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Is There A Doctor in the House?

Murray McLeod-Boyle

A recent edition of a denominational magazine¹ carried an article entitled "The Church is holding its own." This article presented some of the first results of the 1996 National Church Life Survey, and, as the title suggests, is fairly positive in its outlook.

This article was also accompanied by a cartoon. This cartoon featured a parishioner with a ball and chain around his ankle saying, "But Reverend ... 95% of your parishioners would much prefer *not* to be chained to the Church pews. To this the Reverend, keys in hand, replies, "Statistics, statistics, statistics ... what I want to know is: What is God's will in this matter, hmm?"

This cartoon is no doubt aimed at provoking ministers into being a little more attentive to statistical evidence and the congregation's wishes. However, we must ask ourselves, *what is the value of statistics?* This question is even more relevant when we apply it to the Church. Why? Because *the Church is not a democracy!* Hence, how we use and what we do with statistical results must be a matter for careful (Biblical) thought.

As a youngster I remember reading an issue of "Mad" magazine² in which they spoke of manipulating a survey. In their example, various questions were asked at a public university and at a private Roman college. Naturally, these two groups

would give very different answers to the same questions. Consequently, this quizzical lesson taught by "Mad," is something that we all need to take on board when examining survey results.

How we interpret results can depend on the make-up of the constituency interviewed; the questions asked; how the questions are framed; and, not least of all, the perspective of the collator.

One of the greatest mistakes of our day is the almost wholesale subscription to the incorrect, dare I say 'wrong,' approach of the Church growth movement. Demographics have a place to play in making certain decisions about Church life. However, there is a limit. Demographics, or any statistics for that matter, cannot predict outpourings of the Holy Spirit. They cannot predict where revival and reformation will break out. These things depend upon God and the faithfulness of His people, not how many people of a certain age or sex live in a particular district.³

This then leads us to consider the results of the NCLS. If we are interested in how many posteriors polish pews on Sunday then these initial results may buoy our confidence. However, if we are concerned about deeper matters, then the news is far from good.

In 1991 another NCLS was held. In the ensuing years various books

were written. Each of these focused on different areas of the survey. One of the last books written was "Views from the Pews."⁴ In this volume a number of issues were focused upon. Importantly, many of these results pertain to doctrinal and theological matters. In other words, the results conveyed to us in this book give us a window into the soul of the Church in Australia — and it is not a pretty sight.

To gauge effectively where the Church is really at, we must measure it in terms of Biblical - Historical belief and not in terms of numbers. God's revelation alone can be used as a spiritual barometer for the Church.

Ethics

In the area of ethics we note some very significant shifts in belief.

42% of respondents believed that euthanasia should be allowed if a patient is "suffering from an incurable illness." A further 28% were unsure, leaving only 30% who believed that euthanasia is wrong. Given this evidence, it is a wonder that the recent senate decision to overturn the Northern Territory's voluntary euthanasia law was passed.

Another area where an obvious shift has taken place is in the area of "sex outside marriage." In response to this question 75% were opposed to "sex outside marriage." The remain-

1. APL (Australian Presbyterian Living Today) July 1997. Pages 6-8.
2. The product of a misspent youth?!
3. Zechariah 4:6 — Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts.
4. Openbook Publishers: Adelaide, 1995.

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ing 25% were made up of those who did not know (4%), or approved of sex outside marriage because the couple were either consenting (4%) or committed (17%).

Looking at the response in this area, it is a pity that more ethical questions were not asked. It would seem that questions on abortion, homosexuality, and the like would have also made for interesting reading.

Epistemology

One real area of concern highlighted by this survey pertained to how Christians think. The statement, "it doesn't matter so much what I believe so long as I lead a moral life," was put to the people. In reply 61% definitely disagreed; 17% tended to disagree, leaving nearly one quarter (22%) who agreed with the statement.

If this is not a case of placing the (theological) cart before the horse then I am not sure what is. It is an impossibility to have any true morals without having first established a belief system. More importantly, if God is not the starting point for that belief system, it is condemned to failure from the outset.

Surely the leaders of the Australian Church must be concerned by the fact that 39%⁵ of the Church are

not even able to reason in a Biblically consistent manner.

Eschatology.

Further evidence of the decline in the Church comes when we view the answers given to questions on eternal life and the judgement.

Sadly, only 62% of those surveyed were confident that they were going to heaven. A massive 30% "hope to go," with a further 6% who do not know, and 2% who believe they will cease to exist.

In regard to the divine judgement in which "some shall be rewarded and others punished," 60% believed this with "no doubt" and 17% responded with a "yes, I think so." Most disturbing of all is the fact that 12% did not believe this to be true, whilst another 11% were uncertain.

Again we are forced to ask, how is it that in both cases 40% of those polled did not believe, or had serious doubts about, doctrines on which the Bible is so Clear?

Christology

One of the more positive aspects brought out by these survey results, is that Jesus Christ still holds an important place. In relation to belief in the fact that Jesus was "fully God, fully human and physically rose from the dead," 86% declared that they had "no doubt" that this was true. 8% had "minor" doubts, leaving 2% who had "serious" doubts, 1% who did not believe this and 3% who did not know.

Whilst this is one of the more encouraging aspects of the survey, it must still concern us that only 86% have no doubt about these essential doctrines. It must be remembered that if we deny any one of the aspects mentioned in the above statement, then Jesus fails to be the Christ and can no longer be considered as the Saviour.

What of God?

So far we have seen some fairly disturbing statistics. The natural question to ask is, what has led to this state of affairs? The answer is found in epistemology. Earlier we noted that if we begin at any refer-

Humour

The following are actual excerpts from classified sections of city newspapers.

Illiterate? Write today for free help.

Auto Repair Service. Free pick-up and delivery. Try us once, you'll never go anywhere again.

Our experienced Mom will care for your child. Fenced yard, meals, and smacks included.

Dog for sale: eats anything and is fond of children.

Man wanted to work in dynamite factory. Must be willing to travel.

Stock up and save. Limit: one.

Semi-Annual after-Christmas Sale.

3-year old teacher needed for preschool. Experience preferred.

Girl wanted to assist magician in cutting-off-head illusion. Blue Cross and salary.

Dinner Special—Turkey \$2.35; Chicken or Beef \$2.25; Children \$2.00

For sale: antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers.

Now is your chance to have your ears pierced and get an extra pair to take home, too.

We do not tear your clothing with machinery. We do it carefully by hand.

For sale. Three canaries of undermined sex.

Great Dames for sale.

Have several very old dresses from grandmother in beautiful condition.

Vacation Special: have your home exterminated.

Get rid of aunts. Zap does the job in 24 hours.

Toaster: A gift that every member of the family appreciates. Automatically burns toast.

For Rent: 6-room hated apartment.

Man, honest. Will take anything.

Used Cars: Why go elsewhere to be cheated. Come here first.

Christmas tag-sale. Handmade gifts for the hard-to-find person.

Wanted: Hair cutter. Excellent growth potential.

Wanted. Man to take care of cow that does not smoke or drink.

Wanted. Widower with school age children requires person to assume general housekeeping duties. Must be

5. 39% = 22% who agree with the above statement + 17% who only "tended" to disagree. This 17% are of concern because their answer signifies that they are not one hundred percent sure.

ence point other than God we are bound to make mistakes. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the most radical departure from Biblical doctrine appears in reference to God Himself.

When the Australian Church was asked if they "believe in a personal God," 83% responded by saying that they had no doubts. The remaining 17% were made up of those who had "some" doubts (10%) and those who believed in a "higher power" (6%). This left only 1% who claimed that they "don't know."

Some may be buoyed by the fact that 83% of the Church believes in a personal God. If you are then please sit down before reading any further. You see, 83% of the Church may believe in a personal God, but these people do not know whether God is Arthur or Martha.⁶

When asked to respond to the statement, "it is wrong for Christians to refer to God as female," only 32% "strongly agreed" that this was indeed the case. A further 17% "agreed" with this statement, meaning that only 49% of the Australian Church believes in the 'maleness' of God. The remaining 51% are divided as follows; 15% are "uncertain"; 19% "disagree"; and 17% "strongly disagree." Leaving the "uncertain" category aside, we are left with the staggering figure of 36% of the Church that believe that God is *or can be* labelled as female.

Now for those who are probably thinking that such figures can be accounted for by the fact that the NCLS includes liberal churches, there is more bad news. It is certainly not surprising that the Uniting Club have one of the highest rates of belief in a "female" God (38%). However, many will be shocked to know that the Assemblies of God polled 41%; the Anglicans 37%; Churches of Christ 37%; Lutheran 35%; Presbyterian 31%; Baptist 31%; and Salvation Army 28%.

As stated at the outset we must be careful with statistics, however, what is clear is that the Australian Church has some serious problems. Most disturbing of all is that, in regard to some of these wrong beliefs, they are common in all denomina-

tions. One cannot simply blame certain 'liberal denominations' for dragging the statistics down.

What is apparent is that the Church has shifted in its Historical-Biblical belief and is in need of a shot of spiritual penicillin.

Are there any Answers?

In looking at the results of the NCLS it is alarming to see how important Biblical doctrines have been jettisoned. Yet in the midst of these results we can find answers.

The NCLS asked some questions on prayer and Bible reading, and once more we are confronted with some thought provoking statistics.

Six percent of the Church do not view prayer as important, whilst a further 26% pray "only during times of stress, need or gratitude." Combined this means that 32% of the Church do not consider prayer as really important.⁷

Moving on to Bible reading the picture does not improve. The NCLS informs us that only 64% of the Church read their Bibles at least once a week. This leaves an astounding 36% who read their Bibles "occasionally" or "hardly ever."

This last statistic is the very heart and soul of why the Australian Church is in need of a visit from the Great Physician.

It is not a wonder that the church has some very peculiar beliefs when so few of its members are reading God's Word on a regular basis. Remember that the figure of 64% is made up of those who read "most days", "several times a week", and "once a week." If we eliminate the last two categories we are left with only 41% of the church who read their Bibles "most days."

Once again we will be surprised to see that the problem is not necessarily limited to liberal denominations. In this instance the liberal denomination do poll lower than the others, which is understandable given liberalism's disregard for an authoritative Word. Yet, the AOGs, who record the highest number of regular Bible readers, still only have 69% of their

capable of contributing to growth of family.

And now, the Superstore-unequaled in size, unmatched in variety, unrivaled inconvenience.

We will oil your sewing machine and adjust tension in your home for \$1.00.

number who read their Bibles routinely. This means that even in the best denominations there are 31% of people who do not open their Bibles "most days."

Conclusion.

Such statistics should concern us, for the picture painted here is one of a Church with major health problems.

Whilst it is a good thing that Church attendances are holding steady, it is of little value if this is achieved through compromise and surrender. The Church, first and foremost is about glorifying God. Hence, it is totally counter productive to introduce people to the Church who are there for subjective reasons. Moreover, there is absolutely nothing to be gained by introducing people to the Church who have no concept of God, or who, at best, have an extremely odd concept of God. This is particularly so when the Church has no inkling, desire or ability to correct a wayward view.

In fact, when we consider the responses to some of these questions it would seem that the Church is actually encouraging heterodox views — a trend that cannot be allowed to continue.

If the Australian Church is to turn the spiritual corner, then it needs to recapture the historical belief in God and His revelation to man. It is only in jettisoning the humanism to which the Church now subscribes that this will be possible.

The Australian Church has no future if it continues its current trend of denying Scripture and the statements it makes about the nature of God. This path will only lead to a greater irrelevancy than currently exists. Why? Because God can never

6. No Blasphemy intended.

7. Or at least do not think it important enough to pray on a regular basis. (Ed.)

answer any of man's questions if His nature and character are shaped by man in the first place.

This is the logical fallacy of idolatry. Isaiah the Prophet declared:

Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile, and their precious things are of no profit; even their own witnesses fail to see or know, so that they will be put to shame. ... He works it with planes, and outlines it with a compass, and makes it like the form of a man, like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house. Surely he cuts cedars for himself, and takes a cypress or an oak, and raises *it* for himself among the trees of the forest ... Then it becomes *something* for a man to burn ... Half of it he burns in the fire; over *this* half he eats meat as he roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire." *But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for thou art my god."*

They do not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared

over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend. And no one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire, and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat *it*. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!" (Isaiah 44:9-19, NASB)

The logical fallacy of Isaiah's day was that a man could use one piece of wood with which he would cook a meal and light a fire to keep warm. Then he would take the remainder of the timber and fashion an idol.

The logical fallacy of our day is that fallen man can take the God of heaven, mould and shape Him until He has more imperfections and shortcomings than man, and yet still be declared to be God when the process is finished.

This being the case, it is little wonder that the world sees the Church as irrelevant. After all, why should someone go to Church in order to worship something that is less than themselves?

This is the quandary that the Australian Church is in. The only way out is to repent and return to the historic - Biblical vision of God as holy and awesome, and of a God who is truly worthy to be praised.

Isaiah had it right:

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (Isaiah 6:1-8)