Christian leader in the times in which we live – the times between the times, that period between the first and second advents of Christ, with all its attending challenges, confusion and dangers. But more importantly, it points to the promised future where God will bring the kingdom which his Son has inaugurated in the incarnation to full consummation.

It is extremely important for Christian leaders to hold this eschatological vision before us as we go about our ministry. For we will surely lose our way if we lose sight of God’s promised future. The biblical vision of the future reminds us that God is in control of human history – it is he who

will bring all things into conformity to his will and purposes. Biblical eschatology, in other words, reminds us that we are serving the sovereign and almighty God. It urges us to put our faith and hope in him even as we seek to fulfil our calling as leaders and to serve him with resolute courage. It gives us the spiritual resources to overcome obstacles and to endure suffering for the sake of Christ and his Gospel. It enables us to declare together with the apostle Paul: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Romans 8:18).

It is this eschatological vision of the imminent consummation of the divine kingdom will enable us to 'Keep Calm, and Carry On' as we do the work that God has given to us in these perilous and uncertain times.

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