

# Challenges to the Gospel in a Secular world

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## Introduction: The world is changed

“The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost; for none now live who remember it.” So says Galadriel the elven lady in the opening words of Peter Jackson’s film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Many Christians today are feeling the same. There is a profound sense of unsettling in the Church due partly to changes in our wider culture and partly to questions from within. My aim this evening is to help us think through some of the challenges to the gospel that we face. I want to do this in three stages:

1. Firstly, thinking about our changing context.
2. Secondly, exploring the nature of the gospel and the challenges we face.
3. Thirdly, proposing some practical ideas about how we should live in response.

## Our Changing World

The title of this talk refers to a “secular world”. I don’t want to presume what was in the mind of the organisers of this event when they proposed this title, but I do want to explore what the word ‘secular’ means by thinking through some of the trends that are influencing our society. In thinking about a secular society, we need to distinguish between two terms: secularisation and secularism.

- **Secularisation** is simply a label describing the decline in commitment to organised religion and its influence in society. In sociology the highly influential, but increasingly questioned, ‘secularisation thesis’ predicts that as societies modernise and become wealthier religiosity inevitably declines. There are some major problems with this theory – America appears to be an exception; decline of organised and established religion does not always mean a decline in spirituality; the resurgence of faith in Orthodox Russia, Hindu India and growth of Christianity in China, Korea and many parts of Africa tell an alternative story; and the rise of fundamentalism, especially in the Islamic world, means that religion is likely to be more, not less, influential in global political dialogues in future. It is, nevertheless, certainly true in Western Europe that organised religion had been in decline in recent decades.
- **Secularism** goes beyond simply describing the reality of the declining influence of Christianity in Western public life. It is a philosophy that claims the best way to maintain peace between diverse people is to remove religion from the public sphere. Secularists believe that a secular society in which religion is removed from public life protects the right of every individual and community to believe whatever they believe and the equality of people of all beliefs under the law. Somewhat ironically, the word ‘secular’ and the concept of a separation between the ‘secular’ world and the private matter of religion originated in medieval Christianity. The sacred were those who were called to be monks, nuns or priests, while other professions were ‘secular’. This false separation, the so-called ‘sacred/secular divide’ has blighted the Church for centuries and has now leaked over into wider thinking.

The difficulty with insisting on keeping religion out of the public sphere is twofold:

- a) *It reduces religion to a private matter*, rather than taking seriously the claims that religions actually make. Muslims, whose societies have never experienced the full flowering of modernity, understand this better than we Christians often do. They know that Islam is a way of life that must affect everything – individual life and social interactions. We could learn from them in this respect, although of course Christian faith, with its unique call to love our enemies in the pattern of Christ, will teach us a different way to interact with those who do not share our faith and will never lead to imposition.

- b) *It enshrines and encourages a philosophy of human potential.* By removing God from public life we are really returning to Babel once again – we're saying that people can turn to whichever god or belief they find helpful when it comes to their private world (postmodern thinking), but the political and social realm will have no god other than our confidence in our innate goodness.

Tom Wright (2013), with his usual clarity, has explained how this context is a fertile breeding ground for what he calls modern Gnosticisms. As in the first century, when people who felt alienated and marginalised within a powerful imperial system, contemporary people who feel disempowered within the globalised financial and political systems turn to all sorts of secret and hidden knowledge for meaning and fulfilment. There are three 'p's' (if you'll forgive some alliteration) which describe three important realities in this increasingly secular society to which we must accommodate: post-Christian; postmodern; and pluralistic.

### a) Post-Christian

Stuart Murray (2004) opens his book *Post-Christendom* with the following two 'Snapshots of Post-Christendom':

In a London school a teenager with no church connections hears the Christmas story for the first time. His teacher tells it well and he is fascinated by this amazing story. Risking his friends' mockery, after the lesson he thanks her for the story. One thing had disturbed him, so he asks: 'Why did they give the baby a swear word for his name?'

One Sunday in Oxford a man visits a church building to collect something for his partner who works during the week in a creative-arts project the church runs. He arrives as the morning congregation is leaving and recognises the minister, whom he knows. Surprised, he asks: 'What are all these people doing here? I didn't know churches were open on Sundays!'

Murray argues that society in Western Europe has moved out of the era of Christendom, meaning that the period that began with Constantine's embrace of Christianity in which Christians had a privileged position within the State and culture, has finally come to an end. Christendom took many different forms in different places, ranging from political control of the State by the institutional Church to the kind of 'cultural establishment' of Christianity that has typified the USA and Northern Ireland. It is important to note that this idea of post-Christendom only makes sense in Western countries – Christendom never existed in South or East Asia and a new form of Christendom may yet arise in sub-Saharan Africa. It should also be noted that in many places, not least Northern Ireland, Christendom and post-Christendom co-exist (just as elements of pre-Christendom thought survived even into modern times). The trend, however, is towards a declining influence of Christianity in popular thought and public discourse.

Christians may disagree over how welcome the demise of Christendom is – some, in the legacy of the Radical Reformation, which never bought into the Christendom idea, are glad to see the end of a system they believe to have been a distortion of the Church, while others bemoan the loss of Christian influence – it is indisputable that Christendom is coming to an end, at least in the Western world. Barring the possibility of a dramatic divine intervention – what many evangelicals would call a 'revival' – we must prepare for life in a post-Christian society.

This process involves three shifts:

- **Mainstream to marginal** – whereas the Church used to be at the very centre of national and community life – think about the positioning of church buildings in towns and villages – it is now peripheral. Clergy are no longer shown special respect by virtue of their position and the moral guidance of the Church is no longer sought. Christianity is on the margins.
- **Dominance to diversity** – whereas Christianity used to be thought of as the national religion or the majority faith, in most Western countries practicing Christians are now in the minority and Christianity is simply one minority faith among many. Churches can no longer expect to control or even influence society as they once could.

- **Familiar to foreign** – whereas Christians used to feel at home in the culture we are increasingly strangers to it as our society's moorings to a Christian worldview are progressively severed. More and more people are also unfamiliar with the Christian message – the Church and Christianity seem strange and foreign to them.

'Jesus is intriguing; the Church is archaic'. That is how many people in the contemporary UK and further afield think. Some people in contemporary Europe are just as ignorant of and confused by the Christian message as the people of the first century. For them the message of a crucified man who is God and Lord is unfamiliar, intriguing and provocative. Meanwhile there is the Church, which for many is just as foreign, but less intriguing and seldom provocative, except with it appears to pontificate on moral matters, telling people who don't recognise its authority how they should live their lives or failing to catch up with the times on issues like same-sex marriage. For some it is a relic of the past; for others a dangerous institution harbouring child molesters; for still others a harmless part of the traditional fabric of public life that they'd be sad to see go, but which ranks well beneath the local post office, convenience store or petrol station in its usefulness to the community.

## b) Pluralistic

The second 'p', pluralism, describes the reality that in our post-Christian society we have an increasing diversity of peoples and beliefs. Even in this island at the edge of the world we are seeing increasing cultural and ethnic diversity, but indigenous people are also exposed to a much wider range of ideas through the information revolution brought about by the internet. New technologies have hastened the progress of globalisation, so that popular culture (or more accurately popular cultures) is changing more rapidly than ever before. Importantly, post-colonialism, patterns of migration and growing cultural confidence among non-Western peoples has meant that the direction of travel is no longer one-way (from the West to the rest) but multi-directional (from everywhere to everywhere). The fleeting global impact of K-pop (Korean popular music) is one example.

This is not to say that cultures and belief systems are melting into one single world culture. In fact, there is evidence of increasing conflict between large cultural spheres with quite different values (the West; Russia and Eastern Europe; the Muslim World; China; India; sub-Saharan Africa). The picture is more of a raggedy patchwork with some ideas and some people crossing the borders. The result, especially in Western contexts is that we live in an increasingly pluralistic society – people of different cultures and with different belief systems live side by side (or at least meet each other in shared spaces, like the workplace). Cultures co-exist, but they are also less static than in the past. Often as Christians we are catching up in our understanding of other cultures only to discover that the individuals who come from those cultural backgrounds no longer share the traditional cultural concepts.

## c) Postmodern

What of our third 'p', postmodernism. This is an important trend within the post-Christian pluralistic mix. By definition, 'postmodern' means what comes after 'modern'. 'Modern' in this context means the philosophical view that has dominated Western society, culture art and science since the Enlightenment of the 1700s. Modernity bases itself on human rationality as the way to recognise and establish truth (in reaction to 'premodern' dependence on authorities). It claims that truth is absolute and can be discovered through scientific enquiry. Progress is possible on the basis of applying this truth to the challenges we face. Modernism is really a false gospel – a human-centred confidence in our own potential to progress and save ourselves that is as old as Babel.

The fundamental concept in the postmodern reaction against modernity is that truth is relative and discovered through experience in your own cultural location, or at least that absolute truth cannot be known with the degree of certainty that modernity seems to imply. Objectivity is impossible and claims to absolute truth are often excuses for oppression of others whose 'truth' is not the same as ours. This suspicion about absolute truth leads to several other consequences:

- **Stories?** – the modern promise of progress is questioned along with all other claims to have the one universal story explaining human experience. Political and religious ideals, it is argued, have only led to conflict and loss of freedom. Individual and local stories are, however, valued and celebrated. People will donate to causes, especially when they hear a story, but loyalty to organisations is harder to obtain.
- **Meaning?** – texts have no single meaning, either contained in the words or expressing the author's intention. Rather, meaning is generated by the reader as the words interact with their preconceptions and assumptions. This is clearly problematic for evangelicals committed to the authority of Scripture.
- **Authority?** – leaders are not respected on the basis of position and influence must, instead, be earned through personal charisma and heroic actions. Bureaucracy is seen as a confining aspect of modernity and more fluid ways of interacting and relating are preferred (e.g., social networking). Consider the recent debate about the vote to leave the EU. Countless 'experts' were warning about the consequences of Brexit, but campaigners for 'leave' insisted that ordinary people could see through their claims to make a vote for freedom. Whatever we think of the outcome, there was certainly a clash between modernity and postmodernism at play.

The reality is that most people in the Western world live with a strange mixture of modernity and postmodern thinking. They use the technology developed by modernity to engage in postmodern social networking. They visit their doctor, whose craft is the product of modernity, when they are sick, but also imbibe the self-help theories of gurus who mix and match concepts from various philosophies. They continue to believe in an orderly society in which changes in the law mark significant progress towards the values they believe in, yet they are suspicious of the politicians who make the laws.

Where postmodernism rules supreme is at the level of individual choice and values. In this sense, postmodernism could really be called 'late modernism'. It is the end result of the modern confidence in human reason and judgement. The core values that result from this late modernism are expressed in a simple phrase coined by my colleagues and friends in Evangelical Alliance: "I buy stuff". These words capture three values: individualism, consumerism, and materialism. We understand ourselves to be individuals with rights, consuming things for our own fulfilment or pleasure. In a superficial reaction against the individualism of modernity, postmodernism values community, but groups are generally loosely comprised with no expectation of permanent commitment. They exist to support individuals in their pursuit of personal freedom and self-discovery. The core value is autonomy – literally meaning 'self-law' – the right of the individual to choose for themselves who they are and what they want. The only basis for choosing is consumerism, which tells me that what I want is actually what I need and promises a fulfilled life through the accumulation of things. These are not new ideas – they are there in the pages of Scripture – but they are gripping society more powerfully than ever before. Even those who reject the greed that typifies our age, however, often do so on the basis that what we need instead is security and confidence in ourselves. 'The Big Ego Trip', as Glynn Harrison calls it in the title of his book, has led our culture to a huge increase in low self-esteem and mental health issues.

## Our unchanging message

Enough about the world as we find it today. It is time to think about what the gospel is and how it speaks into this situation. The modern English word 'gospel' derives from the older spelling 'godspel', meaning 'good news'. In the New Testament it translates the Greek word *euangelion*, which literally mean 'good news'. To understand any New Testament word it is helpful to consider the way it was used in the wider culture of the time and the distinctive way it is used, and potentially redefined, within the New Testament:

- **Before the New Testament** – *euangelion* was a relatively uncommon word before the New Testament. It carried the impression of news that needed to be announced (heralded) and that had life-changing significance, for example, about military victories and changes of rulers. This meaning is seen in a letter dated around 9BC from Proconsul Paulus Fabius Maximus, which calls Caesar Augustus a Saviour, a god and "the beginning of the *euangelion* for the world that came by reason of him". Gospel, then meant important news that would change

circumstances – the arrival of a new ruler and new world order. This may or may not seem like ‘good’ news to the hearer depending on their opinion of Augustus, but it was certainly news that could not be ignored and that would inevitably result in change sooner or later as his rule became increasingly effective throughout his empire.

- **New Testament usage** – Mark begins his account of Jesus’ life with the words, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. The implication that his whole account is the gospel underlies the naming of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as ‘Gospels’. Throughout the Gospels, *euangelion* also describes the message Jesus preached, which Matthew specifically calls the ‘gospel of the kingdom’ (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 20:1). Importantly, Jesus centred His message on Himself – God’s kingdom had arrived because He had come – and a response to His message is equated with a response to Him personally (Mark 8:35). Jesus also spoke of the gospel being preached by the apostles after He had left them (Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10) and Acts records how they did that (Acts 8:25, 40; 14:7, 21; 15:7; 16:10; 20:24). In Paul’s epistles and in 1 Peter, *euangelion* refers to the message proclaimed by the apostles, which centres on Jesus Christ who died as our Saviour and was declared to be Lord through His resurrection. The parallels with the announcement of the victory of Augustus should be clear. There is a new king, and although it might take time before His rule takes full effect, things have changed and we cannot ignore it. Whether or not we receive this news as ‘good’ depends on what we think of Jesus.

Perhaps the most famous summary of the gospel is contained in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, which was one of the earliest Christian writings and a highly influential passage in the later formulation of the creeds of the Church. The apostle Paul writes as follows:

<sup>1</sup>Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. <sup>2</sup>By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

<sup>3</sup>For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup>After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup>Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup>and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Notice the core features of what Paul says, which you’ll also find in other biblical summaries of the gospel:

- It is a message of salvation, but only those who stand on it by faith will be saved through it.
- It centres on the historical facts of the person of Jesus and especially his death and resurrection.
- Those historical events have a world changing significance, Jesus’ death dealing with sin and His resurrection showing that He is Lord (this implication is drawn out in the rest of Chapter 15).
- The Scriptures are the authoritative key to understanding the significance of Jesus – we wouldn’t know what a Christ was or why He had to die without them. Jesus fulfils Israel’s story.
- It is a message that came from Jesus Himself and comes to us through the apostles He appointed. It, therefore, forms a new community of believers in this apostolic truth, the Church.

In one sense there can be no challenges to the gospel – it is unchanging, unchangeable, rooted in historic facts. We can no more change the gospel than we can change the fact that two planes were flown into the twin towers on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 or that a certain battle happened in Ireland in July 1690. We must remember this, but, of course, faced with these changes our understanding and our confidence in the gospel are under great strain.

The gospel is the declaration of what God has done in Christ Jesus. We may be used to reducing the gospel to simply declaring the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is certainly the centre of the gospel, but it is not the whole story. To explain those events and call people to respond may be adequate in a broadly Christian society, but in post-Christendom people aren’t familiar with the big picture. For post-modern people, too, we must become more skilful at telling the gospel as a story, although the challenge will be leading them to see that it is not only *a* story, but *the*

story, not merely *a* truth, but *the* truth. I find it helpful to think of the gospel as a story with five movements. The first four of these correspond broadly to the four spiritual laws that are often used to explain the gospel, but the fifth is important and rather than propositional statements of truths, I describe these as five stages in the great story of God that runs from Genesis to Revelation.

**1. God reigns** – God’s kingdom is supreme. The gospel is the gospel of the kingdom. God’s sovereignty as creator and sustainer of all things underpins our existence in the world. God’s wisdom is greater than ours. God created us to know Him and to be His image to the world. There are two lines of assault on this point in the gospel story:

- a) **Divine sovereignty** – God, if God exists at all, is reduced to the granter of our desires, our servant and wish fulfiller. The oldest lie is the claim that God is a despot, a tyrant who uses His sovereign rule to oppress humankind and restrict our potential. This kind of caricatured ‘god’ is easy pickings for the new atheists, who are thoroughly modernistic in their approach. Ironically, however, their strident dogmatism actually turns off many people who have bitten enough of the postmodern apple to be suspicious of their absolute claims. The God who reveals Himself through Scripture is, of course, both perfectly just and perfectly loving. He is light *and* love, completely righteous and holy, yet completely merciful and gracious.
- b) **Human identity** – instead of understanding ourselves to be recipients of something that is given to us – creatures created for the purpose of representing something greater than ourselves – we become masters of our own identity and destiny. This trend is being seen increasingly especially in the areas of sexuality and gender. To challenge someone’s preferences or actions is now seen as a challenge to their very identity.

**2. We rebelled** – the gospel tells us that the root human problem is not death, unhappiness, ill health, or societal dysfunction, but sin. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. These other problems are certainly very real, and should exercise us to respond, but they are symptomatic of a deeper issue, our fractured relationship with God because of our rejection of Him and rebellion against His rule.

The main challenge to this aspect of the gospel is our tendency to misdiagnose our problem. We do not proclaim a ‘therapeutic gospel’ in which the need we have is a new treatment for our malaise, but the gospel of God which declares that our true identity is found in surrender to the righteous and loving King of the Universe. Until we come to a willing and loving acknowledgement of His good rule we cannot be saved.

**3. God reveals and redeems** – the message of the gospel centres on the person and work of Christ and especially His death for our sins and His resurrection from the dead, but the uniqueness of Christ makes sense only within the back-story of Israel. I made this point recently in a conversation with a lady from a Roman Catholic background who has found Buddhism appealing. She asked me how I know that Jesus was not simply another enlightened person like the Buddha and my response was that we need to understand Jesus’ ‘back-story’. The Old Testament explains what sacrifice was – the substitute bearing our sins and dying in our place. When Jesus said He would die as a ransom for many this was what He had in mind. He fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah 53 of a sinless servant who would die in our place. We must take Jesus’ claims about Himself seriously in His own context – He claimed to be Saviour and Lord.

Of course, this point depends on another ‘r’, the belief that God is revealed faithfully in Scripture. Our confidence in Scripture is a major issue in every age, but not least in our current world. The Bible claims to be true and trustworthy and it makes authority claims over us. In case we mistakenly think that we are submitting to a book, in reality the Bible calls us into a relationship of faithful obedience to God because it claims to be His words to us. We receive the Old Testament which Jesus upheld and the New Testament written as a faithful record of His life and the teachings of the apostles He appointed.

**4. We respond** – we must respond to the good news of the arrival of God’s kingdom in Christ through repentance and faith. There are two common misunderstandings of the response part:

- a) **It's not simply a once off response, but the start of a lifetime's pattern** of taking up our cross daily and following Christ in discipleship. It finds our lives taken up in something much bigger – the sweep of God's great story of the ages. We need to present the gospel in these terms. It is about love of God.
- b) **It's not merely an individual response; the plural ('we') matters** – together we are God's missionary people; whole-life response, leading to faithful, obedient service. Church in present as community of those who recognise, seek and celebrate God's redeeming reign in Christ. The gospel is also about love of others and the beginning of a new people.

**5. God restores** – the story doesn't end with our response. It begins and ends with God. The creator and redeemer will also be the restorer of the universe. The kingdom of God – His rule – brings real change and this is the basis of our hope. This restoration is both present as the Spirit transforms lives and future as God will renew all things when Christ returns in glory. Notice that it is not us, but God who restores! It is God who formed and continues to form the Church – Christ promised that He would build it and we simply need to be it. It is God who transforms lives by the power of His Spirit and His gospel truth; we simply need to proclaim it. It is God who will one day restore all things, we simply stand firm in the gospel as we await that day. It is God who establishes His kingdom and His Christ as its Lord and King and we simply seek and welcome it. This distinction is important if we are to avoid falling into a Christianised version of the promise of modernity – progress through human effort. The false gospels of overcoming the world's problems through human ingenuity and the world's divisions through financial globalisation must be critiqued and exposed by Christians. Too often we buy into them both in our private lives and in how we order our churches.

In the contemporary world we are seeing this aspect of the gospel under challenge through a reduced emphasis on the second coming of Christ and the final cataclysmic judgement that will follow. Whilst some of those who under-emphasise the future do so because they want to correct a neglect of the present and the difference we can make now, ultimately it is unhelpful and damaging. We need to dampen the pendulum swing by placing the emphasis where Scripture does – on our patient endurance as we hope for the coming of Christ which transforms us into selfless servants of God and of others in His name. Perhaps here is the greatest challenge to the gospel – how much have we truly been transformed from the 'I buy stuff' mentality to the 'We love people' mentality that the gospel produces? Do our church communities reflect the values of the kingdom or are we encouraging superficial commitment, individual autonomy in most of the really important issues of life (personal and family issues in which the Church is not permitted to interfere) and a consumer mentality?

Within this discussion of the gospel I have identified some of the major challenges to the gospel both in our wider society and within the Church, but I want to finish by proposing a way of thinking about how we live as Christians within this context.

## Our faithful response

The three trends that we identified in contemporary Western society all pose challenges to the communication of the gospel:

- **Post-Christendom** poses the challenge of unfamiliarity with the gospel and, in some cases, rejection of Christianity as out-dated and an unhelpful relic of the past. It also creates the exciting opportunity of bringing the gospel freshly to people who genuinely have never heard.
- **Postmodernism** poses the challenge of helping individuals to see that Jesus is not simply one way or a nice story, but the unique way and the centre of the only true story. It also creates the opportunity to tell the gospel as a story that contains ultimate meaning for those who are lost without hope.
- **Pluralism** poses the challenge of how we communicate the gospel to diverse people in language that makes sense to them, but that does not distort the gospel and recognises it as a universal truth for all.

These challenges – unfamiliarity, uniqueness, and universality – are not new, of course. They are the same challenges faced by the apostles and other Christians in the first centuries in the Roman world. What is different, however, between premodern / pre-Christian times and our postmodern / post-Christian world is the sense that Christianity has been tried and found wanting and the proposal that faith can be a matter of private conviction, with a civilisation finding cohesion in values that are self-evidently true despite being ripped away from their foundational story. This is a recipe for confusion and, arguably, for the collapse of a civilisation.

Despite the challenges posed by postmodernism, Ravi Zacharias (2000:26ff.) suggests that it provides five windows of opportunity for evangelism:

1. It has cleared the playing field of alternative final authorities.
2. Enough of the modern worldview remains for reason to have a point of entry.
3. Postmodern people search for community.
4. God intervenes sovereignly in history, creating moments when the world questions.
5. People have exhausted themselves with pleasure seeking.

To this list we might add that Christianity and even church, can appear intriguing to those who have no experience of it because they are one or more generation post-Christian or come from a different ethnic, religious and cultural background.

In thinking about how we should live in this changing context, I find helpful Peter's words to Christians in the not-dissimilar context of first century Rome. In 1 Peter 2:17, the apostle issues a four-fold command: "Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor". I have used the ESV here because, unlike some translations, it reflects the fact that there are only three verbs here. Our duty involves:

- **Fear** – we are to fear God. This verb indicates giving ultimate allegiance and acknowledging God's sovereignty. We submit willingly to God's good rule. In 1 Peter 3, this fear is said to be the basis of our confidence in speaking about the hope we have – our fear of God frees us from fear of others and gives us boldness. Remarkably there, Peter takes an Old Testament statement about God (from Isaiah 8:12) and replaces God with Jesus, who should be set apart in our hearts. The implication is clear. Jesus Christ is Lord and God. We need to be worshippers who think much of Jesus.
- **Love** – notice the command is first and foremost to love our Christian brothers and sisters. Of course, we are also commanded to love our enemies, but the new command that Jesus gave was to love one another. We need to be church people – people who are bound to one another with a covenant commitment like the commitment of God to us. A shift towards equipping the saints for scattered life, simplifying the Church to facilitate real life application and enabling them to grasp the gospel and its implications for every issue and aspect of life. We need to keep the gospel and the call to discipleship central in all of our activities. Christian unity is also essential for a faithful stance in the world – as Jesus prayed in John 17, it is through our unity that we will be seen to be His disciples and He will be seen to be the unique Son of God. The gospel tells of an alternative basis for human society marked by true justice and love across difference, but the application of this truth is primarily in the Church.
- **Honour** – we are commanded both to honour the emperor and to honour everyone. Honour is a rich word, which explodes into a society that tells us to tolerate or respect others. Toleration is a weak idea – who wants to be tolerated? So the world increasingly calls us to respect others who differ from us, but we cannot respect behaviours and claimed identities that aren't compatible with God's truth. To do so would not be to fear God. Instead we are challenged to give honour. The word here means to place value on someone and we recognise that every individual has great value, whatever they believe or do, because they are created and loved by God. Honouring people will mean a commitment to their good. We also honour the authorities, even if, like Caesar, they are ungodly in many respects, because they have been instituted by God. Honouring the authorities means we will seek to do whatever we can to help them do their work in a way that promotes what is good and not what is bad.



Considering these four commands and their interactions, we can produce this diagram. Honour for everyone and for the emperor sit on one 'axis' as responsibilities outside the family, while fearing God and loving the brotherhood belong on the other as duties within the family.



In the four quarters between these commands I have placed four 's' words that capture what we need to do to live faithfully as God's gospel people in the contemporary world, or indeed in any age. Each of these words sits in the tension between two of the commands Peter issues:

- **Serving** – our love for one another will lead us to serve each other in the Church in love, but our honour towards everyone will cause this to spill over into serving people in their needs in wider society. We must start within the Church, becoming increasingly the kingdom community we are called to be, where God's rule is celebrated and embodied. Church must become less like an institution and more like a family, but as we change our way of being Church Christian unity will, as I said before, be essential. Consumerism must be replaced with covenant commitment. We will, however, find that we have resource to serve in many ways. Christians will see their families, neighbourhoods and workplaces as mission fields full of opportunities to serve others in love. The Church must increasingly focus on equipping them for this task, so that when they scatter they will be effective.
- **Speaking** – a mission of actions of service will be inadequate. We must also share the gospel, proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. If we don't do so we are neither honouring people fully – how could we be if we withhold the greatest news from them – nor fearing Christ – how could we take credit for our good works ourselves rather than testifying to Him as our motivation. The Church, I believe, must refuse to engage in any activity where our freedom to testify to the Lordship of Christ and God's unique salvation in Him is compromised. The degree to which we can access state funding or work with the State will be tested. We must reject the false gospel of social action without evangelism, which only reinforces the myth of human progress without God. The gospel cannot be preached without words. Our speech will also entail speaking out about injustice and redefining wrong understandings of what justice is. We need a clear commitment to Scripture here to see where the world's understanding is wrong.
- **Shaping** – as we learn from our fellowship with one another and learning from God's revealed truth what a society shaped by God's kingdom is like, we will not only engage with the world in service, but we will also take those opportunities we have to shape our society according to God's truth and kingdom values. This option was not much open to the Christians Peter wrote to, living in an autocratic empire, but we have huge opportunities even now in democracies. When the first Christians said 'Jesus Christ is Lord', however, they were declaring two parallel truths based on people's understanding of the word 'Lord':
  - a) In the Jewish context, Jesus is the Messiah and nothing less than Yahweh Himself in human flesh.

**b)** In the Roman world, Jesus is the true King, not Caesar or the Empire.

We must learn to see the gospel as more than a matter of personal belief, or even an individual way of life. We must engage with our world shaping its values and institutions. We must not do this in a domineering way or falsely believing that we can create heaven on earth, but we must have confidence to make the Christian voice heard in the public sphere. In this I think we will need the expertise of organisations like Evangelical Alliance and CARE who can specialise and keep abreast of developments. For those who want to find out more, those organisations will be working together to deliver an Evening Class at BBC exploring engagement in the public sphere – starting 28<sup>th</sup> February 2017. The expansive understanding of the gospel I outlined earlier does not fit with secularism. Believers in Jesus' unique Lordship as God's Messiah and king and the future judge of all things cannot confine their faith to the private sphere. The gospel is an inescapably political message. We are not called to build a theocratic nation, but we are called to be salt and light, pointing to the goodness of God's reign in Christ.

- **Suffering** – this final word is unlikely to be popular, but it must not be neglected. In fact, it is a major theme in 1 Peter, whose first readers were experiencing real opposition for their faith. In a secular world we are unlikely to face physical persecution, but we will find ourselves increasingly squeezed between our duty to fear God and our desire to honour the authorities. Where these clash, we must put loyalty to God first, but honouring the state will mean that we accept the consequences. It will also mean that we think carefully before we engage in civil disobedience or legal challenges. Although physical martyrdom is unlikely to be our experience, I suspect that 'professional martyrdom' may be inevitable as we find there are areas of business and professional life within which we cannot operate in good conscience. The Church will need to be seen to be counter-cultural and radically different and this will inevitably mean opposition from the world. For example, the marriage debate may be best resolved by the churches ceasing providing the State with the function of registering marriages legally. Great wisdom will be needed to know when we must suffer for our fear of God, and we should not seek deliberately to provoke opposition, but we must understand that suffering is part of our calling. We need a theology that can embrace this, not the triumphalism that we sometimes see which claims we can win every battle and overcome every obstacle. Ultimate victory will be ours in Christ, but for now the path will often be tough.

## Conclusion: a time for confidence

It is time for us to have renewed confidence in the gospel on the basis that God is faithful and Christ will build His Church. We must also recognise our strength in Northern Ireland and even Ireland as a whole. The Evangelical community is strong here numerically and in its resources. If we can unite and work together locally and across the region, God can do great things through us. We must snap out of the despair of decline and focus on hearing what God is saying and the opportunities He is presenting us with. The first Century Christians made a dramatic impact on their world as they gave practical help to others and proclaimed a message of hope in the context of fierce State-sponsored opposition that within three centuries Christianity had become the dominant religion of the Empire and could no longer be ignored by the emperor. God does not promise us that this will be our future if we unlock some 'magic formula' or develop a new strategy, but He does call us to honour everyone, to love the brotherhood, to fear Him and to honour the authorities. As we do so we must serve, speak, shape and suffer. This is the four-dimensional shape of Christian testimony in a post-Christian, pluralistic, postmodern, secular world.

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