

THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

For some time now the world has been inundated by TV articles and documentaries, films and media reports about environmental problems, perceived or real. We are told about climate change, carbon emissions, global warming, melting icecaps, rising sea levels, drought and changing rainfall patterns, which could drastically affect the food production of our planet and the displacement of large populations.

The United Nations and governments around the world have commissioned studies with the object of establishing, if possible, the accuracy of predictions, and their long-range effects, if any.

Although there are conflicting opinions by "the experts," we can accept that the world does have a problem, and a problem that has to be tackled on a global basis. We can also accept that once the problems are correctly identified some solutions will be found.

On the purely material side we need to tackle the mentality of the "throw-away" society, for we have been guilty of wasting the God-given natural resources of the earth. Planned obsolescence has been a feature of our society and economy for many decades.

There is a connection between the misuse of our God-given resources and evolution. We have been indoctrinated for over a hundred years into believing that our planet has been here for millions, if not billions of years, and will continue for millions more. For the non-Christian the logical outcome of this thinking is, "I'm doing all right now, why should I be worried about posterity?"

The answers, if any, to the current problems will come from a completely different mode of thinking. The Christian approach is very different, for God has commanded us to rule over the rest of creation, and to use what He has placed in the world for the benefit of all. We should act responsibly as caretakers of God's created world, avoiding greedy exploitation of resources for the benefit of a few, avoiding pollution of air, land and water, conserving rather than wasting energy, and in general, taking care of all of God's creation.

If these principles are followed there is a chance that the problems we face will be surmounted.

But what if the problems are beyond the capacity of man to solve, and some or all of the predictions of doom envelop our world? Jesus spoke of the scenario that mankind could face when He said, "*Peoples hearts will fail them as they fearfully wait for the things that are coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken,*" Luke 21:26. Jesus said this at the time He told the disciples of the destruction of the Temple, a prediction which came horribly true some 35 years later.

Eventually, at some time of which we do not know, this world will be destroyed and replaced by a new heaven and earth, in which righteousness dwells. Our ultimate concern is not to worry about any disaster that may or may not occur, but to cling to the salvation from this evil world that Jesus' redemption has obtained for us, and prepare for the blessed life to come.

So this is not a sad time for Christians when contemplating the state of the environment. The Christian life is essentially optimistic and cheerful, one of hope and serene confidence. After telling His disciples that the "*powers of the heavens will be shaken,*" Jesus went on to say, "*When you see these things begin to happen, stand erect, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is coming near.*"

PUTTING 'CHRIST' BACK INTO CHRISTMAS

Believe it or not, but this year has nearly come to an end, and soon we will be not only remembering but also celebrating the angels' joyful announcement of a Heavenly King. So how do we celebrate His majesty?

The world's preparation for Christmas usually shuts Him out. Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, simply doesn't fit today's politically correct views. That's why signs and symbols of the celebration bearing His name have been censored from many schools and public places all over Australia.

Never mind that He created the universe and has each future day written in His book. Or that He alone can fulfil our longing for genuine peace and lasting joy. His guidelines offend the world. His holiness violates people's comfort zone, so they hide from Him (like Adam and Eve), deny His existence, or fill their days with shallow distractions and alternatives.

Meanwhile, many are too busy planning end of year Christmas parties, rather than seeking His will.

The King whose birth we celebrate may be sad, but He's not surprised. Long ago, He stood in Jerusalem watching a world too blinded by human wants and ambitions to see the Saviour in their midst. "*If you had known,*" He said with unspeakable sorrow, "*the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes,*" Luke 19:42.

Today, almost 2000 years later, religious leaders still lead the anti-Christ crusade. Many have accepted the new global consensus on spirituality: all religions are equally good. Christianity is too narrow to be tolerated in this new millennium. The envisioned "Culture of Peace" won't make room for God's "divisive" Biblical values. Faith in His unchanging truths clashes with the global standard for mental health. And at the forefront of this cultural transformation stand countless compromising churches that teach a cross-less and Christ-less distortion of Christianity.

No wonder many so-called theologians are embarrassed when at times people in the public spotlight, such as Christian politicians and other prominent people, mention the name Jesus in public. We have seen that happen in times past. Whenever someone mentions his faith in Jesus Christ, there is almost a feeling of disbelief, especially by the media. To offend “Christian” leaders, evasion and lies would have been more tolerable than Biblical truth and light. But then, such was the religious climate that glorious night when our King came to earth and angelic jubilation pierced the stillness of the skies. For Jesus was born into a culture ruled by the same spiritual mastermind that prods the masses today. The apostle John said it well: *“The whole world lies under the sway of the evil one,”* 1 John 5:19.

That’s why the religious leaders during Jesus time on earth had little tolerance for His call to purity and separation. *“Come unto Me…”* meant leaving the acceptable ways of the world, a dangerous notion that threatened the establishment. Unless the long-awaited Messiah would conform to contemporary teachings, He was not welcome in their midst. John summarised the tragedy as well as the triumph: *“He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God,”* John 1:10-13.

Human nature doesn’t change with time, nor does the spiritual battle that still rages against Jesus Christ, His Word, and His followers. Churches still conform to the culture, and statistics tell us they do so quite consistently.

For the most part, the world will tolerate stars, angels, Christmas trees, or a sweet little baby sleeping in a manger. But there’s still “no room at the inn” for a King who invites us to walk His lowly path. If we heed His invitation, then we must also share His suffering and bear with Him “the offence of the cross” – the world’s hostility toward the separated and crucified life Christ grants to those who love Him.

But the main problem with Christmas is not the way we trivialise angels and shepherds, nor is it the season of the year. I don’t think that Jesus would care whether we celebrated His birth in December or another month. Nor is it the religious alternatives to Christmas. While other programs in public schools and homes may have replaced the real meaning of Christmas, they alone wouldn’t weaken the Church. Just look at China. Where true believers face the greatest challenges to their faith and families, they demonstrate a growth in faith and perseverance (as well as in numbers) that puts us to shame. Nor is it the pagan roots of most popular Christmas customs.

Our root problem has to do with our view of God and our relationship to Jesus. We have been taught to think of the King of the universe more like a super-Santa than a

jealous God who holds us accountable to His Word.

He grieves when we, His people, turn worship into self-indulgence — or pretend to please Him while we serve ourselves. His lowly birth in Bethlehem points to the hardships our Saviour was willing to bear for our sake. Without diminishing His glorious stature as eternal King, His humility prompts us to give Him our lives, surrender to His will, endure persecution, and fix our hope on eternity.

Peter didn’t understand such single-minded love. So when Jesus described His coming death, Peter reassured Him, *“Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!”* He meant well, but he was wrong. Jesus had to correct him – for our sake as much as for Peter. Turning to His friend and follower, he said something that would hardly fit today’s politically correct consensus process: *“Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men. . . .If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”* (Matthew 16:22-24).

Peter had set His mind on “the things of men.” How can we set our minds on “the things of God” this Christmas?

Two millennia ago, God touched the hearts of certain men who would have treasured the truths we have available today. With joy, they received the little information He gave, then set out on a long, risky pilgrimage to worship the newborn King: *“Behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him’”* (Matthew 2:1-2).

These pilgrims were willing to risk their own lives to make the long, dangerous journey, and the gifts they brought were chosen with care. They gave Him their very best – offerings worthy of the King of heaven and earth. God must have been pleased. He didn’t need their gifts but He saw their loving hearts.

Other gifts have pleased Him less. When Ananias and Sapphira pretended to give their all but secretly withheld some of their wealth, they were struck dead — a frightening consequence for what seemed to be good intentions. But God chose to show us something about Himself. He longs for whole-hearted devotion, not a pretentious show of piety.

Then as now, a lukewarm show of obedience to Biblical guidelines is hypocrisy – a pretence of loyalty to the Christ whose name we bear. But the opposite, the genuine devotion God seeks from His followers, is what is needed today. The gift God desires from us is our own lives fully dedicated to Him. Only then can He fully use us to fulfil His purpose here on earth. This means a deep lifelong commitment to feed on His Word, follow His way, and demonstrate His life. It is summarised in an old command, taught through Moses and emphasised by Jesus: *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words, which I command you today, shall be in*

your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit... walk... lie down, and... rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:5-7).

That means that all we think, feed our minds, share in our families, and show the world, will be to and from our King. His life is our message – and our lives are His message. It’s a big calling, but when we consecrate ourselves to Him and rest in His arms, He will accomplish it.

God’s path for His own beloved Son led through a lowly stable. His only worshippers were his parents and the poor shepherds who, in the secluded stillness of the night, could hear the angels sing. So the question to ask ourselves today is: When the Lord comes to us, how are we to receive Him this Christmas?

REFORMATION DAY AT TINGOORA

On Sunday 29 October 145 members of the Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church descended upon Tingoora to celebrate, with the people of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Hivesville, the 489th Anniversary of the posting of the Ninety Five Theses by Dr. Martin Luther on the church door at Wittenberg, signalling the beginning of the Reformation. Tingoora is a little town nestled in the gentle hills of the South Burnett Region, just 25 kilometres north of Kingaroy.

It was a wonderful day, beginning mid-morning with Divine Service and celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The focus of the Service was on the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and the zeal and spirit of the Reformation to go and make Christ known. The congregation heard how the churches of the Reformation were keen to put the Bible into languages of the people, and how they eagerly took on the work to make Christ known. They heard how the Lutheran fathers who came to Australia were also very active in getting the message of grace and salvation to others. Finally they were challenged to re-ignite our first love, and let the love that we have received from Christ shine forth in our zeal and spirit to share our knowledge of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour with others.

After Divine Service the Chairman of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Hivesville, Alan Dionysius, gave a short geographical description of his congregation. Few people realised that St. Mark’s has members dotted over a very wide part of the continent, in places as far away as Townsville, Darwin, Kalgoorlie, and Melbourne, as well as a number of places a little closer to home such as Bundaberg, Springsure, Rolleston, and Goondiwindi. Still fewer realised that the home congregation itself comprises people living within a 50 kilometre radius of its two church properties at Hivesville and Tingoora. St. Mark’s Lutheran Church is certainly a widespread congregation, and probably unique on the Christian scene in Australia.

The afternoon began with a community luncheon in the Tingoora hall, where God’s people could enjoy the company of fellow believers, with old friends catching up and also the making of new friends. This was

an opportunity for people to build each other up as they discussed the Word of God and His working in their lives.

The highlight of the afternoon was the presentation by guest speaker, Mr Tom Varney, who attracted people from outside the congregation who responded to the invitation sent out into the community by St. Mark’s to come and hear Tom speak. No one would regret the response.

Tom spoke of his past life and bondage to alcohol, drugs, crime and the mental institutions. He related the time when, while in J Ward maximum security prison for the criminally insane, at Ararat in Victoria, a fellow inmate with a Gideon Bible tucked under his arm heard his cries of misery and frustration and declared to him, “God is your only hope.”

These words were the beginning of his search to know God. He began to read God’s Word, and little by little the Lord began to open his eyes. God led him to a work place where he found it necessary to ask the man working beside him to borrow a pick. While handing him the tool this man said to him, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” Through this man God soon had Tom sitting at the feet of a Bible teacher, who expanded the Scriptures to him.

Tom did not become a Christian overnight, but in His own time. Through these meetings with His servants, God slowly rescued Tom from a life of destruction and gave him a life of salvation from sin through grace.

The challenge for each one of us who listened to Tom and was moved by his story was what do we do when faced with someone like Tom? Would we have handed over to him the pick with the question, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” or would we have said nothing? God used His servants to save Tom, and He would use us also to save others. You may never know what impact the words you say about Jesus Christ may have on other people, you may never know how God is using you, but it is a sure privilege and pure joy to be used by the Lord in His service with the zeal and spirit of the Reformation to go and make Christ known.

AUGSBURG

If a film-maker made an accurate film about Augsburg in 1530 it would be a spectacular with all the pomp, grandeur, and power of a ruling Emperor versus the courage and conviction of the leaders of the Reformation.

The Reformation is rightly celebrated on the anniversary of Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517, an important day in history. However it could be argued that Augsburg was equally important, not in starting the Reformation, but the base from which the Christian Church could consolidate its reforms.

The story unfolds with the concerns of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V over the doctrinal divisions, which in turn could lead to a weakened military front to

combat the might of the Turkish Army pushing its way towards Vienna. The Dukes and Princes of the Empire were summoned to attend an Imperial Meeting at Augsburg. Charles' tactics were a combination of a soft approach, but if necessary force and obedience with threats.

High drama was evident immediately. A huge assembly of people gathered for the arrival of Charles, where the Pope's Ambassador would give a special blessing from the Pope to the kneeling crowd. Elector John, Luther's faithful protector and his fellow princes refused to kneel.

Charles and those with him proceeded into the city cathedral, where a special Mass was held. The crowd noticed that again Elector John and Landgrave Philip refused to kneel but remained standing with their heads covered during the blessing.

Later that evening, Charles and his brother Ferdinand, the King of Austria, met privately with the Lutheran princes. They ordered him to forbid any Lutheran preaching in Augsburg during the meeting. They commanded him to attend the Corpus Christi festival the next day with the Emperor. George, Margrave of Brandenburg, spoke boldly for the Lutherans. He refused to concede to Charles any demands, saying, "Before I let anyone take from me the Word of God and ask me to deny my God, I will kneel and let them strike off my head." The Emperor, clearly shaken by Georg's boldness, sputtered in broken German, "Not cut off head dear Prince. Not cut off head."

Luther was a declared criminal and heretic, sentenced to death in 1521, and could not attend as the Evangelical Princes had no control over Augsburg, and Luther's safety could not be guaranteed.

And so, at three o'clock on Saturday, June 25, 1530, came the defining and dramatic moment, thirteen years after Wittenberg. Dr. Christian Beyer stood up, walked towards the Emperor of The Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, and began reading the Augsburg Confession in a loud and distinct voice. Through the open windows a hushed crowd in the courtyard outside hung on his every word, as did some 200 of the dignitaries in the hall. The German princes stood up to indicate their support for the confession.

When Dr Beyer finished reading Dr Brueck took the copy and handed it to the Emperor saying, "Most gracious Emperor, this is a confession that will even prevail against the gates of hell, with the grace and help of God."

Thus was born the church of the Augsburg Confession as a unique confession of the truth of God's Holy Word, distinct from Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and Reformed, Anabaptists and radicals on the other hand, on June 25 1530. The presentation of the Augsburg Confession was a decisive moment in history with effects that spread far and wide across the world.

Today we can marvel at the courage of the men who stood firm, and ask where we find such men today.

The Reformers literally put their lives on the line. Today we have too many leaders whose corporate little empires and public standing are more important than proclaiming truths that are unpopular with the apostate world.

BRITISH AIRWAYS CRASH LANDS ON CHRISTIANS

Christians in Great Britain are wondering how Christianity can survive. Devout Christian Nadia Ewedia, a check-in worker at Heathrow, was ordered to remove her Christian Cross, which she wore constantly. Refusal caused her to be stood down.

In a vigorous protest, the Rev. Tony Kelso of Matchborough, West Midlands, said on BBC Radio, "It is ludicrous that British Airways has the Union Flag on their tail fins which is made up of the sacred crosses of the United Kingdom, and yet it practises this discrimination against Christians."

Members of the House of Commons protested, including Jack Straw, the Leader of the House. It is not likely that protests will change the airline's policy.

Nadia Ewedia appealed her standing down but this was dismissed. She has been unpaid since standing down, but told she can return to work and wear her crucifix providing it was hidden from view.

British Airways' policy is obviously designed not to offend Muslims and other non Christian creeds, and is in strong contrast to the weak policies of police departments in both Great Britain and in some Australian States, where Muslim policewomen are permitted to wear their headgear after demands based on religious grounds.

We appreciate receiving Letters to the Editor. If you would like to comment on anything, please let us know.

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THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE WISH TO EXTEND CHRISTMAS GREETINGS TO ALL OUR READERS AND FAMILIES WITH THE HOPE THAT YOU ALL HAVE A HOLY, HAPPY AND SAFE CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS.