

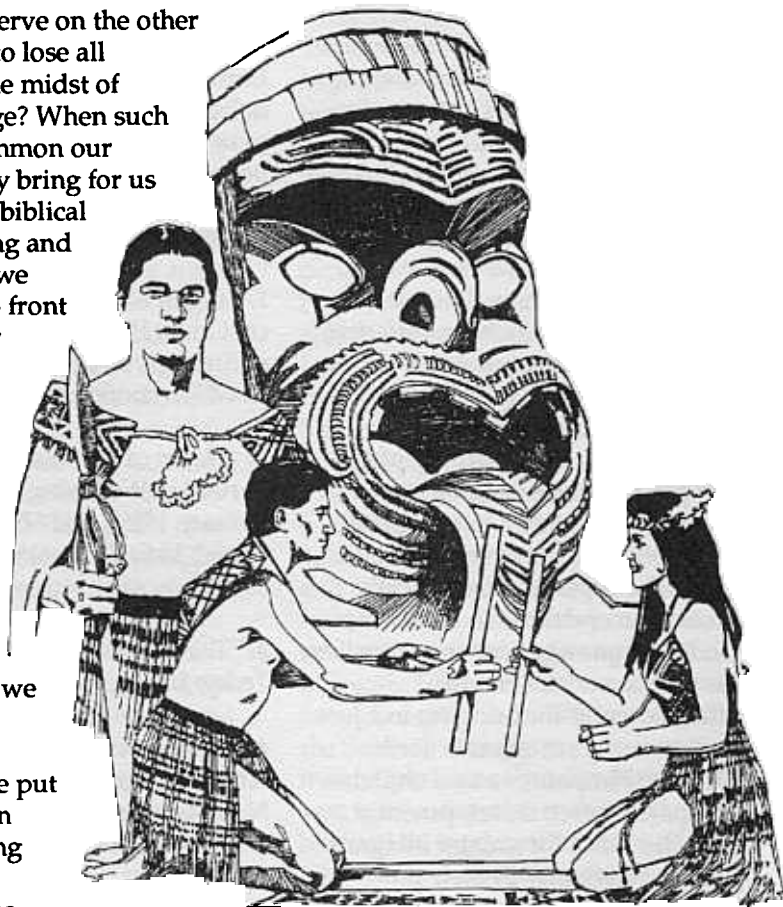
The iron is hot

Could it be that God intends in the years ahead to inspire among the people of Aotearoa New Zealand significant new vision and new hope, new responsibility and new creativity through the Christian church? We do not know. But let us give responsible thought to the possibility, and to the agenda which this possibility places before us now.

Prominent today are the opposite tendencies of confusion and anxiety, escapism and retreat into narrow self-preservation, as politically generated tremors bring down much of the social fabric which people have taken for granted. Nevertheless, in the midst of this many people are casting around for new bearings. And the church, mainly because it is responsibly resisting social injustice, is receiving new attention and respect, as well as criticism. Does God mean this attention and respect to deepen, given the lively cooperation of Christians, until there is a far greater knowledge of God and readiness to seek his will than we see presently, and the country is blessed because of it?

As Christians we know where to turn to discover new vision and new hope. We are in a position to encourage those around us toward similar discovery. We can do this today by exploring with them the deeper questions stirred up by the present social turbulence. Where can be found trustworthy grounds for hope? Where shall we discover the head waters of our deepest values, our truest vision? What fond ideas must we sacrifice on the one hand, and what treasures, what *taonga*

must we preserve on the other if we are not to lose all integrity in the midst of present change? When such questions summon our attention, they bring for us a crisis in the biblical sense of testing and judgement – we have either to front up to them or actively evade them. We have to do one thing or the other. Our choice will show what we are made of; by our response we shall have judged ourselves. We are put in the position either of taking new and demanding steps forward in self-awareness and commitment to reality, or else losing our dignity and self-respect.



This process of challenge and response is mediated most powerfully by the light of the gospel. The gospel plumbs the depths of our deepest questions and commitments. It empowers us to let go our fear and evasion, explore our buried questions and commitments, and let

them be transformed into a hunger for, and welcome for, the gospel itself. The gospel now becomes a whole new starting-point from which to understand ourselves and

our world. This brings with it, amongst other things, a fresh perspective on the social turbulence which has stirred up our questions in the first place. As Christians, we ourselves must become those who first take up the challenge which God poses today to *individuals*, to *New Zealand culture*, and to *modern Western society in general*. Judgement begins with God's own people! This challenge can then be shared by Christians among the people of New Zealand in general.

The challenge and encouragement of the gospel addresses individuals in the first instance. But it addresses equally the shared visions and values which make up the culture of New Zealand. It calls for a response from this culture – and in so doing places it under judgement.

"What point is there in doubling church attendances if the salt has lost its savour?"

Finally, the gospel addresses modern Western society as such. It calls Western society, on the one hand, to recognise and shake off the 'secularist' assumptions which have slowly eroded Christianity within it for several hundred years. It calls it, on the other hand, to see from the perspective of the gospel its strengths as a cultural stream.

Here again, in calling for a response from modern Western society the gospel places this society under judgement.

The challenge to address modern Western society as such is inescapable. The church today has been largely culturally assimilated. Alan Webster's little book 'What difference does it make?' is only the latest to show this. What point is there in doubling church attendances if the salt has lost its savour?

The task of evangelising Western culture is therefore urgent for Christians throughout the world. But there are a number of reasons why the church in New Zealand may hold a special responsibility before God for this task today.

Firstly, public opposition to current social and economic policies is particularly strong in New Zealand. This is partly because monetarist policies have been pushed through more rapidly than in many countries. Also these policies run more against the grain for New Zealanders than for some nations. This is forcing the people of New Zealand to question in a lively way and to search for hope, and there is an openness to new ideas and approaches. This is illustrated by, for example, the present seriousness about fundamental electoral reform as shown in the 1992 referendum.

Secondly, and in parallel fashion, traditions of thought in New Zealand's universities and places of learning are being shaken

up. The vision of liberal humanism, so strong in these places in the past, is now under threat both from the left (from postmodernist philosophy) and from the right (from those wanting to harness education to the economic machine). This is happening at the same time as values

shared by humanists and Christians alike are being subverted by the ideology of 'the new Right'. In this situation we must watch for humanists showing signs of greater openness to the gospel message, and a readiness to listen more receptively.

Thirdly, New Zealanders are in the process of exploring their national identity. In

past generations *pakeha* New Zealanders drew their sense of identity mainly from Great Britain. Since Britain joined the European Common Market in the 1970's, however, there had been a growing recognition that New Zealand has to find her own way and make her own future. The vision offered by American society, meanwhile, has features unattractive to many New Zealanders. Many dislike the violence, consumerism and general superficiality which they and their children meet in many American television programmes and videos; they dislike the dominance of big business in American society, and the harsh policies it often adopts at home and overseas; and they dislike the extent to which American politicians seem to see other countries in terms only of their own vested interests.

The proper

contribution of Maori culture to the future of New Zealand gives a further impulse to examine what is good and bad in Western culture. People from these two cultures need to continue learning from each other, and slowly to discover together what can rightly be retained in each, and what laid aside, as each with integrity pursues its future in relationship with the other.

New Zealand is therefore arguably a special place, and now a special time, for serious engagement between the gospel and Western culture. The question of timing, as well as of place, is important. There are several reasons why the present time of opportunity may soon pass.

Firstly, as people get drawn actively into implementing harsh policies, they will be driven to compromise themselves by the work they agree to do. They will then tend to build personal defences against the reality of what they are party to. For example, they may devalue those whom they treat poorly, in order to convince themselves that this treatment is fitting. Once in place, these defences will not easily be broken down; a painful, demanding conversion and repentance will be necessary. This will make for a new set of difficulties in the way of openness to the demands of God, His justice and compassion.

Secondly, should a majority of the population find with the passing of time that they are reasonably

content materially, then in a new climate of insecurity they may settle for this and learn to shut out the plight of losers and casualties. New Zealand may become more like America which is conserved, despite serious problems of poverty and violence, by what G K Galbraith calls 'the culture of contentment'. Again, the

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deeper questions facing our integrity may get buried.

Thirdly, acute public awareness that powerful vested interests are at work in the reshaping of society may fade. While this awareness remains, as at present, the church's voice is welcomed because the church is not in anyone's pocket and the need for such a voice is strongly felt. This situation may change.

Fourthly, we must expect that some people hurt by present social changes will forsake self-respect and self-control and turn to violence and destructive forms of escapism. Loss of dignity and self-respect also brings breakdown in family and community relationships. Once personal hope has been destroyed in this way, dignity is not easily recovered. A painful turnabout is required. This is true even for those addicted to the 'soft' forms of despairing escapism common today, such as new age reveries, consumerism and gambling. As we see in eastern Europe today, despair is a heavy burden which hinders the rebuilding of a creative, responsible society.

Fifthly, at any time new global crises may arise to push aside serious reflection on the current

direction of western culture. At present, the ending of the cold war has created a temporary vacuum in our attention allowing space for such reflection. But this could change. New and absorbing preoccupations could arise from a worldwide recession, from spreading civil war in Europe, from advancing Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and elsewhere, or from a right-wing takeover in Russia. The opportunity to reflect upon our own Western culture may be 'history' by the end of the present decade.

For these and other reasons, then, the present exciting window of opportunity may close. Can Christians seize the moment with initiative? The challenge of the moment is captured in Jesus' parable of the talents. In this parable Jesus refers to a man who, entrusted by his master with wealth, buries it. The man does so because he is daunted by his thought of a harsh and unjust master. His fear of his master is not disappointed; the wealth which has been entrusted to him is removed. Are we similarly to bury the wealth of God's gospel within the

walls of our churches and within the huddles of our prayer-groups, daunted by a harsh and unjust world? If we do so, do we not show our distrust in the God who thrusts this world upon us?

The challenge to us is rather, boldly to invest in initiatives within and towards this world, trusting that God affirms us as we do so, and that he has entrusted the wealth of the gospel to us precisely with this intention. Perhaps only then shall we discover, as spiritual wealth multiplies, just what unfathomable riches God entrusted to us?

Rev. David Kettle

David Kettle is Anglican Chaplain at Massey University and Minister of Milson Combined Church, Palmerston North. He and his family took up permanent residence in New Zealand 3 years ago. David has a background of parish ministry and theological study in England and he has a special interest in epistemology.

