

Our Changing World

Lord willing, I hope to celebrate my 65th birthday this year. I have now more years to remember than to look forward to on this earth. I was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in a time when European powers prepared for war. Many believed that it couldn't happen. But nevertheless, it came in September 1939. My first recollection of my father was his first army furlough. The war years in Nazi occupied Holland were traumatic for our family. On May 5, 1945, we were liberated. But my brother, sister, and I, who had been evacuated to the northern province of Friesland, were not able to return to Amsterdam until June. And we had not even gone beyond August when we heard that an atomic bomb had been dropped in Japan. And the whole world began to shake and it has been quaking ever since! The promised world peace never came. The list of post World War II wars seems endless.

When I tell my family about my youth in Holland, they find my lifestyle nearly incomprehensible. I learned to write on a slate. We had no telephone. Mail came promptly, twice daily. We had no car, which meant traveling either on foot or by streetcar. I got my first bike in my teens. We had only one radio in our apartment, controlled by my parents and usually tuned to a Christian broadcast. Television was in its infant stage. The only set I ever saw in the early fifties was in a store window. Every week we went to the library for stacks of books as we were all avid readers. Church, Christian school, and family ties were our constants. Hence, our emigration to Canada was a difficult experience.

When we boarded the ship, *Zuiderkruis*, in 1954, we thought that we would never see our relatives and homeland again. Our world is vastly different now. We have been back to Holland numerous times. I even had the opportunity to study at the Free University. When my Canadian born wife and I went to Holland together for the first time in 1970, I had a great time showing the sights of my "old country" and introducing her to my relatives.

A leap into the future

The dramatic changes I have witnessed since my youth mark the mood of our times. Change is something ever present with us, but it is more evident today than ever before. For more than 200 years the Western world has been caught up in a spirit of restlessness, a longing for new things, thrills, and change. The break between rapid change and radical change occurred around 1950. The movement is so swift and so powerful, and the prospect of acceleration so great that an imaginative leap into the future cannot find a place to rest. It moves at such a dizzy speed that it is hard to keep up with all the new developments. Politicians rely on "sound-bites." Newspapers replace sentences with eye-catching messages called "headlines." Commercial advertising bypasses the mind and goes straight to the emotions and the pocketbook.

The Loss of the Eternal

We have become so driven by the pace of change that we have lost sight of the eternal. There is relatively no time for contemplation. Churches In Western Europe have lost their

influence. The so-called "Quiet Revolution" in Quebec illustrates the loss of the eternal in Canada. For generations Quebec appeared to be a solidly monolithic society. The Roman Catholic Church was firmly entrenched in Quebec's culture. But behind the scene a "quiet revolution" was taken shape, especially among the intellectual elite, who abandoned the faith of their fathers and opted for a secular nationalism. The revolution left a dispirited, weak, and shattered Roman Catholic community in its wake.

Secularism made its impact felt in English speaking Canada as well. When I came to Canada, the mainline churches were still influential, growing, and building new churches. At the beginning of this new century they have lost their voice, their memberships are rapidly declining, and churches are closing. For those who left, the church is simply irrelevant. Yet they still use it when it suits their purpose to do so. They may never get near a church on Sunday but want to be married in church, have their children "done," and a religious service at a funeral. Evangelical Christians have not only lost their voice, their faith convictions are ridiculed.

In the 1950s when John Diefenbaker, a devout Baptist, campaigned for the Conservative Party no one criticized his church attendance and beliefs. Today, Canadian society has disregards organized religion. It has become a nation that attempts to form itself without God. Consequently, it is rootless and restless. For many of our political and ecclesiastical leaders the situation is as the American Franklin Delano Roosevelt described it in his first inaugural address: "We don't know where we are going, but we are on the way."

A Post-Christian Culture

Until recently Western culture still had values with their roots in the Christian faith, while acknowledging various aspects of that culture flagrantly contradict the Gospel. Nevertheless, Western culture was strongly conditioned by the Christian faith and humanism. Europe and Canada are both post-Christian. If you would stand on a street corner in the 1950s and asked passersby some basic questions about the Bible, they would know the answers. Today, you would most likely get blank stares. Since church and Sunday school attendance has plummeted and public schools no longer allow any Bible lessons, no wonder so many Canadians have only a superficial or no knowledge at all of the Christian faith. Yet many of these same people have a long list of objections to the church.

But when the public square has no longer room for God, other gods have found a voice and receptive ears.

New age beliefs have in part filled the void, promoted by the media. Many New-Agers profess admiration for the religious teachings of Hindu gurus but are less enthusiastic about the rigorous programs of abstinence and chastity linked with such teachings. Sophisticated neo-paganism in the forms of witch-craft and satanism are widely practiced. It is said that there are 10 million witches in the United States alone. The new Idols take on many forms.

We are told that we now live in a pluralistic-multicultural society. This new intolerant ideology treats anyone, who claims that Jesus Christ is the only way to God the Father, as

the intellectual equivalent of a fascist. Evangelicals are accused of arrogance and imperialism. Postmodernism, another new catch-all phrase, is committed to pluralism and relativism. It proposes that all claims to truth are equally valid or equally meaningless, depending on your view. There is no universal objective vantage point that allows anyone to decide what is right and what is wrong. But the supreme god that modern man worships is man himself. He has made an image of himself, and has bowed before it. Yet, the 20th century has taught the truth about man. Look at the brutal Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, remember Dachau and Buchenwald, the Soviet Union's Gulag, and the concentration camps in China today.

Morality

In my youth in Europe as well as in my first decade in North America, there was still a publicly shared moral standard. That is not glamorizing the past. But as a student of history I know that no culture can survive in the absence of shared beliefs and values. Carl F. Henry observed, "when a rebellious society caricatures and vilifies its godly minority and ridicules fixed values, it invites divine judgment." Therefore, as a Christian and a grandfather I am deeply concerned about the godless trends in our society. When North America became post-Christian in the late 1960s the moral consensus disappeared. There is no longer a common purpose, or a common faith, only bewilderment. In other words, we have now a collective moral problem. In my youth sexual images and constant talk about sex did not bombard us. Homosexuals were still in the closet, divorce was rare, and single parents were few. The 1960s introduced us to "the sexual revolution."

The change in sexual mores is breathtaking in scope. It is difficult to find a movie or TV program that does not embrace the view of permissive sex. In public schools sex education features birth-control devices, but rarely allows presentations supporting abstinence until marriage.

Our society has reached the point that people who have chosen to remain chaste are openly ridiculed on television talk shows. Nothing shocks us anymore. We have lost our sense of shame. As Leon Wurmser points out, "the culture of shamelessness is also the culture of irreverence, of debunking and devaluing ideals." Deviant behaviour yesterday is normal today. Homosexual relationships, divorce and illegitimacy, once seen as the breakdown of the family, are now viewed as "alternative life styles," as natural and every bit as normal as being heterosexual. Even in some Christian churches homosexual behaviour is no longer questioned. Abortion has become a social preference instead of an issue of life and death, a means to get rid of the consequences of sexual activity.

Church

Church life today is vastly different from when I started the ministry. Many of the familiar landmarks of the ecclesiastical landscape have either changed or disappeared. In the early sixties the minister was still the "dominee" and not pastor John. I wore a Genevan gown. In my first congregation I typed the bulletin and used a paintbrush to ink an ancient Gestetner stenciling machine, which had to be hand-cranked. I had no worship committee to contend with. In 1950s the Bible was the King James Version, the Thees and Thous in prayer, one standard hymnal, and a uniform order of worship were the norm. How different

today! We have now come very close to "do it yourself" liturgies. I have been in churches where the new hymnal remained unopened and an overhead screen was used. Contemporary repetitive praise songs are the normal fare. And why new tunes for familiar hymns or the use of inclusive language? When I ministered in nursing homes, the residents appreciated singing their old favourite hymns, which they had learned in their youth. Worship teams now lead the congregation with piano, drums, and guitar at very high decibels.

Our "therapeutic culture" has influenced the thinking of many, including the church. Innumerable psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors, aided by theologians, claim answers to spiritual needs. Nearly every social problem seems to be traced to a failure of self-esteem. What every happened to sin? Michael Nichols says, "Pastors...speak out about healthy self-esteem... You wouldn't have heard this twenty years ago." But the focus of Scripture is on the cross and self-denying - sacrificial love.

Ever since the Wurmbands, founders of the Voice of Martyrs, visited our home and church in Wellandport, the persecuted saints have been in our prayers. Millions of Christians are discriminated against, sold into slavery, tortured, and even killed for their faith. Although this worldwide tragedy has been well documented by the Voice of the Martyrs, Dr. Paul Marshall and others, the suffering continues while relatively few Christians speak on behalf of their fellow believers.

In the mid-20th century church members were loyal to their denomination. Many drove long distances to attend the church in which they had their spiritual roots. But today's hedonistic consumerism has also impacted church life. In the 1950s, people chose churches on the basis of denomination. Today they choose churches on the basis of pastoral popularity, good programs for their kids, and an attractive building. Many church leaders travel Chicago, Willow Creek Community Church, to sit at the feet of Rev. Bill Hybel's to learn how to grow a mega church. And in the closing quarter of the twentieth century, the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement, says researcher David B. Barrett, came in a amazing variety of 38 categories, 11,000 Pentecostal denominations and 3,000 independent Charismatic denominations spread across 7,000 languages. This movement also made its influence felt in the Reformed churches.

I also witnessed a profound shift in global Christianity. In historically "Christian" nations the Church is in a minority position. The majority of Christians are in developing nations. They are more diverse ethnically and culturally, increasingly urban, and significantly more poor, oppressed, and suffering.

Academic theologians claim the sole expertise to explain the Bible. They confront the ordinary believers with new theologies. The late 1960s witnessed the growing influence of theologies of liberation, of secularization, and of hope. Some say that God is a she or an it; others claim that God does not know the future or that God is our partner. Many believers don't dare to confess Word of God as the inerrant lest they conflict with modern theologians. They are now subject to a new jargon and shibboleths. The women in office debates took their toll. Some left for other denominations; others founded a new Reformed denomination. The increasing feminization of North American churches spurred the

founding and phenomenal growth of the Promise Keepers Movement, providing men Christian fellowship and encouragement.

Social changes did not bypass the church. In Los Angeles, home to more than 100 languages, a high school offers classes in thirty-six different languages. When I lived in Toronto in the late 1950s, it was still predominantly white Anglo-Saxon with "a little Italy" and a "China town." Today it is 70% ethnic. It has become one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. The rampant individualism, the loss of community, urbanization, the fragmentation of society, the alarming rate of family breakdown and its tragic effect on children present unprecedented challenges to the church's ministry.

The public versus Christian school debate also comprised my ministry. I firmly believe that Christians need to instruct their children within the framework of a Christian worldview, the foundation upon which all other disciplines should rest. My wife and I are grateful for the opportunity to send our children to Christian schools. And we have now grandchildren attend.

In recent years I have seen a slow change in attitude among evangelicals toward Christian schools. For years the public school was seen as Protestant. And indeed, its roots were in the Protestant educational tradition. Today parents cannot assume that the education they received in the public school system in the 1950s or the 1960s is still being delivered. Many Christian parents see in public schools a crisis of authority, content and values. They are concerned about programs that both challenge and ridicule their beliefs. Consequently, more and more Christian parents are talking about educational options: home schooling, Christian schools, charter schools, school vouchers, or creation taught alongside evolution in public schools. One of the finest developments in Christian education in Ontario was the founding of Redeemer University/College, where I had the privilege of teaching a course in World Religions for one semester.

Technology and the Media

When the electronic media began to invade private homes in the 1950s with their powerful commercial interests, a revolution occurred. Because of the media, modern families are exposed to far more violence than previous generations. Movies shown on TV today would not be shown in theatres ten or twenty years ago. MTV relentlessly shows visual images of rock songs that depict drug abuse, rebellion, and the occult. Television competes with the local church with its "electronic church," its "prime time preachers," and "televangelism." Youth ministries now must take into account the role of the media in outreach.

The fantastic development and acceleration of information technology in the past few years has dramatically changed communications. If anyone would have told me ten years ago that I would be using a computer for writing articles and correspond via e-mail with people all over the world, I would have laughed in disbelief.

For the last decade or more, December 31, 2000, was the date by which a good many Christians hoped to see the completion of world evangelization. The goal was not reached. But contemporary means of radio, cassette, TV, progress in Bible translations,

computer, the Internet, and satellites make the vision of a feasible and realistic goal. A recent mission phenomenon is the avalanche of short-term missionaries. Each year tens of thousands of men and women from North America participate in short-term mission trips sponsored by local churches, a faith mission, or their denomination mission board. Although this type of ministry attracts unprecedented interest and consumes more and more of the church's resources, a recent issue of the *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* asked whether short-term mission trips are worth the money, the effort, and the time.

Great, Unchanging God

Yes, I have seen many changes since my youth. But I thank God that in the midst of the storms life God and His Word do not change like shifting shadows (James 1 : 17). Our Lord is still King. There is still no other way to God the Father, except through Jesus Christ His Son, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I am saved by His blood and will be kept by Him until the day I see Him face to face.

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