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The Most Exciting Days in History

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As the last few years of the twentieth century flit away, much of our society is marked by a sense of disillusionment. Things have not turned out the way we once thought they would. The optimism of the '60s and '70s has given way to a harsh '90s loss of vision and hope for the future.

We have become used to living with change. Alvin Toffler's book Future Shock, written in the '60s, understated the massive change that humanity has been subjected to.

Alongside society's feelings of hopelessness and questions about the value of life and living, the church has also gone through massive change. Church life surveys indicate that fewer people are attending church services each week, and the message of the good news of Jesus is regarded by many (including some churchgoers) as at best irrelevant. The young have deserted the church in droves, voting with their feet.

In so many ways, it seems that confidence in our culture and our future on planet Earth is at an all time low.

Perhaps the greatest danger is when human beings themselves find they are at the end of their rope. At the point where our optimism fades and our expectations are threatened, we often act in ways that are extreme, sometimes downright inhumane!

At each era of history, in all the schemes for living that the human race has devised, it always seems that in the course of time the best ideas end with a need to look for further solutions. Each set of ideas disintegrates on the rubbish heap of history.

To people who are human spirits and who (as St. Augustine reminds us) can be satisfied by nothing but God, it is little wonder that we cry out for the reality of God's person.

Exciting Days

How can we say, then, that these are the most exciting days of human history? They are exciting because in these days of disillusionment we are finding much that is sterile and destructive, and we are beginning to see past our dreams of better things to catch a glimpse of the vista revealed by the God who shows his intentions in the Bible.

For a long time we human beings have disregarded God and his ways. Like goldfish in a bowl, we have

argued that our perspective on life is reality. This reality has only been shaken from time to time when the bowl has wobbled. But we live in days when it's threatening to topple. Like goldfish tipped from their bowl into a drain and on into the ocean, our perspective is undergoing radical change!

This is an exciting time in human history because humankind is realizing that things are not what our philosophers and psychologists have said they are. Rather, reality is based on the God of the Bible.

Looking for God's Reality

But where do we find that reality? Despite all the religious options of our day, people still don't know where to look.

They've seen the futility of mere talk about God. They've sensed the emptiness of projecting their own vulnerability and failures on to God. And the way the hopes and magic practices of 'religion' make God appear as someone able to be controlled and marketed, without too many side-effects, has made people as disenchanted and wary about God as everything else.

We must ask: Has religion kept us busily away from knowing close relationship with God? In the end, structures absorb life and rob us of a growing intimacy with the Creator.

The truth is, God's church has been 'squeezed into the mold' of the world system, the very thing Paul warned us about when he wrote to the Roman Christians:

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (Romans 12:1-2).

Paul's admonition is for all of us who have seen the goodness of God's rescue from sin and death to focus clearly on God and see the world from his vantage point with the expectation that God will change us from the inside out. This change will allow us to know what God desires so that we can respond.

The outcome is that we'll no longer find ourselves locked into society's way of approaching things. Taking God's perspective saves us from being dragged down to the level of the immaturity of our culture.

The Church Is not Peripheral to the World

The exciting thing is that, in these days when many seem to be leaving organized institutional religion, more and more people are discovering new depths to their relationship with the living God.

For too long we've understood God's church as being a little like a students' chocolate eating club' that

meets outside of school or university class-time. We've seen it as an extracurricular activity for people whose primary concern is life in the world.

But God's understanding is that his church is a people for whom his desires form the central direction of their lives. By doing what God reveals, they find not only that they express their love for God but also that what he desires is best for humanity itself. As they do what God wants, God rules as the supreme ruler he is.

As Paul said, [God] set [Jesus] on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever ... At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence (Ephesians 1:20-23).

History underlines that the world is different because of what God has done through his church. Hospitals, schools, trades unions and many of the service and caring strategies taken for granted today had their beginnings in God moving his people to act.

Yet history also records some very dark days when horrific things were done in the name of God. You don't have to go back to the Crusades; mere decades ago in God's name, Aboriginal children were removed from their families, and thereby denied the very relationship that God made basic for life.

God Is Always at Work

But history is his story, and the sovereign God is never jammed! Even when his people are disobedient and rebellious, he redeems the mess and leads them on.

There is no point in the history of his people when God has not been there to sovereignty lead them forward. Even in the darkest hour God is at work. Luther published his famous 95 Theses. Calvin saw a vision of a city where God was king. Wesley made the Gospel known across England. Booth cared for the marginalized and poor. The Pentecostal and charismatic movements of the 20th century helped people open up to God's Spirit. And so on. God has moved his people.

Some people today are sad when they consider what they know of the church. But God is at work. There is no place where God acts that is not good!

The days we live in are exciting because at long last we are rediscovering what God intended for his people from the beginning. The groups and fellowships we meet with are really organizations made by men and women that try to manage and control God's church. But all the best efforts of men and women to support, encourage and help 'grow' the church often get in the way of the One who is master of the

church. For it was the Master, Jesus, who said, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not stand against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Relationship Not Religion

It is easy to miss the point that it was God who initiated the action to rescue his creation when we rebelled. Jesus died on the cross, and in this action opened the door for forgiveness to be available to all humankind. Paul writes:

"Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

This is not religion but the expression of a relationship with a living being. It's not theory but reality! It has nothing to do with 'going to church' and everything to do with being the church.

When a person encounters Jesus, he or she is a whole new creation. They find that God has made them more than just a mind and body they discover the realm of spirit. And they find that God has made them to know the wholeness of spirit, soul and body that modern men and women have disregarded but desperately long for.

Life Better Than We've Dreamed

Things may be changing. The whole world may seem mad. Many things may stand in the way of finding the Creator's reason for our existence on this earth. But God is at work. He has acted to redeem his creation. Nothing but nothing will stand in the way of what he has done.

When the Mao Tse Tung's government came to power in China, a group of foreign missionaries being forced to leave China sat and lamented that God's work was being curtailed. Less than 50 years later the evidence of the fastest growing church in the world points to the fact that people's most diabolical treatment and schemes cannot stop God!

This is a day when we are increasingly seeing the difference between the programs of religion and relationship with God, and catching a glimpse of what Jesus was talking about when he said, "I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

So don't worry if denominations pass away or Christian organizations crash! For these are indeed the most exciting days in human history!

Editor's Note: *This article Copyright 1997 by Kevin Smith. Reprinted with permission. First published in On Being magazine, PO Box 434, HAW-THORN VIC 3122. Kevin has become a dear friend of this ministry, having first met him in 1995. This fall Wayne taught with him tn Singapore. They are in the early stages of co-authoring a book tentatively titled The Church Relational: Discovering How to Live in Father's Family. Kevin Smith, with his wife Val (pictured above), has an extensive ministry teaching, counseling and encouraging Christians throughout Australia and overseas. Bible quotes in this article are from The Message by Eugene Petersen.*

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