



by Dr. Andrew Corbett

In some respects, the Church has always been under threat as it has faced attacks from three perpetual sources - the world, the flesh, and the devil - or, to put it another way, from: external forces, internal forces, and spiritual forces.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

From the outset of the Church's inception, it has been under threat. Initially, the Church was threaten by the Jewish Sanhedrin. They viewed Christianity as a sect of Judaism and strictly forbade the Jewish apostles of the Christ from preaching the Christian message.

¶ And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening...So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Acts 4:1-3, 18

Christianity faced constant opposition and threats from Jewish forces as it spread around the Empire (refer to: Acts 9:23; 13:45, 50; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12; 20:3; 23:12; 25:7). Yet all the while the apostles kept appealing to their Jewish countrymen to accept Jesus of Nazareth as their Saviour. Initially, the

greatest source of Jewish persecution against Christians came from the man who would very soon become Christianity's greatest spokesman, Saul of Tarsus.

Saul's conversion to Christianity has long been a great encouragement to persecuted Christians down through the ages to pray for those who persecute them, as Jesus had instructed (Matt. 5:44).

The Book of Acts closes with the impending persecution against the Church by Rome about to begin. In A.D. 64 Caesar Nero oversaw the executions of Peter and Paul. He then orchestrated one of the bloodiest persecutions the Church has ever had to endure. Hundreds of thousands of believers were brutally martyred during his 42 month tirade. In A.D. 65 the Apostle John was unsuccessfully martyred then banished to the Isle of Patmos. This violent Neronian persecution against the Church would end in A.D. 68 when Nero, aged 31, took his own life. The Book of Revelation's backdrop is this first Roman persecution and their eventual destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Before the Apostle Paul was martyred he warned the Ephesian elders about the danger of 'fierce wolves' coming from within their church, "And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29). The expression "twisted things" begins with distorted doctrine (a doctrine is a biblical teaching), and is usually done to justify some unbiblical conduct, usually involving abhorrent sexual practice. Jesus Himself rebuked the churches at Pergamum (Rev. 2:14) and Thyatira (Rev. 2:20) for allowing such twisted doctrine to infiltrate their churches.

The early church faced internal threats from those who attempted to synchronise Judaism with Christianity ("Judaizers" Gal. 2:14), Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis* which means 'knowledge') which taught that the material world is evil and therefore Jesus did not really come in the 'flesh' (the epistle of First John largely addresses this heresy), and from charlatans who attempted to take financial advantage of the early Christians (Paul addresses this briefly in Philippians 1).

As we have seen, the Church has always faced dangers and threats. The Church is always going to be in danger when it compromises God's Word, or

neglects the place of prayer. These dangers spill down to the application of Scripture especially considering the spiritual and character requirements for leaders. History shows us that when church leaders were appointed who were not spiritually regenerate, the Church became corrupted. We must be ever vigilant against this danger of wandering from the truth. Similarly, there is always the danger that the Church ceases to evangelise the next generation, or ground the children of believers in the reasonableness of the God of the Bible. That's why statements like, "Just accept it by faith" are so dangerous to the transmission of godly faith in Christ from parent to child, because it sends the message that Christianity is without reasonable evidence, when in fact, it is!

I am using the term 'threats' to indicate those external factors which threaten the Church in some way. We have seen that the early Church also faced such threats (from Jerusalem and then Rome). The following threats are what I perceive to be the most pressing and looming for the Church to respond to over the next few years.

THREAT #5 - RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism can mean a society where there are different religions practiced. But increasingly in a religiously ignorant culture, religious pluralism has come to mean that all religions are equally valid. The implications for the Church impinge upon its claim about the exclusive nature of salvation being found in Jesus Christ only.

Two heresies have attempted to accommodate this threat: *Universalism* (teaches that since Jesus died for the sins of the world, everybody has already been saved because Christ has already atoned for their sins); and, *Inclusivism* (teaches that Christ's redemptive merit applies to all those who adhere to a religion which seeks to worship God - however they may understand 'God').

THREAT #4 - POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Currently, in many Western countries, Christianity enjoys certain privileges such as charitable status, and tax exemption. Increasingly though, these privileges are being politically challenged. If these threats are realised it will place an enormous financial burden on churches and the many community based and welfare programs it provides. In addition to this

potential threat, there is a growing political assault already underway against the Church including undermining religious liberty laws with legislation presented as 'hate-speech' and 'anti-discrimination' laws.

THREAT #3 - CULTURAL OPPOSITION

Western Christianity is under enormous cultural opposition from forces portraying the Church as not merely irrelevant, but actually dangerous! More common cultural opposition accusations include 'homophobic', 'bigoted', 'narrow-minded'. Cultural opposition overlaps into Political opposition with various non-life policy agendas such as the push for liberal abortion laws, and doctor-assisted suicide laws. Educationally, Christianity is ridiculed as being science-deniers due to many outspoken Christians denying manmade climate-change, and even Big Bang cosmology. This kind of cultural opposition is on the increase.

THREAT #2 - ECONOMIC PERSECUTION

Christians are increasingly targeted economically in the market-place and workplace for refusing to comply with views which are opposed to Biblical morality. The case of Jack Phillips in the US is one recent high profile example of this. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EG3CwI6oK9A>)

THREAT #1 - ME-CENTRED 'CHRISTIANITY'

I use 'Christianity' in scare-quotes, because when it is focussed on me it ceases to be Christianity. When Christianity is presented as being about what we can get from God; the ways we can make God do what we want; and that Jesus wants us to love ourselves first before we love anyone else - it is then that we are no longer practicing authentic Christianity. This kind of pseudo-Christianity is reflected in the songs sung by those who adhere to it which predominantly reflect this false theology with most of the songs focussing on the worshiper (not the use of personal pronouns - I, me, my) rather than on the only One truly worthy of worship: God.

THE 5 WAYS WE SHOULD RESPOND

The Church has always faced threats and dangers of various kinds - and has prevailed. We can do. These responses to the above 5 impending threats are not novel; indeed, these are the responses the Church has always used to counter similar threats.

The reasons some churches will not engage with Religious Pluralism might be because the appropriate response runs the risk of sounding arrogant; argumentative; hostile; and even confrontational. But it needn't be. First Peter 3:15 instructs believers to share their reasons for their faith in Christ with gentleness, respect while being well-mannered.

but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

First Peter 3:15-16

This winsome engagement can declare along with the first disciples that there is no other name given under heaven whereby man must be saved.

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Acts 4:12

The best way to respond to religious pluralism is to boldly and clearly proclaim the Gospel. Someone has said that whenever anyone puts an adjective in front of 'Gospel', such as “social Gospel” or “LGBT Gospel”, we are no longer talking about the Gospel (the same phenomena also happens with the word justice). The Gospel declares that we all stand condemned before God because of our sin - and in peril eternal condemnation if our sin is not atoned for. While that's the bad news, the good news, God has freely made the

atonement accomplished by Christ available to whosoever will turn to Him and ask for it! (Rom. 10:13)

This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

First Timothy 2:3-4

The Church is called to be a prophetic voice into culture. We can draw tremendous inspiration from the prophets of Old - particularly Jeremiah, who prophesied to several Jewish kings plus several other foreign kings of surrounding nations, calling them to repent, treat people fairly, and to honour God. We do not live in a theocratic state (and neither should we) but we do (at the moment) live in a democratic nation where we are free to make our case in the public square. This demands prophetic boldness, but also well-reasoned arguments. We have, though, the huge advantage of having the truth on our side! (1Tim. 3:15)

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,

Second Peter 1:19

for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Acts 20:27

First Peter 3:15 urges believers to always be ready to give a reason for the hope they have. (I suspect the reasonableness of Christianity applies not just to our hope.)

Christianity has always been counter-cultural! While the world values human life in an oddly inconsistent fashion (an example of this is the nonsensical *Personhood Theory* discussed by Prof. Nancy Pearcey in her book *Love Thy Body*), Christianity regards all people as being created in the image of God with inherent dignity and worth. Our lives are not our own - they belong to God. This is why God's Word so strongly condemns murder and sexual immorality. Our stance against licentiousness (note Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:17-19; 5:5) pits us against a world hell-bent on worshiping the false god, Eros - which they will use all means possible to justify and attempt to silence the prophetic voice of Christians against.

Our response to cultural opposition also should include deepening our sense of Christian community. Fellowship has to mean more than two Christians sharing a bowl of potato chips on a couch watching the football! We

now live in such a disconnected world where many people have no meaningful interaction with any other human being. This lack of personal interaction with others is unnatural and unhealthy. We were created to interact with others. But this is where the Church can help. While many people may think that 'church' means a Sunday morning worship service, 'church' is actually about community - people connecting meaningfully with other people. I wonder how much of the hostility toward the Christian stance on moral and sexual issue would be quelled if these opponents experienced the acceptance of an authentic Christian community? (1Thess. 3:12)

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:35

Increasingly Christians are put under pressure in the workplace to comply with new company policies that are contrary to Biblical standards. When some of these Christians have challenged their company's stance and the demand that all staff comply, they have either been fired or faced the threat of dismissal. There are some lessons from the life of Daniel, who lived through the Babylonian exile, and probably underwent even greater social and employment challenges than we face today. Daniel's response was: (i) Not to compromise his values grounded in his faith in God and His Word; (ii) Be the best employee he could be (even for an unrighteous employer); (iii) Be prepared to suffer loss as a cost to his uncompromising stand (#lions_den).

This raises the issue as to why employers may be able to force Christians today to compromise their positions on morality because of the enormous economic pressures they will be under if they don't comply with their company's instructions. This economic pressure is compounded due to people's personal levels of debt.

Average personal debt levels among Westerners has never been higher. Credit Card debt, hire-purchase debt, College Loans (HECS debt in Australia), are financially crippling many people.

Churches should lead by example and teach the principles of sound financial management (stewardship) of God's Word. This involves teaching: saving; investing; delayed gratification; financial planning; and the nobility of running a business.

The Gospel is not all about us. The Gospel is all about God - His initiative, His plan, His sacrifice, and His glory! The simplest response the Church can give to the false notion of the 'Me-Gospel' is to teach God's Word expositionally, and exegetically. In doing this, those who desire to follow Christ will be confronted with the truth claims of Christ about laying their down for His sake, loving others as they already and intuitively love themselves, and that love involves willingly and gladly serving others. Christian discipleship necessarily involves our lives reflecting more of Jesus and less of ourselves. John Baptist reflected this when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

¶ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2

The two great and under-estimated advantages that the Church has always had, and continues to have, which will always ensure that we respond swiftly and appropriately to each threat we ever face are (i) the truth is on our side; and, (ii) the abiding power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The prayer of the soon-to-martyred Apostle Paul for the Church still echoes down through the centuries and will for centuries to come-

so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ¶ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:17-21

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5th August 20019

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