

*discussion article*

## THE PLACE OF CHRISTIANITY IN OUR TIMES

*by Bernard Zylstra\**

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[These reflections were first presented as the basis for a discussion with a large number of professional and business men in the Hart House at the University of Toronto in March, 1970. We place it in the Bulletin with the expectation that it will elicit meaningful discussion also in many places elsewhere. Editor]

### **The revelational setting**

1. Man is God's man (I Tim. 6:11): made in His image; a loving servant of his Maker, along with his fellow-man; assigned to do the world's work (the mandate of creation); at peace on earth (paradise). "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).
2. While God is the sovereign Creator, man is the maker of history. For history is the stage on which man is to execute his divine assignment: molding the normative potentials of the creation-order into human culture. Man's path in time is, as it were, the cultivation of the garden into a city: the 'City of God', with its families, its states, its schooling, its art, its justice, its economy, its technology, its beauty, its — everything. That 'Day of God' was intended to be a scene of holiness, of righteousness, of goodness, of love, of harmony, of peace: shalom.
3. Sin makes all of this impossible. In sin, man declares that he no longer needs the Lord, that he can go it alone, that his humanity is not to be found in loving service but in being the master of his existence. Sin makes man a stranger to God ('Adam, where are you'); to himself ('upon your belly you shall go'); to his fellow-man (I will put enmity); and it makes him a stranger in this world (thorns and thistles). It is no longer 'good' in God's creation. Shalom will not come. Paradise is Lost. The City of God will not be built.
4. The Lord is not only a Creator, but also a Re-creator, a Redeemer. He took it upon Himself to begin building the 'City' of peace, with those men and women as his co-workers who repented from their evil ways. Mankind does not respond; instead, builds the City of Man (Gen. 11) : we see the rise of ancient civilizations — Sumeria, Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, China, Ancient India, Greece and Rome — and their death, their decline, because man did not desire to live by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God. That which ancient man did discover in a partial response to the mandate of creation was often immediately idolized (Rom. 1:22, 23), bringing upon himself the curse of decay (Rom. 1:24, 25).

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5. So the Lord starts again: He calls Abraham out of the City of Man and makes him a sojourner in Canaan: that little spot where thousand years He will localize and particularize His original global inerts. He blesses Abraham, so that — at a later stage of history — all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:3). And God spells out to the sons of Abraham, by means of Moses, what the rules for the good life are. “Hear all that the Lord our God will say; and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you; and we will hear and do it. - - - Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might - - - Be careful to do these commandments, that it may go well with you” (Deut. 5:27; 6:4, 5, 3). In response to this re-publication of the Lord’s intents, man is in principle no longer a stranger to his Maker, to himself, to his fellows, era, to his earthly . In the fear of the Lord is the beginning— at least that — of wisdom of knowledge.

With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
He has showed you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6: 6, 8)

6. After a thousand years of preparation, the Son of Man, born of the virgin Mary, proclaims to men: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17). His death on the cross in principle breaks the hold of the Evil One over the hearts — and lives — of men. On that Easter Morning, Christ becomes the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (I Cor. 15:20). And that Son of Man is thus the Christ, the Master of men, the Lord of history — which is now radically re-directed with respect to its ultimate destiny. The coming of the Kingdom can already be noticed. Behold, it is within you (Luke 17:21).

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you” (Luke 10:17f).

Christ’s brief ministry reveals to men the nature of His reign. He heals the brokenhearted ones, the alienated; he saves those who are lost. He has compassion on the hungry; he cures the leper, the lame, and the blind. He sets the rule for citizenship in His kingdom: ‘Follow me.’ And He demands unconditional response: “Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mt. 4:20). He explains the cost of discipleship: The Son of Man has nowhere to lay down His head. Let the dead bury the dead. Give everything you have to the poor. No one can serve two masters. Seek first my Kingdom. Without Me you can do nothing. I am the way, the truth, and the life. His is the only name whereby man can be saved, can find genuine humanity. He made all things; He re-made all things; in Him all things hang together; and now He desires to be preeminent in all things.

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7. To this, He makes His followers fishers of men. No longer in and Galilee, but everywhere. The original 'cultural' mandate of Genesis comes to us in Gospel form: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." And thus we find the New Humanity, no longer estranged, but living in peace: ". . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (Eph. 2:15f).

Anno domini: the era of the Lord

8. Paul caught the message, and proclaimed it, in the centers of the Mediterranean Roman world. While the greatest civilization which mankind had built outside of the faith was slowly dying because of internal spiritual bankruptcy, the christian religion — with its good news — became the 'seed' for a new era which will not die again until the Lord returns. In that new era we find the Cry of God battling the City of Man for men's allegiance, in an ever-widening circle — which today is global.

9. It took three hundred years before the christian faith was recognized in the Roman Empire as sufficiently vital to provide some basis for cultural continuity. That recognition brought about a danger from which we still suffer: membership in the 'empire' (later: nation) began to be looked upon as membership in arises Kingdom.

10. It took another seven hundred years before the barbarians of Europe were somewhat 'tamed by the gospel. The process was, of course, never complete; and the possibility of internal spiritual decay within the 'Christian West' was always dose at hand: demerits of Greek and German paganism were absorbed into the corpus Christianum.. A Luther became the ever more urgent need within the Church. And then there were the external attacks: the Huns, the Mongols, the Turks, the Vikings; and Islam, first in Spain (732: Battle of Tours); later in the East (1453: Constantinople); and even at the gates of Vienna (1532).

11. By the year 1500 three developments are crucial: a) the global discoveries; b) the rise of Renaissance Humanism; and c) the Reformation. These developments, and the response of Christ-followers to them, condition the spiritual climate of our day.

12. The Reformation brought with it a partial return to the spiritual force and beauty of the Gospel. It implied a shift of cultural power from southern to northern Europe. It stimulated the development of political freedom, of industrial development, of scientific advance. It gave us the art of Rembrandt and the music of Bach. But it also divided the 'body' of Christ. And the conflicting spiritual forces which had been kept at bay during the Middle Ages now appeared on the surface in the diverse Protestant denominations. The Reformation gave us a century of hope, but lost its dynamics in the seventeenth century with its rationalist theology, its individualistic view of man (thus providing a background for the competitive spirit of capitalism), and its moralistic, puritanic ethic. These demonic forces — strangers to the spirit of the Gospel — still condition contemporary (evangelical) Protestantism.

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### **The battle of our times**

13. Humanism provided an alternative spiritual direction, right in the center of Christendom. Humanism — in both its individualistic ‘western’ form as well as its later ‘eastern’ collectivist Marxist form — is a Christian heresy. That is, it took over the christian view of man and of the Kingdom but eliminated God from its world-view. And in terms of this new ‘religion’ it set out to take the spiritual and cultural leadership in the West With success. First in the universities, then in the political arena, the schools, in the industrial sector, in the arts, in the means of communications: in the entire setting of our daily existence.

14. The globalization of our geographic horizon since 1500 did not create a Pauline vision in the Christian West The struggle between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism sapped Christians’ strength: Christ-followers became each other’s enemies, and thus missed the opportunities to begin a world-wide mission program until three hundred years later, in the nineteenth century — when it was too late. The first mission undertaken by Protestants were often tied to the various national programs West India Companies. Later, when the deadness of a rationalist orthodoxy began to reign supreme in the major Protestant churches, the pietist movements of the eighteenth century took over the major burden of mission work. But already at this time the all-encompassing Kingdom of our Lord over the lives of men in their entirety had been reduced to the salvation of individual souls — at home and abroad. Mission work concerns the elimination of the control of the devil and demons over the lives of men and the life of a pagan culture. Since that was not sufficiently seen, the christian faith did not uproot the pagan direction of non-western nations in their total cultural expression. This absence of a Pauline missionary vision, accompanied by the fragmentation of the missionary enterprise because of the splitness of Protestantism at the home base, created a spiritual and cultural vacuum into which stepped the secular children of the christian idea: Renaissance Humanism and Marxist Humanism (Gandhi, Nehru, Sukarno, Mao-tse-tung, Nasser, Che Guevara, etc.).

15. The major spiritual force of our times displaying some dynamic is Marxism. This explains the intensity of the dialogue between Christians and Marxists, especially in western Europe. It also explains at least in part the new left movement on many North American campuses. For the bankruptcy of the ‘North American Way of Life’ itself is becoming more evident as the years pass by. Crime, pollution, corruption in the centers of politics, the distorted direction of the industrial system because of excessive stress on profits, the loss of meaning in the universities, the lack of focus in the public school system, the externalization of our values because of radio and television, a return to pre-christian dionysian paganism in the arts, tensions between management and labor, racial disharmonies, generation gaps, property-poverty gaps, drugs, man as a behavioral-sexual animal, world wars and explosive situations bringing us to the brink of total destruction: these phenomena are characteristic of a world we inherit from a humanism which has proclaimed reason and rationality as the path to genuine humanity.

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16. Does Christianity still have a message to this world? Or should it go the way of so many religions that have come and gone? Hasn't the time come to give a chance to Marx, Mao-tse-tung and Marcuse?

17. Christianity, in its present form, is not equipped — often not even interested — in proclaiming the Good News to the brokenhearted ones, to a culture in decay. Christians, though confessing one Lord, one faith, one baptism — are frightfully fragmented into a hundred diverse, often opposing directions. There is no christian 'mind,' and thus no christian message, to our time. For Christians have adjusted the spirit of the Gospel to the various movements of modern humanist thought and practice. In that sense every denomination expresses a heresy — often in a rigidly orthodox, supposedly 'Bible-believing' context. Before we can address ourselves to 'the world' we have to examine the sickness, the cancer that destroys a wholehearted commitment to the Lord of our lives. 'Biblical' Christianity is in need of a Reformation more radical than the Church has ever witnessed before in its two thousand years of history.