

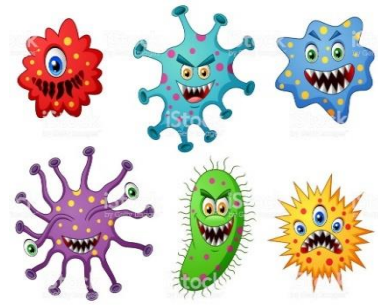


The Corona Chronicles

Reviewing the Church through a time of crisis

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Here is a thesis: Heretics have taken control of our Church

We Australian Anglicans have lost our way because we have fallen away from the apostolic faith and/or have fallen into what is nothing less than apostasy. What this has allowed to develop, unchallenged, is a growing secular society. Christian faith appears from the outside, to have nothing of value to offer men and women across our country. This is not just a failure on the part of Anglicans. It is Christian failure across all Christian denominations. Australians are still searching for a spiritual reality but are not finding that in the Church.

We are a nation supporting what many would understand to be “bad religion”. Traditional religion and faith have declined and been replaced with what is very much a pseudo-Christianity, a parody of Gospel faith which is actually destructive.

What we are teaching by example is the acceptability of short cuts

According to census figures, it might still be possible to call Australia a Christian Nation. But dig down into what Christianity has become and what we find is an abundance of Christians growing their own versions of what began as traditional religion. Gone is the rigorous theology that sustained the Church for millennia. It is replaced with religions that are more about the feelings and comfort of the individual. It has become an ego stroking pop-religion.

As it was in the time of the writing of John’s Book of Revelation, the biggest threat is not from an external culture at odds with and sometimes in explicit opposition to Christian teachings. The threat comes from within. We have allowed ourselves to be dominated by false prophets offering shallow shortcuts to “discipleship”.

Attend a General Synod and what we find are speeches defending and insisting on a Christianity that will insist on a faithfulness to a Bible that is divinely inspired standing alongside those who insist texts are open to a myriad of interpretations all

of which are true. In the post-session huddles, we are slotted into one of two categories: traditionalists who insist in the word by word truth of each word in the scriptures and liberals for whom the value of the Bible can be summed but by fridge magnets. The reality is far more complicated but it is clear how for many we are all free to choose our own Jesus, giving Him the qualities and mission that best suits the occasions in life in which we find ourselves. Who are others to question them?

Everything now seems to be up for grabs – remember not long ago we had a Primate who questioned the fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. We grew up valuing every human soul as being unique and precious in the eyes of God. Now we have modern prophets who preach a gospel of *self-help*, *self-improvement* and *self-love*. This all stands in the face of thousands of years of an understanding of original sin and a soul in need of divine grace if it is to find lasting peace and genuine fulfilment.

The results of all of this is the disaster of false optimism in the belief that God, through our democratic systems and cultural values is working His divine saving plan in the world. *We can create heaven here on earth as long as our Christian religion prioritises the need to be all things for all people.*

Can we dare to say the following out in the open: Slightly rearranging the stark observations of the journalist Ross Douthat - *We are not a Christian nation. At best, we are a nation of heretics.*

Heretics? Really?

But all is not lost! In the middle of all of this theological mud-puddle we have had men and women who have *persevered in faithfulness* (from Revelation). They are present in every domination and rather than labelling them as being Traditionalists, I prefer to think of them as being orthodox Christians. They abide by the ancient doctrines and do not fall for experiments in theology; they hold onto truths that have been handed down, generation by generation from the Apostles. They insist on teachings that demand individual believers affirm, take up and live out in their daily activities, a faith that transforms life, a witness meant for the “conversion” of all peoples. A faith founded in divine revelation in the Scriptures.

These are the faithful believers who have resisted the temptation to be caught up in every new trend, in whatever happens to be the fashion of the time. This orthodox faith is what sits at the centre of Australian Christianity and continues to hold it together in these difficult times. They are small in number but continue to resist firmly the postmodernist delusions of an over confidence in the Age of Reason with its rational approach to all things. And, they have also fought against the gloom and doom and judgmentalism of a dominating and threatening literal fundamentalism.

But is it reasonable to call this “heresy”? Alister McGrath (*Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*) defines heresy in this way:

A Christian heresy is best seen as a form of Christian belief that, more by accident than design, ultimately ends up subverting, destabilizing or even destroying the core of Christian faith.

Clearly this subverting and destabilising is not going to happen in a single event. It is a process. One that takes place over time, a process that may not always be obvious as it unfolds. Important also to note is how sometimes it is not clear who is the heretic and who is the orthodox Christian. Sometimes the saints are persecuted because they oppose abuses (Joan of Arc, reformers, Catholic martyrs) who are only reclaimed as being orthodox after a long period of time.

There is an important point to make here: past abuses by Church bureaucrats do not permit believers today to deny there is any such things as an orthodox, theological core to our faith. Abuses such as the Inquisition are not a justification for rejecting a central Truth that sits at the heart of our faith, one that cannot be rejected along with the religious systems claiming to be its loyal defenders.

This Truth is one held by Protestants of all kinds, along with Catholics, the Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox. It is the consensus evident in the early Church and handed on across the centuries – *the faith of the Apostles* (Luke’s expression in the Acts of the Apostles). How it is manifested may vary but not the Truth itself.

Differences within these ecclesial groups has been about how to interpret this faith, what it means in subsequent generations. It has been, up until modern times, most debates have been about the expression and application of Truth but never a challenge to the Truth itself. For the Church of today, things have changed. The greatest threats to our existence and mission as disciples of Christ in the world are the ways these core Truths, the fundamental foundations of our Faith are now being questioned, modified and abandoned. A decline in Church comes from a decline in faith at all levels – including among those who are supposed to be our leaders.

Once we grew up being assured of the Truth of the basic dogmas of our faith: the Incarnation and Christ's atoning love on the cross; the Trinity, the Virgin birth; the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection and life eternal beyond the grave. If that sounds familiar it is the content of the Apostles' Creed. We grew up being taught the Bible was the divinely inspired Word of God and came to us with an authority all of its own. It was not to be added to nor were some parts to be skipped over as being unimportant and it was most certainly not to be watered down or rewritten. We were taught to find in it commandments guiding us in the way of moral living that were given to us by God Himself and explained to us by Jesus.

It was a Saved collection that gave us a picture of a new world, a new way of living in God's creation, a way determined by God. In the New Testament there are constant condemnation of violence, greed, oppressive power, excessive wealth and what we might call unchastity. This was the Way of discipleship.

We learned off and recited the traditional creeds – the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene and Athanasian creeds and accepted at least a skeletal organisational structure for the governance of those who came together in faith communities under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We accepted as a given how there was an orthodox faith. A core set of beliefs that had been handed down to us by the saints. It went back to the Apostles and has been a continuous teaching through to the present day. We inherited this from our forebears and we understood our baptismal commitment was an obligation to live them out in the world. And all of this came through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit poured out on the Church at Pentecost.

But God's ways remains a mystery – and that troubles a rational world

This does not mean all was simple and clear. From biblical times, with both Testaments, believers have always had to struggle with the mystery that was God, the divine identity and the divine saving works...*the ways of God are not the ways of men and women*. If God could be understood by created men and women, He would not be much of a god. It is for this reason religious faith has always been a stumbling block for the world. It is confusing for people and theology can at times seem to be a collection of riddles that have more questions than answers.

Imagine trying to explain to unbelievers the mystery of the Incarnation – Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. The Trinity - God is Three and God is One. God created humans to live with him forever but gives us free will to reject Him. God created the world and declared it to be *good* but the same creation is corrupted by original sin and tainted by Evil. We read through the Old Testament and find a God who seems to be constantly angry and vindictive but believe this is the same God who is the Father of Jesus the Christ with His message of love, mercy and forgiveness. The Bible insists how it is faith alone that saves but insists equally on the importance of good works. The Church is a community of and for both saints and sinners at the same time, a family called to perfection but tainted by sin with sinners in its midst. We grow up within that world, imagine how confusing it must be for people looking in from the outside.

It is impossible to smooth over the mysterious nature of God

A cursory reading of Church History will reveal a wide range of ecclesial attempts at resolving some of these apparent conflicts. The most obvious of these have been the Church Councils – beginning with the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. How can this new movement appeal to both Gentiles and the Law bound Jewish Christians? They rarely succeeded in simplifying these mysteries, being more intent on setting limits to what could and could not be believed. Remember St Paul's great solution: you are free to eat meat sacrificed to idols but you shouldn't!

What they avoided was going the way of groups like the Gnostics. They did not remove the mystery from Christian beliefs. They did not rationalize these

teachings, remove apparent conflicts and paradoxes and reduce them to easily digested thought bubbles that were supposed to summarize the traditions.

Nor did they try and resolve the problems of God: why do the faithful suffer? How do we explain the ongoing presence of Evil in the world? Why does God allow suffering and all of the injustices and human abuses that abound to continue and even to grow in power, privilege and wealth? Would not a perfect, omnipotent God step in and impose a new Garden of Eden in which we could all live in peace and harmony?

The Fathers did not try and cover up these “problems with God” that beset those who strive for a life of faith. They well understood how the ways of God are far above the comprehension of mere men and women (in the language of the Psalms). They combined both paradox and mystery and avoided today’s contemporary failings of insisting on either “truth” or mystery. Herein is the source of why it has persevered down through the human history of contemplation and reflection. It has something to offer everyone because its answers are not bound to culture and historic times.

The heretics within Christianity have gone the other way. They have sought to resolve these contradictions and shave down its paradoxes so that it is more convenient and accessible. Christianity is shaped so that it offends no one and has room in it for every kind of rationalising. Jesus becomes what we want Him to be, think we need Him to be rather than what has been revealed to us about Him. If Jesus offends my sensibilities, then I modify Jesus rather than going through the hard work of modifying myself and changing my way of living in the world. The intent of the heretic may appear to be noble – make Christ accessible – but if this accessible Christ is not the Christ of revelation, He is not Christ.

The problem with faith is that it requires a humble self-sacrifice

None of this is new, of course. In John’s Letters to the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation, it is the main criticism of the churches. They try and bring faith in Jesus Christ into a way that is compatible with the worship of the Emperor and the many gods of the Empire. The only way to advance and find a life of peace in towns and villages across that Empire was through the offering of sacrifices to the

gods. Failure to do so meant ostracization, marginalisation and the possibility of torture and even death. Surely that is not what God wants, was the argument of the Christian heretics. Like the Hebrews before them, they sought to normalize the offering of sacrifice to Caesar (Baal) and the gods with worshipping the Lamb of God. It was the sensible compromise. The stayed alive. But it was not the *tradition of the Apostles* and it was most certainly the way to imitate Christ the Crucified Saviour.

The Gnostics followed them in the desire to make Christ more tolerable. Their pious argument (based on Greek Philosophy) was that He could not possibly be sullied by having a corrupted human nature. He had to be pure spirit, one simply disguised in the form of degenerate human flesh. Their attempt was to remove all that was human and created from the reality of Jesus who was Christ, Son of God and Saviour. In so doing, they removed the very heart of the Incarnation.

In more modern times, out of the Age of Reason came the Deists and Unitarians who sought to remove all that was supernatural from Christian belief. *Deists* believe that **God exists**, but that He is not directly involved in the world. They picture God as the great “clockmaker” who created the clock, wound it up, and let it go. Miracles are therefore not possible as it would involve a direct divine intervention. If it was not backed up by science and supported by science, then it was shoved off into the world of fairy tales. God did not intervene in creation beyond that first creative act.

Here is another way of expressing this same kind of heresy. This time it is taken from the website of the Unitarian Church. Sadly it could just as easily sit on the noticeboard of many Australian Anglican parish churches as well: - my italics added.

- "*I want* a religion that respects the differences between people and affirms every person as an individual."
- "*I want* a church that values children, that welcomes them on their own terms—a church they are eager to attend on Sunday morning."
- "*I want* a congregation that cherishes freedom and encourages open dialogue on questions of faith, one in which it is okay to change your mind."
- "*I want* a religious community that affirms spiritual exploration and reason as ways of finding truth."
- "*I want* a church that acts locally and thinks globally on the great issues of our time—world peace; women's rights; racial justice; homelessness; gay,

lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights; and protection of the environment."

Conclusion to Part 1

The Church has endured over two thousand years of history on account of the faithfulness of our leadership to the teachings of the Apostles. They have kept doctrine true to its origins in Christ. It is not that they have simply conserved doctrine in a standard form across the whole of the Church. They have encouraged a heterodoxy that led to a deeper understanding of the creeds and their meaning. This has been done in so many ways by those saints who found themselves at odds with and sometimes excommunicated by ecclesiastical leaders.

The Church has grown, not only despite the heretics within but counterintuitively also as a result of those same heretics... *because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance (James 1:3)*. In standing up to and rejecting the heretical activities tempting believers from within, those doctrines had to come alive. And so they did. While so much changed around them, the doctrines enriched, supported and freed the faithful to persevere in their mission and ministry.

Here is a further way in which we can learn from the struggles threatening those early communities. Christ's disciples were told how they needed to test those who declared themselves to be prophets. The first letter of John expresses this imperative in clear language... *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1)*.

In the next essay I will test the above theory, examining it against the lived history of the Church beginning with the inroads of modernism. The coming of the Social Gospel began a radical transformation of the Church's priorities. Sold a distortion of the teachings of Jesus, many of the local (clergy) and national (Bishops) leaders of the Church ended up encouraging believers to take up a Gospel of their own. They led them into a wilderness, one further and further from the sacrificial Kingdom epitomized in the Cross of Jesus into a soft Gospel, one that offered the world little it could not find in more attractive and less demanding ways.