

The Story of Colliding Worlds

Visual Flash Card or Power Point Headings.

- * Bewildering Change
- * Christendom Era--- a culture now past.
- * Post-Christendom---a new arrival



Presentation Script: This script can be read or used in conjunction with the Flash card or Power point headings shown above.

Introduction.

It is not difficult to be bewildered and confused by the rapid pace of change gripping the Western World. In the past things changed slowly and several successive generations lived in a similar cultural environment. Today many people and church congregations feel that there is so much change and diversity around them that the world they once knew has passed them by and moved on. Today, there are people side by side in the church and society who are the products of many different confusing worlds.

Most churches are the result of a way of life we called Christendom but around the late 1970s the way our society generally understood life quietly shifted. Today a new Post-Christendom era and way of thinking has emerged.

Those people over 50 years of age are products of a past world and way of thinking but they are still with us. People from the world of Christendom often struggle with a form of collective grief as they come to terms with changing attitudes, lifestyles and church decline. It is not an exaggeration to say it is essential to understand that we are living through a special time in history. Although we usually see things through the glasses of our own experience and mind-set, it is time to realise that in our time we are living through the transition of two profoundly different periods in history.

The aim of “*The Story of Colliding Worlds*” is to help us to listen carefully to what God is saying and to how He is leading his people today.

The overlapping time between these two periods will last about fifty years (1980 to 2030) It is projected that Christian affiliation of the Australian population will drop below 50% by 2030. All those people shaped by the Christendom period by 2030 will be gone-- but now we are in the middle of a time of transition and in many ways, it is a confusing, challenging time for Christian people.

This time of change can be a positive experience if we are willing to trust God in a new way and to grow in new understanding. It is important for those who have experienced the values of Christendom to share with those who are younger the positive values of that world, the substance of faith found in the Bible and what it means to live out the faith in a broken world. Those who are younger need to help older people understand how feelings, emotions, and relationships are important to Christian experience and in making sense of today’s Post-Christendom world.

BIG Picture Examples

Visual Flash Card : Power Point

It is imperative that we fully appreciate this moment in history. The church has been challenged to re-order its understanding of itself a number of times in history.

- * Apostolic Age
- * Christendom
- * Reformation
- * Post Christendom

The Apostolic Age

The disciples of Jesus who had been brought up in the tradition of Judaism had to change their way of thinking when they came to follow Jesus. Their learning was a gradual process and was assisted by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (John 14:26) In many matters they had to choose between current Jewish beliefs and the wisdom of Christ illuminated by the Holy Spirit. The two worlds were often in conflict but step by step the disciples and the church matured to bring their minds under the lordship of Christ (2 Cor.10:5) The Church existed in a hostile environment. Despite persecution, Christianity was a missionary movement that grew.

Christendom

In the fourth century AD things changed drastically, Christianity was no longer opposed by the State. Persecution ceased and Christianity became compulsory. The Church became a powerful central institution in Rome. The church shaped knowledge, social order, built massive buildings and became the gateway to heaven.

Reformation

Reading the Bible, Martin Luther declared, "*The just shall live by faith.*" The authority of the Pope was replaced by "*scripture alone, through Christ alone, by grace alone.*" Some State churches became Protestant. A new literate culture focused on the written word and removed the symbolic, mystical and experiential elements of the faith.

The Christian faith became the soul of Western culture. The church was central as a religious and social institution and generally our morality, law and ethics were Bible based.

Post-Christendom

In many ways, the shape of Christendom continued. Western culture remained static for many years In Australia supporting the church was part of supporting the local community. The demise of Christendom developed over many years via liberal humanism and scientific rationalism. The decade of the 1960s to 1970s saw great moral, ethical and social change. Post-Christendom (post-modernism) became a turning point in Western culture that now penetrates music, art, fashion, media etc. This change radically effects the way we understand everything in everyday life. What is real, how we view what is true --- including Christianity, rule of law, sexuality, gender, etc. Christianity is perceived as increasingly irrelevant and so is the Christian message. The church is seen as a Christendom institution in a Post-Christian world.

A new culture requires us to re-think many of our inherited ways or to re-invent what we understand as church. Amid this period of rapid change the challenge before us is how to embody the gospel and remain faithful followers of Christ.

G.K. Chesterton has said, "*At least five times the faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died.*"

The Passing World---a culture of State and Church.

- Ordered world
- Ordered knowledge
- Ordered culture

Western civilisation emerged from a Christian foundation that acknowledged God as the Sovereign over the natural ordered world.

Life seemed coherent and functioned well when God was honoured and obeyed. Christianity belonged to a universal catholic church. This was the way to understand the real world and real truth. The State adopted Christian values and legislated Christian morals for society. Laws were reinforced by Civil and Church courts. With some variations, this view of life found expression over many centuries. It sought *“to subject all areas of human experience to the Lordship of Christ”* and the Church.

Through religion, education and culture a range of ideas and influences expanded our understanding of the ordered world.

Moral boundaries were defined by the Ten Commandments. Babies were baptised. People were married and buried by the church. A catechism prepared people for confirmation into the church to live out the teaching of Jesus. In an indirect way Christian conversion was imposed by expectation but gradually with increased knowledge only empirical science was allowed to speak the truth.

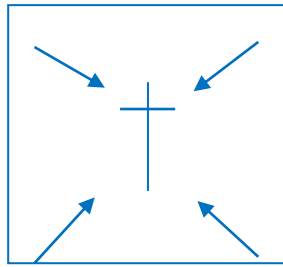
Progress and the pursuit of truth was all about rational thinking and the study of cause and effect. A common basis of enquiry and thinking was established through a range of sciences.

Science was about objective facts while values and beliefs was more subjective and personal. In Western society God became increasingly unnecessary, irrelevant and gradually the power of Christendom was slowly peeled away.

However, living in the shadow of Christendom still provided confidence and certainty. Australia was a secure, mono-culture for many years where society was largely self-regulated by the acceptance of common civil law and social values largely based on a Christian view of life. Australia remained comfortable but with diversity the more controlling, ugly aspects of Christendom became obstacles to people coming to faith.

For some people today Christendom has now served a purpose. It is no longer really central to people’s lives or to their understanding of truth. Today not only has our culture bypassed the concept of Christendom but it is increasingly opposed to it. Many different ideologies and views of life now aggressively compete to fill the moral/spiritual void that the church once filled. However, one thing is certain. Christian influence and mission will not be lost or simply consigned to the past.

Christendom Church--- a mixture of Church and State.



The foundation and cultural frame of Christendom was based on the acceptance of the existence of God as the ultimate source and authority behind life. The Bible revealed that God made us to know Him, to enjoy His presence and to enjoy having a reason and meaning for life.

Rather than being an object or an ideal, Christians believe God is a person who speaks. God comes to us and reveals himself and his divine truth through precedents recorded in history and the Scriptures. God comes to us especially in the unique person of Jesus Christ who said he was sent, “to testify to the truth.” (John 18:37) **The arrows point** to a central Christ because He is different and distinct from all other leaders or world philosophers. This means that God’s eternal truth is not a matter of our personal preference, feeling or the opinion of the majority. Christ is central to the church and society.

The square box shape represents Christendom thinking and the ordered certainty of Christendom. Beyond human politics and style we live in a spiritual/moral universe that witnesses to the truth and distinguishes between right and wrong. Through his death on the cross Christ is the only way to salvation and peace with God. This is so important that through the ages the Holy Spirit, guided Christians to preserve these biblical insights in doctrines and creeds. These values formed the basis our cultural boundaries.

The square also represents Christendom organisation, the accumulation of church wealth and power. Most activities took place within the four-wall boundary of the church building and people invested finance and energy in its maintenance. The life of the church was organised by its institutions and it exercised its authority through a priestly clergy caste, centralised lineal programmes, regulations, councils, procedures and church rolls. The primary way of nurture/teaching and communication was verbal through preaching on a text each Sunday. The Holy Spirit helped people to hear God’s word through scholarship, the judgements of history and the conscience.

Organisation included the Church buildings that often stood in the centre of the village or on the top of a hill. The church existed for the well being of the whole community through education, health and aged care institutions.

Over many years the mission model remained the same. It included the colonisation of the pagan and a general focus on reaching overseas countries. People were sent to pioneer work among those who had never heard.

Instead of a balance of theology and experience informing each other, exciting new world discoveries gave priority to a ‘left-brain’ way of thinking, towards the importance of the sciences, and empirical evidence. Church scholars with critical liberal views questioned the historical resurrection and core elements of Christian teaching.

This Christendom mind-set/model is not likely to lie down and die quickly but its heart-soul condition is terminal. What it means to believe in the historic Apostolic faith has become blurred--- The church has become pluralist in doctrine. What it really means to believe in Jesus Christ has become confused. Christian people are no longer distinct from other people in society and a person today can claim spiritual belief without living out that faith in a genuine way.

Colliding Worlds and Empty Universe

*“Herbert Butterfield sensed fifty years ago, this is the most important and most exhilarating period in the history of Christianity for 1500 years.”
Alan Kreider. 1999.*

- The empty void being filled
- It's not all bad news
- Growing the Christian mind.

By the end of last century, the demise of Christendom left God relegated to the private world for people *'who like that kind of thing.'* God had become unnecessary and so for many in today's world the universe is empty. Most Christians have kept on believing in God but many no longer live as though God has any real power over them or the world. Today Christianity is no longer central and many know little about the Bible or the content of Christian belief. Other beliefs and ideologies are now filling **this vacuum** and are well established in popular culture. Pluralism and relativism today permeates the teaching of many mainline churches leaving the lines of Christian belief and mission seriously blurred. This compels sincere Christians to move beyond their comfort zone and to rediscover who they are and what they really believe.

Post-Christendom then is not just a new academic theory, a figment of imagination or a passing fad. **Not all Post-Christendom thinking is bad** but neither must we accept or allow cultural change or political correctness to determine the Christian gospel or what we believe. A post-Christendom era is by no means a post-Christian era. This new landscape does provide an opportunity to venture with Christ in a new way. The culture around us may change but the unique truth found in Christ remains the same. It means we can rediscover parts of the Christian faith that have been bypassed or neglected.

New Testament Christianity was born into a Roman/Greek world where religious idolatry and sexual diversity, paedophilia and the occult were widely practised. Harry Blamires has said, *“It is difficult to do justice in words to the complete loss of intellectual morale in the twentieth century Church...there is no longer a Christian mind.”*

Like the early Christians, today we must learn to discern, scrutinise and discriminate between what is life-giving and what is destructive, what is good and bad, what is God honouring and scriptural, and what aligns with Christian truth. We must be alert to recognise and discern the difference between a Christian way of thinking and the subtle seduction of humanistic philosophy and method. In a new way we need to pay attention to understanding the culture and way others around us see the world. We also need to learn to think **Christianly** about the perplexing issues of our times. Paul instructed the Christians of Corinth in his time to **have “the mind of Christ”**. There can be times when the human mind acts independently of God and comes up with ideas or conclusions that are completely different from God's ideas. The person without the illumination of the Holy Spirit sees the truth as foolishness. (1 Corinthians 2:14) To submit our mind to Christ's revelation by meditating on the scripture is a practise neglected by the church today. We need to increasingly ask, “Is a practise life-giving or does it lead to a personal/social bondage?”--- addictions to wealth, adventure, or media popularity. Christians may not be understood or popular because like the early church they are a minority again, but it is time for a discerning wisdom and a new vision. In an exciting way the God who called the church out into the Apostolic world two thousand years ago is again calling us into a secularised world where we must rediscover who we are; our message and mission.

Today's Arriving Culture

A fluid/felt
knowledge
and
culture

Post Christendom

Moving from Christendom to post-Christendom requires a new way of thinking. It requires not just a new practise or method, but a different mind-set. The church needs to live-out and embody the historic Christian gospel in this new emerging world. Truth is no longer found in absolute fact or the reasoning of Christendom. In some areas of life empirical evidence is not always available so in the post-Christendom way of thinking the senses and experience are now thought to be closer to what is real and true. Other features include:

Relativism

Instead of absolute truth, truth is relative, it all depends on how you want to see truth. The individual observes and accepts what they consider true or false. This means the foundations of moral and spiritual truth, including the Bible are suspect and open to re-evaluation. There are no objective truths that can be known We can never be sure because we all construct our own realities. There are no facts only biased interpretations.

Meta-narrative

Any big, overarching story, ideology or view of life about the human condition is regarded with suspicion and scepticism. In the past powerful institutions, have imposed world-views on societies and so they are no longer trustworthy. Today it is said that what was called truth and reality in the past were just social constructs formed by particular social groups through their language and cultural symbols. Language is fluid. Words like gender, marriage, and gay can be interpreted differently and redefined to have new meaning and to support new social theory.

Pluralism

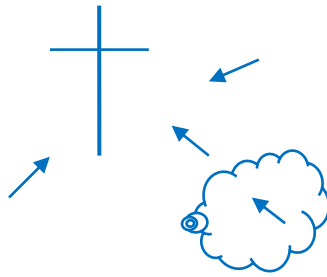
Among a smorgasbord of ideologies and gods, diversity and inclusivism is welcomed. The richness of a multi-cultural society is encouraged. Pluralism however impacts all areas of society in good and bad ways. It produces a wide range of equal, but sometimes opposing views about important issues such as what a society believes. All views are valued and demand respect. To discriminate between ways of thinking or issues is to be judgemental. To discriminate or to exclude people is to exclude part of the truth.

This means there are fewer compartments to life. The old distinction between the sacred and secular, good and evil, are no longer clear cut. This includes what Christians believe. In attempting to grow Christianity in a progressive appealing way, some in the church have downsized the Christian faith as just another world religion. Others regard the Trinity and Christ's physical resurrection as unhelpful.

Pragmatism

Intellectual knowledge alone can lead to inflexibility, pride and arrogance. Truth is no longer just entrusted to hierarchical experts. In the post-Christendom world real knowledge is thought to be more a matter of the heart, the senses and relationships. Real truth is closer to what we experience, feel and what has been proved to really work. Today 'experts' are people at the coal face, people in the field with dirty hands. This approach and thinking has profound implications for the church, ministry, and the authenticity of the Christian gospel. We can react in a defensive, negative ways to these invasive ideologies or we can venture forward in mission.

Arriving Post-Christendom--- church on the margins



The new model breaks with many aspects of core Christian belief and it questions many of the basics of the previous Christendom period. Post-Christendom and the decline of Christianity not only changes the way the church operates but it demands a new way of thinking that remains faithful to Christ. This period of transition is both scary and exciting for serious followers of Christ. Rudolph Bahro has said, *“When the old culture is dying the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.”*

How can Christians relate to a way of life that has no absolutes? We are reminded, *“Faith is our handle on what we can’t see. This trust in God, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living.”* Hebrews 11:1 (Message text). What legacies of the Christendom era are helpful? What can be put aside? What are the crippling addictions of our time to be addressed? How do we present Christ?

Mission is Who we are

In the first place, to be a missionary congregation in a post-Christendom context is not a matter of **what we do** but of knowing **who we are**.

Outreach programmes have usually been ‘added-on’ to current church programmes, extending what is already being done. Instead of employing another method --- to become a missionary congregation requires a corporate conversion, a radical rebirth of mind and life style in terms of Romans 12:1-2 so that the congregation is good news in just being itself.

A renewed congregation in a post-Christendom world will mean a congregations **being**, will come before its **doing**. Congregations will spend less time on programmes, more time on people, building trust, person to person relationships, a sense of authentic community that encourages people to **belong** before they **believe**. Kreider says, *“Despite scorn and persecution there was something deeply attractive about the early Christian movement. Their bonding, knitting together people by love and rite into a sisterhood and brotherhood of belonging.”*

With an assurance that God calls and equips his people to be his agents and channels in each generation, we need to allow God to renew existing congregations and to plant new ones. Being people who have heard and responded to God’s call,-- being of common mind in prayer and direction, being a faith-filled, Holy Spirit filled, being a welcoming, listening, caring community to broken people in an impersonal, lonely world will all be of first importance. Congregations need to be specific about their mission, what they offer and to whom they are becoming --- a loving, faith-sharing, justice-seeking people. Because society is increasingly fragmented and diverse, like the earliest Christian congregations, each church will be a missionary congregation discovering their own vision and setting directions suited to their own environment/circumstances.

Learning from the past, Kreider says, *“Early Christians were alert to the dominant cultural pattern they enculturated their message in societies They drew upon the narratives and images of their times. They asked whether a given practise was life-giving or whether it led to bondage.”* --- frenetic

living, wealth/ consumerism, poverty/ dysfunction, Sex adventure/abuse, occult practise/domestic violence. In this context rather than the faith being passed on from generation to generation the conversion and belief of new comers in a post-Christendom world is not likely to be an instant fix. Conversion will be a long process, the result of **belonging**, long term learning and personal mentoring.

Behavioural change was a central component of early church conversion. The catechetical confession and learning process was probably similar to what we know as the AA twelve steps approach.

In post-Christendom, faith in the story of a Sovereign God and an inspired Bible is replaced by people's personal observations and experience of life. Observations about what is true and false are largely based on relationships and experience. This now highlights the importance of story-telling, personal testimonies and contemporary encounters with God.

Culture and Discernment

Post-modernism brings a refreshing openness to the visual arts and to reflective, sensory spirituality. This may draw us closer to understanding the transcendence and a reverent mystery of God. In a positive way this may support a greater, robust Christian view of life, a better balance and right use of both **reason and sense of discernment**. This will be increasingly important when it comes to distinguishing the difference between mere human philosophy and what actually aligns the Bible and God's will. Christians need to be alert and able to evaluate post-modern culture not just to confront it but to also use and modify it in a positive way. eg use of visual arts, biblical meditation, relational technologies. Media film clip reviews etc.

Because post-Christendom says that nothing is really 'knowable' or certain, the significance of history is depreciated/down-sized. Within many churches today there is a relative ideology that says that all interpretations of the Bible are equal and valid. This means the Christian Bible is open to re-evaluation and it depends on how you see it. This leaves the church with ancient stories but with no authoritative revelation, no unique reliable Word of God or certainty. This describes the confusion, lack of clarity and false teaching that sadly weakens and undermines the integrity of the historic Christian message today.

Emerging new World

Notice in the picture (see p7) **there is no reassuring square box** framing the picture. The church institution is smaller. While it has blurred edges the church appears more flexible in response to changing culture. There is no safe formula for the future. We are called to faith and trust. We discover 'how' by venturing in obedience with Christ and the Holy Spirit into an emerging future. The future will involve risk, trusting God, contending for the essentials of the Gospel entrusted to us and allowing the Holy Spirit to ignite creative ways of being church in a diverse culture.

Understanding Culture

Rather than 'go with the flow' we must take time to understand cultural change and to contextualise the church so that we relate to people's heart-felt experience. The gospel must be constantly re-addressed because the recipient is constantly changing address. Instead of the church being confined within the walls of a church building on Sunday society now tends to regard the church as just another charity, one of many non-profit community service groups. However it is more than that. **Notice the outward direction of the arrows.** The church has had to move from a *maintenance* to a *mission* mode. The emerging church is missional; it has an outward looking mind-set. It reorders its way of thinking by cultivating friendships and networks beyond the institution. **Christ is represented** in the visual above by the cross. (observe where Christ now stands) Instead of Christian people relating to Christian people, the church now exists for those who don't belong to it. Christ is shown to be present in the secular community where people and their needs are. Alan Kreider says, "*Our study of conversion across five centuries has show us that for several centuries the church*

grew because it was addressing people's needs and liberating them from the compulsions that were disfiguring their society."

In the future Congregations will rely on pastoral leadership which comes from within their own ranks rather than ordained, stipended ministers stretched over several congregations. Instead of the ordained minister being regarded as a superior Christian belonging to a clergy-class, lay people will participate and use their ministry gifts. Instead of the church being governed by a centralised, controlling bureaucracy, the status of each congregation becomes the primary expression of the gospel. Each congregation discovers the power of God's creative Spirit and becomes a primary expression of the gospel. Each congregation becomes a presence embodying the compassion and justice of God.

The arrows represent flexible, grass-roots networking and co-operation between congregations. The fragmented, diverse context of mission means that denominational headquarters can no longer set directions for congregations by sponsoring uniform, pre-packaged programmes. Specialised para-church groups/agencies work beyond denominational oversight.

In the past we have understood the commission of Jesus to his disciples geographically. The church has spread itself across the country but today the frontier is all around us in our diverse community. Today growing the church should be understood sociologically --- not just in new housing areas. Respecting diversity, mission and ministering to people takes place in sub-cultures and groups that exist in contemporary Australian communities. Street Pastors, Chaplains to Sports groups, Police force, car clubs etc

Congregations will readily network with para-church agencies for resources and support with their mission. Scripture Union, Bible Society, World Vision, Street Pastors, Church plants. Jesus said, *"He who is not with me is against me."* The agencies are independent and diverse but note, united in Christ **they all travel in the same direction towards Christ.** Beyond offering a social service and the ministry of deed, the church will be more intentional and articulate in offering Christ to the marginalised.

Rev E. A. (Ted) Curnow. October 2016.

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