

Kerygma and Australian Culture:

The case of
the Aussie Battler

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Evangelism is simply the bringing or announcing of the *euangelion* or good news. John Stott argues convincingly that if we are to use the term in accordance with New Testament practice, we must not define evangelism in terms of its results. "To 'evangelize' in biblical usage," he says, "does not mean to win converts (as it usually does when we use the word) but simply to announce the good news, irrespective of results." /1/ Nevertheless the aim of the church in evangelism must be to do it as effectively as possible. That is to say, the good news is to be proclaimed in such a way that it has a fair chance of being heard and of eliciting a positive response in the hearers. The thesis of this paper is that to be effective in Australia evangelism must be undertaken with a much better understanding of the culture and mentality of the Australian people than has been the case in the past.

There is little to indicate that the Australian churches have ever tried to understand the unique cultural setting in which they live and work. This may have been due to the false assumption that English-speaking people are the same everywhere and that whatever works in London or New York will work as effectively in Sydney or Melbourne. There may also be an element of cargo-cult mentality. Perhaps we have tended to assume too optimistically and too lazily that sooner or later answers to all our problems will come to us from across the seas. So there has been a tendency to latch onto the latest American technique and try it in Australia. There have always been some results, (for example, from Billy Graham campaigns), and these have permitted us to avoid such questions as: Is this the best we could have done? What will be the long term effect of using this method? What are the negative results which the method produces?

It is particularly important to face up to this last question. Over against the number of converts some account needs to be taken of those who have been turned off Christianity or further hardened against the gospel. This is, of course, a very difficult figure to assess. It is true also that in all probability any method and any message will have some negative result. Nevertheless some attempt to weight the negative results against the positive needs to be made. In particular we need to be aware of the extent to which any method turns off the intellectuals and community leaders. In God's sight they may be no more important than the derelicts sleeping under the railway bridge, but they are important in terms of the long-term impact of Christianity in Australia. It is arguable that at present the cause of Christianity in Australia suffers great harm because so many moulders of public opinion have dismissed it (or their false understanding of it) as unworthy even of serious consideration.

In a paper of this kind it is not possible to deal with every point at which the culture can be seen to impinge on the method and content of evangelism and therefore I propose to confine the paper to two cultural characteristics and their implications for evangelism.

1. Dislike of Authority

Australians have a strong dislike of authority and a strong tendency to undermine it and turn away from it. This attitude began with the convicts who naturally disliked the authorities that kept them bound down. Even when they had to submit to authority they were ingenious in finding ways of expressing insubordination. The same dislike of authority found expression on the goldfields. The diggers resented government attempts to regulate their activities and to raise revenue from the fields. Rejection of authority manifested itself most clearly of all in the bushranger tradition. The number of these outlaws was small, but the reason they were so hard to catch was that they enjoyed the sympathy and help of the common people who expressed their own dislike for authority vicariously through the exploits of the bushrangers. More recently both AIFs were notorious for their apparent lack of discipline and their insubordination, which was basically a refusal to be subject to authority especially when it is officiously expressed. The same lack of respect for authority is still a feature of our thinking, so that to co-operate with authorities against a fellow citizen may be the worst sin an Australian can commit.

Paradoxically Australians do not resent government intrusion into their life and they have been called the most over-governed people in the world. Paradoxical as it may seem, this docility before the spread of government coexists with dislike for authority.

Generally speaking, the church has been seen as part of the authority structure in Australia. The church has encouraged this by adopting a Christendom posture and assuming the right to speak authoritatively on moral and social issues. It has tended to speak in an authoritarian way and to come on strong with condemnation, prohibition and legalism. To use the terminology of Transactional Analysis, Australian religion has been strongly Parent

in character. With their strong dislike of authority and authoritarianism, Australians are going to tune out on religion of that kind and evangelism which is permeated with this spirit will not have maximum effectiveness. There are some churches that specialize in authoritarian type religion and do well out of it. This is understandable from a T.A. approach. They depend for their success on reaching those people whose child-ego, alone and helpless without a strong functioning adult-ego, is prepared to accept the pain of its unokayness in order to have the security of a strong directing Parent. /2/. But there are only so many people who will accept that solution, and even if the solution were more readily acceptable, we would have to ask whether it is religiously valid or ethically responsible.

It is part of the Parent approach of the church that it tends to castigate Australians for being secularists and materialists without a place or an understanding for religion. It is true that Australians are secularized in the sense that they do not submit their lives to ecclesiastical direction in any large measure. It is becoming more common for Australians to report "no religion" in the census. It is also true that Australians generally regard happiness or pleasure as the chief end of life and material goods as the chief means to that end. /3/. But most Australians do see themselves as religious. Most make use of religious rites of passage, particularly funerals. /4/. This suggests that the ultimate framework of meaning for Australians is still religious. What is more, when questioned they claim what they take to be a religious outlook. It is defined in terms of the second commandment (Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself). This type of religious outlook is strongly represented in our literature also. To be sure it is a bit hypocritical, since we are not all that good at loving our neighbours, but most religion is open to this charge. To say to Australians that they are godless secularists is offensive to many and runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is not an effective means of preparing the way for the gospel. It would be far better in the Australian cultural situation to accept the religion that is there and then point to its grounding in the first commandment. The good morality which is espoused needs the good news to support it and to give joy and fulfilment to those who see themselves as living by it.

2. The Aussie Battler Image

There is a strong cultural trend for the Australian to see himself/herself as a battler. Of course many individuals do not conform to this image and we certainly have to be careful of shallow stereotypes. Nevertheless this is part of our culture and affects us all more than we realize.

The Aussie battler never quite manages to get on top of the powers. He feels that all kinds of hostile forces are ranged against him, so that he is forever the underdog, fighting for survival. He faces his difficulties with a slightly humorous stoicism, but his feeling of subjection is real and is tinged with just a little paranoia. Being a battler he has great sympathy with underdogs. He will battle stubbornly for his worst enemy if somehow that enemy has been turned into an underdog by some superior authority. Conversely, he has no time for the person who has made it to the top, with the possible exception of

sportsmen. Tall poppies are for knocking off, not for admiration. To be another battler is the only okay way to be an Australian.

The roots of this self-image lie deep in the past also, in convict origins, in the battle with the inhospitable land and in struggles between labour and management. The battler has been idealized in the poetry we love. The man from Snowy River was a stripling on a small and weedy beast. The old man, the authority figure of Paterson's poem, would have barred him from the chase but for Clancy's plea on his behalf. Another Paterson character, Saltbush Bill, exemplifies the perfectly okay Australia, struggling to get a bit of grass and keep his sheep alive in the face of unfriendly squatters who want to keep him to a half-mile track and a six-mile stage a day. He is well content to lose a fight with the jackaroo so that his sheep will have longer to eat the squatter's grass./5/.

Rolf Harris plays to the same gallery when he sings in his song, "Sydney Town": Great grand-daddy walked along the street with a ball and chain around his feet, and that's the way they'd like to see me walk to give the toffs a chance to talk./6/.

The Aussie battler is the cliché of our rejuvenated film industry. This is one reason why it is so difficult to sell the films overseas. To be able to enjoy a film about a non-hero, an ordinary little person who cannot succeed even in doing something bad, you have to be an Australian. Many films could be named, but "F.J. Holden" is a good example. The "hero" in the film never fully transforms the Holden into the hot car he dreams about. Nothing great is accomplished with the car, and when at last his father waits for him with long face to tell him the cops are after him, it is not for some serious offence, like a "gang bang" (pack rape), but merely a breach of regulations. The subject is handled more humorously in "The Picture Show Man" where the man always remains one step behind his American-born rival. No matter what he does he can never get on top.

This characteristic is illustrated again in the kind of self-assessment Australians give of their abilities when being interviewed for a job. An American will say quite unselfconsciously that he is first class in his field. An employer would not think of employing anyone who claimed less. The Australian, by contrast, will admit only to being "not too bad" and would be regarded as brash if he claimed more. Even asked about his health an Australian will likely answer "fairly well" or "not bad". It would be tempting fate to be more extravagant.

What is the proclamation we bring to the culture of which this is a characteristic? It may well be the proclamation of a God who is omnipotent, who holds all things in his powerful hand, who accomplishes whatever he wills and holds all things in subjection. The question immediately poses itself: Has such a God any appeal for many Australians? It may be retorted that we cannot construct our doctrine of God to suit the peculiarities of the Australian mind. That is how God is and that is how we have to tell it. But is God like that, or at least is that the whole truth about God? May that not be an idea of God taken over all too uncritically from another culture? Even within the tradition

do we not also have the picture of the weak God who, to use Bonhoeffer's words, "lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross." /7/. Is it not also possible to speak of God as struggling to accomplish his will, to bring chaos into conformity? In that sense he is not yet omnipotent. He too is battling. We believe in his ultimate victory and we commit ourselves to join in the struggle with that hope before us. It seems to me that such an understanding of God not only speaks better to Australian battlers but is truer to our experience of God and the world.

In Christology also it is possible so to emphasize the divine Jesus, the glorified, exalted Lord, that the earthly struggles and trials of Jesus are drained of all reality. On the other hand, the emphasis can fall upon the Jesus who is genuinely tempted, who meets with mounting opposition to his ministry and who in the end, forsaken by his disciples, is led out to die on a cross. There is truth in both pictures, but if we have identified a genuine feature of Australian culture Australians are bound to relate better to the underdog Christ for whom suffering and defeat are real, than to a Christ who easily passes through adversity to triumphant glory.

If Australians have not related well to the church this may be because along with its identification with authority it has persistently tended to strike a triumphalist pose. There would be much greater appeal in a church that admitted that it did not have all the answers, that it often felt bereft of its Lord and had to struggle like everyone else with the issues and problems of the age.

Triumphalism is a constant danger to Christianity and it is especially serious in the Australian setting. It must be admitted that there is some basis for it in the kerygma, particularly in the Christus Victor motif and in the preaching of the resurrection, but it is always balanced by another strand running through the New Testament which emphasizes the foolishness of the cross, the weakness of God and the weakness of the messengers of the gospel. This comes through particularly clearly in some of the Pauline material.

The popular image of Paul is that of a super apostle, supremely confident, having all the answers, single-handedly planting Christianity across the Mediterranean world. Perhaps it is because of this image that in all the Bible-study groups I have led in Australia there has been a good deal of gut-level antipathy towards Paul. But this popular image is far from correct. Krister Stendahl has argued that though Paul was a man of robust conscience, not given much to introspection, he was deeply conscious of weakness and troubled by it. /8/. The constant battle of his life was against the physical weakness represented by the "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). This was not only a personal hindrance to him but gravely undermined his position as an apostle since sickness was taken as a sign of the lack of the renewing power of God. Far from being a super-apostle he found himself at Corinth unfavourably compared with super-apostles who were strong, eloquent and impressive but who preached a much more superficial gospel. Paul's personal experience gave him a deep suspicion of all that is spectacular, heroic and too easily successful. His existential position allowed him to appreciate very keenly the centrality of the cross with all its folly and weakness. As Australians with the particular cultural outlook outlined above, we are in an excellent position to

empathize with Paul and to see and appreciate the gospel as he saw it.

While the culture has implications for the mode or manner in which the gospel is presented, the gospel clearly has something to say to the culture. If we take this one cultural characteristic we have been considering it must be said that it is not all bad. It is not wrong to be on the side of the underdog; it is not necessarily wrong to undersell oneself or to find the non-heroic and the failure as interesting as the heroic and the successful. However, it is a matter of concern that "tall poppies" must always be knocked off, that we must always be suspicious of the successful and begrudge them their success. More basically still, it is a matter of concern that we find it so hard to permit ourselves any success. This is not to say that Australians are not successful. Many are successful, but they are not able to acknowledge or accept that success nor feel any satisfaction in what they have achieved. On the one hand this accentuates the tendency for some to become hard-driving workaholics, ever striving for that which they cannot permit themselves to attain. On the other hand it may reinforce the "near enough is good enough" attitude since success is in any case not permitted.

The question then is how does the gospel speak to people in this kind of a bind? How can Australians be liberated to accept the success of others gladly and even to permit themselves some success? Perhaps in part the answer lies in that universal doctrine of justification by grace. According to Stendahl /9/ its original purpose in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans was to justify the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles and the practice of allowing them to become Christians without first becoming Jews. In Augustine and Luther it became the means for dealing with the severe introspective conscience that became a characteristic of western humanity. There are signs that we are now moving beyond this phenomenon. The introspective conscience has not disappeared entirely but it is no longer the tyrant that it used to be. The problem we now have is slightly different, namely that of personal worth and acceptance: How can I deal with my unokay feelings? How can I accept myself and my neighbour both as okay? God's acceptance of us in Jesus Christ is still relevant to these questions though it needs to be preached with these questions in mind and not the questions of another age. If we believe that God accepts us we should be able to begin to accept ourselves as okay, and then as okay people we can begin to accept others as okay too. We shall not need to knock off our tall poppies because they pose some kind of a threat to us; rather we can rejoice in their okayness. We shall also be enabled to permit ourselves some success, so that we do not need to be battlers forever. We can accept our own success and the success of others as occasions for neither pride nor envy, but for thankfulness and rejoicing.

I have tried to indicate the way in which cultural considerations can help us to see how the preaching of the gospel is to be carried out attractively and relevantly in Australia. Of course the cultural factors are far more complex and varied than this paper indicates. A lot more work needs to be done. I am satisfied if I have been able to demonstrate that cultural considerations are relevant and that evangelism needs to give careful consideration to them if it is to be carried on responsively and with maximum effectiveness in Australia.

END NOTES

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4. Mol, H., *Religion in Australia*, Thomas Nelson, 1971, p.225.
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6. *This is Rolf Harris*, Columbia Record, OSX 7861.
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