

WILL THE CHURCH SURVIVE THE 21ST CENTURY?

I want to pose a question: Are we, the church, prepared for ministry in the 21st century? By asking this question and by talking about this issue I hope to raise our level of awareness about the culture in which we live. I want to promote a little self-reflection and maybe even a little self-criticism. I want to generate some passion and openness to change, if necessary.

To answer this question we must first deal with some bad news and that is the negative view of the church in the world and in Argentina.

Let's begin by observing that many influential thinkers believe that mankind is on the threshold of a great and glorious future. Why? Because we will soon possess the scientific capability to redefine human nature through genetics and technology. We will be able to make humans, in effect, less sinful, more intelligent, and wonderfully creative. We will be able to design the kind of children we want. We will possess the power to extend the human lifespan. We will be able to manage our evolution and accelerate our social development.

These thinkers say, in effect: "We will change what it means to be human and create paradise on earth. Utopia will be possible through the advancement of science and technology. And, with wise economic policy and democracy we will extend the benefits of prosperity and technology to all. We will use the insights of the various religions, philosophies, and worldviews to create a better, more tolerant world."

But, and this is important, this "Brave New World," as the philosopher Aldous Huxley described it, this future utopia, does *not* include you or me. It has no place for orthodox Christianity. There will be no tolerance for the biblical worldview, for Jesus Christ as Lord, or for the church as the people of God.

So, how do these prophets of mankind's glory view the church? How do they evaluate Christianity and Christians? And, is there any truth in their assessments?

First, they claim that we are backward-looking and reactionary. They say that we are trying to preserve a bygone era dominated by conservative values and the outdated biblical worldview, which almost nobody accepts anymore. They claim that we are closed-minded and intolerant of others.

Is this true? Well, unfortunately, at least partly so. It often seems that conservative Christians are generally more eager to preserve their traditional way of life rather than engage the changing and challenging world around them. Often, Christians are more comfortable in their spiritual ghettos, their "villas" for Jesus, than in seeking and serving the lost.

Second, they say that we are anti-intellectual and shallow thinkers. Is this true? Very often it is. Our ignorance of the Bible and theology is glaring. Our lack of intellectual curiosity is tragic. Our study disciplines are feeble. We cower in the face of the battles of ideas.

Consider, also, these questions that reflect our lack of influence in society: To what degree does the biblical worldview influence public debate and policy in Argentina? How many cultural leaders are sincere and articulate believers? Are there cultural, business, political, technological, educational, or government leaders whose lifestyles in public reflect their faith commitment in private? How many Christian professors are there in the universities?

Third, they claim that Christians and our churches are too inward-looking and self-absorbed. To put it another way: Does Christianity here mean anything more than a Sunday, subjective, and private experience? Do our lifestyles differ between Sunday and the rest of the week? Do we care about the common problems that we share as members of the human race, our nation, our city, or our neighborhood?

Again, is this a justified criticism? Yes, at least in part. For example, listen closely to the lyrics of the songs we sing in most of our churches. Many are focused on the individual and not the church or doctrine. Many are merely an expression of our subjective feelings rather than expressions of timeless truths about God or our pilgrimage on earth. Many are songs of victory, while most of us suffer with sin and affliction.

One writer says the root of this individualism and shallowness lies in the influence of consumerism on the church. He described the dilemma this way:

The problem rather lies in where our culture locates health, happiness, and meaning: namely, in the realm of private feelings and values rather than in the shared mission in which God's people participate. When Christians accept a consumerist culture's definition at face value, they look to the church primarily to provide them with the means to improve their private lives, enhance their self esteem, and give them a sense of purpose. Worship becomes a form of therapy whose sole aim is to improve the emotional state of individuals and to energize them for the week ahead. It is designed principally to make those individuals feel comfortable and to justify the style of life they find most satisfying.

So, personally, I wonder if this frightened, worldly, and passive church will even *survive* the 21st century.

On the other hand, we should ask ourselves with hope and biblical vision: What kind of church will, not merely survive, but *prosper* during the 21st century?