

The challenges to the Gospel in a secular world

Osmond Mulligan reports on the Headway autumn lecture.



Dr Paul Coulter.

The annual autumn lecture of Headway took place in Edenderry Methodist church where Dr Paul Coulter, lecturer in Practical Theology and Missiology at Belfast Bible College, spoke of 'The Challenges to the Gospel in a secular world'.

Dr Coulter used well-chosen overhead bullet points and memorable diagrams and drawings to maintain the attention of his audience for almost one hour. He then went on to answer questions for nearly 40 minutes, so that everyone had an opportunity to tease out the application of what he had said.

Essentially, Dr Coulter acknowledged that the idea of 'secular' as distinct from the 'spiritual' originated in the Church of the Middle Ages, but he said that Jesus did not make any separation. God is sovereign over every area of existence.

OUR CHANGING WORLD

Dr Coulter started with an analysis of our changing world. We have moved from the Premodern, that accepted God as all important, believing he made the world and sustained it, to the Modern, that began with the Enlightenment, when science put the sun at the centre of the world, to (more recently) the Postmodern, that places humans at the centre of their universe and makes religion/God peripheral.

Today, we determine our own destiny. Personal stories/experiences occupy today's media rather than acceptance of traditional dogma. Currently the Church (in Europe and North America) has moved from mainstream to marginal, from dominance to diversity and from familiar to foreign. Quoting from a book by Stuart Murray, Dr Coulter told the story of a modern teenager who asked why the babe of Bethlehem was given a swear word for his name, and why a church building being used for a creative arts course during the week was able to assemble so many people on a Sunday morning!

OUR UNCHANGING MESSAGE

The second consideration was our unchanging message. Dr Coulter quoted

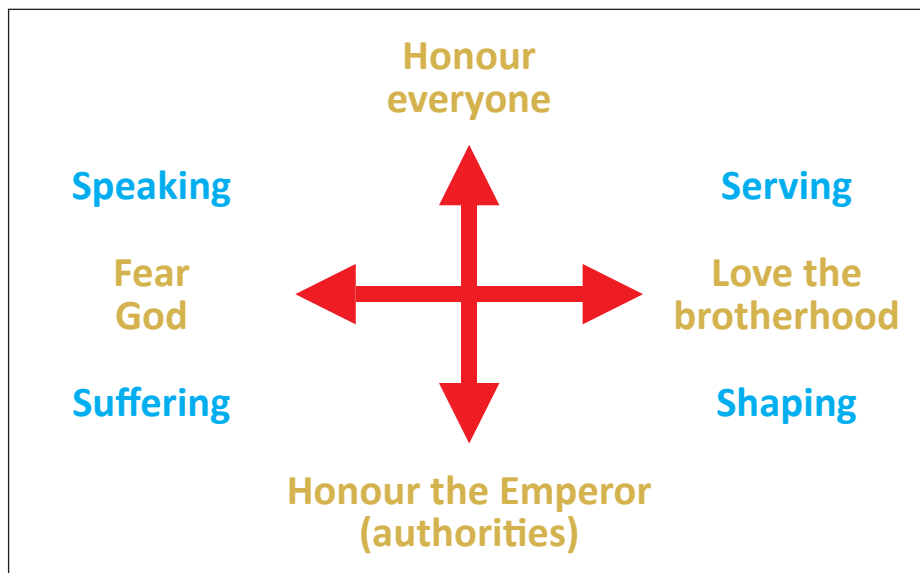


Figure 1.

a Roman proconsul writing in 9BC when the word 'gospel' first gained widespread acceptance to refer to the arrival of a new ruler (Caesar) and a new world order.

This was later taken up by the four Gospel writers to refer to Jesus and the Kingdom of heaven. I Corinthians 15: 1-8 summarised this and later became the basis of the Christian creed. This gospel speaks of salvation on the basis of faith in Jesus, who was a real person in history who promised forgiveness of sin through sacrifice, rooted in the revelation of the Old Testament and described by the apostles in the New Testament.

To give credibility to our message we have to include reference to the Old as well as the New Testament, for the story of God's dealing with his chosen people, beginning in Genesis, provides a track record that gives weight to the story of Jesus, the final link in the story of God's saving activity in the world that God made. While many will no longer accept the authority of 'the Bible says', we believers can affirm its credibility by our own experience and the testimony of many in recorded history.

OUR FAITHFUL RESPOSE

Finally, we considered our faithful response. This was based on I Peter 2: 17 which says followers of Christ are to 'honour everyone, love the brotherhood, fear God and honour the emperor'.

Three verbs embody our task – fear, love and honour. We are to fear God, love our neighbour and honour everyone, including civic authorities. Great emphasis was placed on the verb to honour rather than tolerate or respect. By honouring someone we place value on them, whatever they believe or do, because they are created and loved by God, even when we cannot tolerate what they do or respect their behaviour.

This has repercussions in our service of love in the Church and community, where we must speak of Jesus as the motivation for our social involvement, seeking to shape the world where we live to reflect the Kingdom rule of God, and where we must be willing to suffer when fear of God conflicts with the demands of Governments. (We noted that this could mean that we have to forfeit receiving grants or employing staff that would compromise Godly standards in our social outreach.) The challenges were summarised in a helpful diagram (see Figure 1).

In a long discussion afterwards we noted the tendency for some postmodern Christians to put personal preferences before the interests of the wider Church, which is not always peopled by those of like mind. The local church needs to reflect the varied priorities and gifts available to the world in the harmonious working together of all who are 'one in Christ Jesus'.