

“When The Nation Is Falling Apart, What Shall We Do?”

Dr Paul Moon is Professor of History at AUT University, and author of several books on New Zealand history. In February of this year he wrote a column in the New Zealand Herald newspaper arguing that the crusade to remove Christian religious education from our state schools is a denial of our Christian heritage. He wrote this –“ This is how far we have come, as a nation, in two centuries: from all the schools in the country being organised by various Christian denominations (first Anglican and Methodists, and later Catholics) to the insistence that no Christian instruction at all be permitted in our state schools, and that to do otherwise becomes an urgent matter of human rights.” Before the Herald closed the opportunity to comment, 236 people had responded to the article. The overwhelming number of responses were scathing of Christianity. People wrote that they didn't want their kids indoctrinated with Christian fairy stories. Christians are seen as anti scientific, ignorant, at best misguided and at worst, deluded. Several of those who responded said they didn't want their kids taught that people were sinners, and the whole idea that Jesus died on a Cross to save people from their sin was rubbish. As for belief in the Bible, the critics had a field day with the idea that the Bible could have anything relevant to say to people living in 2014.

If you believe the Bible to be Gods word to us, and Jesus to be the Son of God you are now very definitely holding a minority view. Things that the Bible clearly labels as sin are now being challenged, even by Christians within the church. Here are a couple of examples. Evangelicals have always understood that a sexual relationship between a man and a woman belonged within the covenant of a marriage relationship. Much of our society has given up on that idea, and it's very common for two people to live together outside of marriage. But increasingly I find Christians are asking the question, “What's wrong with having sex before marriage?” Another example. In both Old and New Testaments, homosexual acts are universally condemned as sinful. There is not one positive reference to homosexual practice in the entire Bible. Yet an increasing number of Christians are giving approval to homosexual practice as being valid within a Christian lifestyle. As I understand it, that's not a question of an interpretation of Scripture, but a clear rejection of the teaching of Scripture.

Long ago our politicians abandoned the Bible as a foundation for truth. Decisions are now made on the basis of what the public want and what is convenient and expedient. Some of these decisions have had disastrous consequences for our country. Lowering the drinking age to 18 has resulted in huge social problems. Legalising synthetic cannabis has caused such a public outcry that the politicians quickly backtracked last week. The legalisation of prostitution has created a whole new raft of problems. The introduction of same sex marriage has devalued an ordinance that has provided stability for civil society for thousands of years. Parents of school age children have to give written permission for their child to go on a school trip, but are not notified when their underage child has an abortion. And the anti smacking legislation has turned tens of thousands of good parents into criminals.

What Should We Do?

When the nation is falling apart, what should followers of Jesus do? What are we supposed to do when children in our schools are being taught that the way to safe sex is to wear a condom? What are we supposed to do when the Christian values on which our country was built are now being openly mocked? What are we supposed to do when our country has sexually transmitted diseases in what has been described as epidemic proportions, yet when Christians put forward the idea of sexual purity, waiting till marriage to have sex, we are regarded as some oddball freaks from another planet? What are we supposed to do when nearly 15,000 abortions are performed each year in this country? When the foundations are being destroyed, what should the righteous do?

When Israel Was Falling Apart.

There was a time in the history of the nation of Israel when the foundations were being destroyed, and the nation was falling apart. The King on the throne was subject to fits of madness. The nation was without good leadership. Everyone was pleasing themselves. God was for the most part forgotten. People were living it up and the moral fabric of society was being torn apart. Everywhere the foundations were being destroyed, and good people were asking “What are we supposed to do when the nation is falling apart?” It's a question that was being asked of David, who was to become King. His response is found in Psalm 11:

“In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: “Flee like a bird to your mountain.

***For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them. The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face."* (Psalm 11:1 -7)**

When David faced a situation where the nation was falling apart, his friends advised him to run. Run from a deteriorating situation. Get out from the crisis. Their arguments were based on two well known facts;

1. Bad people can't stand good people.

We all know that good people remind evil people of their shortcomings. It was the philosopher Socrates who said, "if ever the perfect man comes to earth he will be crucified". He said that a long time before Jesus came. David's friends said to him, You had better get out - you had better run. These people don't play fair. They shoot from the shadows. You don't stand a chance. Get out"

2. Good people can't stop bad people.

"It's a waste of time trying to stop the moral rot. When society begins to fall apart, when the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? There is nothing we can do. Let's withdraw. There is no point in staying around when your influence has gone." That was the advice of David's friends. "We have shrunk to a tiny minority. We are too small a group to influence the nation. There are only a few of us left who are righteous. Let's flee to our mountain hiding place."

It was sound, sensible, sympathetic advice that any secular humanist could have given. It was silly advice. The thing wrong with it was that it took the visible things into account but it took no account of the invisible. It was true that the enemy was powerful and they were outnumbered, and their resources were few. But this advice took no account of the vertical dimension. David turned on his well meaning friends and said "How dare you tell me to run. How dare you tell me to retreat when I have taken refuge in the Lord. If I do run when the pressure is on I'm not going to run a place, but to a person. My refuge is in the Lord." David then began to rebuke his friends and remind them of some facts about God.

Fact Number One.

God is still on his throne. His Kingdom is still in operation. We are still living under the government of God.

Fact Number Two.

Nothing escapes God's notice. He narrows his eyelids and carefully watches what's going on. He's fully aware of what's happening. There are no consenting acts in private to God. Nothing is beyond God's notice.

Fact Number Three.

God has emotional reactions to what he sees. God has feelings. God feels it when a child is sexually abused. God feels it when people starve because of others greed. God feels it when an old man is beaten up by a gang of young thugs. God feels it when a young mother is dying of cancer. God feels it when night after night the cream of the nation's young people sit in front of mindless television programs dumbing down their intelligence. God feels it when fathers and mothers spend the children's food money on Lotto tickets and Pokies.

Fact Number Four.

God always settles his accounts. For a time David lived in a cave on the shores of the Dead Sea. As David looked South from that cave he would remember the time when God's feelings boiled over, and he destroyed two cities with coals of burning sulphur. Those two cities were Sodom and Gomorrah. I'm sure the people of those cities thought that God wouldn't notice the way they were living. I am sure they thought God would never bring judgement. Many people believe God destroyed Sodom because of their sexual perversion. That may well be the case, but the prophet Ezekiel gives us another reason the city was destroyed. ***"Now this is the sin of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters were arrogant, over fed and unconcerned. They did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did***

detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen". (Ezekiel 16: 49)
They were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned. That could be a description of our nation today.

Fact Number Five.

It's still worthwhile being good because God loves goodness. Good people are still going to be able to look God in the face.

What a difference those vertical facts make. No wonder David says, "I know the pressure is on. I know there is increasing confrontation between those who live right and those who don't. I know the foundations are being destroyed. If I'm going to run, I'm going to run to God."

Running Away From Reality.

As a nation we have lived through the swinging 60s, where everything was so easy and so prosperous. We have lived through the spending 70s, where every one of us has lived above our income, and 10 percent of our money was borrowed for us on our behalf and we have had to pay it back. We have lived through the escaping 80's where the fastest growing industries in the Western World were Tourism and Television. Both tourism and television are about running away from reality. One of the characteristics of our churches in the 1980s and 1990's has been that we have run away from reality. We have seen the foundations destroyed, so we ran away and forgot about the world we lived in. We have seen it in worship, where the majority of our acts of worship were "Bless Me" times that had little to do with the things that were happening in our communities beyond the church. Praying for others was almost forgotten in our church services. There was escapism by Christians wanting to move into Christian work places. People were saying things like "There is no one who is a Christian at my work. I just want a job in a place where everyone else is a Christian. I just want to buy a house where there are not so many Maoris and Asians". We have been running away from some vocations because it's been hard to be a Christian at the meat works or in the factories or in the trade unions or the media.

Escaping From The World.

Even some of our Christian projects that were meant to be light shining in the darkness, became tempting areas for escape from the world. Christian radio stations, Christian schools, Christian sports clubs became little enclaves of retreat. Yet paradoxically, in the 1990s and 2000's many churches got involved in community ministries. We developed food banks to feed the poor, kindergartens for preschool children, aerobics classes, toy libraries, old folks homes, hospitals, friendship groups, counselling services and lots of other worthy efforts to help people. Yet, after all this community effort, our relationships with unchurched people are more distant than they have ever been. It's almost as if our community activity has kept us so busy we haven't actually engaged with the people we have been trying to reach.

How is this nation going to be turned around?

The politicians would have us believe that this nation going to be turned around by growing the economy. We have been getting richer year by year and working on all sorts of economic solutions, but the foundations still keep getting destroyed. Is it going to be turned around by throwing more money at health, education, welfare and law and order issues? Every year we keep pumping more and more money into these sectors of our society and the country keeps getting worse. Is it going to be turned around with new political parties, or a new government? Every three years we vote and put our hope and trust in new parties or politicians, only to find that they are just as fragile and fallible as the ones we voted out.

I don't believe economics or politics or new policies will turn this nation around. This nation is going to be turned around by the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ, which changes the heart of every individual, one life at a time. It's going to be turned around when busy Christians deliberately carve some time out of their full agendas to spend quality time building friendships with those who don't yet know Jesus. It's going to be turned around when you and I start praying for some non Christians we know, and inviting them to our place for coffee, or help them lay concrete, or go to the movies with them. This nation will be turned around when Christians get out of the saltshaker and get back into society to stop the rot and to be the preservative God intended us to be. New Zealand is going to be turned around when we turn off our TV sets, get our noses out of our Christian novels, and spend time with some genuine certified pagans who need Christ. The church of Jesus Christ has been given a mission, because Jesus himself believed that his church was the hope of the world. When the church does what Jesus told it to do, then

not only are lives of individuals transformed, but the structures of society are transformed as well. That comes about when we get involved.

I want to finish this morning with the true story of one man, who loved Jesus, who got involved, and who changed a nation.

In the fourth century in a remote community in the Roman province of Asia, lived a monk named Telemachus. He loved the Lord. He prayed a lot. He had a strong faith in Jesus Christ. He felt the Lord leading him to Rome. He couldn't understand why, for he was a country boy who wasn't used to the cities. When he got to Rome he was shocked at what he saw. Telemachus found himself one day at the arena, with thousands of others at the Coliseum. He watched, horrified, as Roman gladiators stood before the emperor saying "We who are about to die salute you O god!" Then they would set about hacking each other to death. Telemachus couldn't stand it. As the crowd cheered at the carnage, he ran down to the rail, jumped up on the wall and screamed, "In the name of Christ forbear!" "In the name of Christ stop this!" But no one listened. They just applauded the fight and cheered the gladiators on. Telemachus just couldn't contain himself. He jumped into the arena and stood between the fighters and shouted at them, "In the name of Christ forbear!" "In the name of Christ stop it!" Both the gladiators shoved him aside. Soon the little man from the country became an irritant to both the gladiators and the crowd, and they became angry. The crowd eventually became so angry that this little monk from the country had got in the way of their enjoyment of the sports, they threw rocks at him, and stoned him to death.

But there is a tailpiece to this story. Three days after that gladiatorial contest was over, the Emperor got to hear of what had happened. He issued a decree that there were to be no more gladiatorial fights in the Coliseum. And there weren't. History records that day as the last fight of gladiators ever held in the Roman Coliseum. Never again did men hack each other to death for public entertainment. It was stopped by a man who loved Jesus, who heard the word of the Lord and who got involved.