



PROPER CONFIDENCE: BEING GOD'S PEOPLE IN A NEW ERA

The after-shocks that followed the Trump presidency and the Brexit vote in the UK have vividly exposed profound fissures across the late modern West. Is it possible to have meaningful discourse across the divides? How might we build a common future to address the crises confronting us? The fundamental underpinnings of the West have been gradually eviscerated. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted:

The truth that a free society is a moral achievement has been forgotten, ignored or denied since the moral revolution of the 1960's. Since then, a single underlying shift in the ethos of the West has produced identity groups, collective victimhood, loneliness, vulnerability, depression, drug-usage, merciless markets, polarised politics, growing economic inequality and intolerance for free speech on university campuses. These are the long-term consequences of the move from

'We' to 'I'. Social isolation has replaced community...when a civilisation loses its faith it loses its future.^[1]

Tom Holland, in his book *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*,^[2] makes it clear that it's not the values of the Enlightenment that birthed the European Union or the Declaration of Independence. Christianity gave shape to the Enlightenment itself. A politics that assumed Christian values and, simultaneously, dismissed them is reaping the grim consequences. The challenges of pandemic have diverted our attention from the crisis unravelling our culture, postponing the divides that haunt our attempts to build a future common life.

This is an anxious time across the churches when they must find a 'proper confidence' to guide their responses. This is the title of a book by Lesslie Newbigin to which we will return later.^[3] This confidence, rather than in an immediate search for ecclesial survival, lies in our engagement with the mission of God. It involves a rediscovery of Christian tradition so that we might offer a fresh revelation of hope to a West struggling to find a basis for its common life. As the aftershocks of our unraveling roll across our societies they bring in their wake a cacophony of proposals for fixing the malaise of the churches. How will we reweave a future rooted in the mission of Jesus? What is our 'proper confidence' based in as we plan and act in this massive unravelling of church and society? To grasp the import of these questions we must look at some of the ways many church leaders are locating their confidence.

For many church leaders, confidence in the aftershocks seems to lie in data and prediction. We're prognosticating, taking out the crystal balls, listening to the trend oracles and looking in the tea leaves to predict what's next for the church. On-line conferences gather around the theme of 'future church'. Thought leaders tell us how to make our churches future proof. This is profoundly dangerous. The light at the end of our long pandemic tunnel fuels this urge to know what's next. Will everything have changed or will there be a return to the normal we had?

A lot will be different after Covid. Many small businesses won't start up again. The damage wrought by isolation won't disappear. There'll be an economic upsurge - for a while. Jobs will return. Money piled in savings will be released in a huge spending spree. The top 2% will get richer while the bottom 50% will become more precarious in a new feudalism. So much damage has been done. There will be massive debts for ordinary people and nations. The poor will be poorer. Renters and homeowners will be vulnerable as government support is pulled back. We will confront the erosion of hope and our capacities to socialize after the isolation. Some aren't recovering from Covid. We'll likely push them aside so as not to be reminded of our vulnerability. Some churches will be full again, for a bit. Many will fall off the cliff. Clergy will be disoriented by what's happened. Many will be confronted with an economic fragility that could devastate their faith and life.

A lot of us are hurting. It is only government policies that keep many from foreclosure and evictions. A new migration is underway - people can no longer afford to live in cities. Cities

themselves are confronting infrastructure and neighbourhood challenges. The collective result is a breakdown of social belonging. Loneliness and isolation are contributing to the worst opioid crisis ever witnessed. We're experiencing the erosion of trust in our institutions at the moment when such trust is essential. Our tribalized political and economic systems are run by those whose incomes and investments have exploded. Technocratic elites seem unaware that for the bottom half of our populations the fear of precarity is ever present. Too many of our brothers and sisters feel abandoned. This pandemic has laid bare the deep chasms of class and racial divides. The church's preoccupation with membership decline and saving *itself* in these realities is pornographic. It utterly misses the way of Jesus. That's the tragedy. We have to look at the plans we're making and ask: What are these plans telling us about where our confidence lies? Too much of our confidence still lies in our desire to manage and control the outcomes we want.

WHAT'S NEXT?

It's natural for us to want to know what's next. All organizations want to know what's going to happen in the coming months. But this need to name the trends misdirects us from a proper confidence that lies in discerning what the Spirit is doing amongst us in this unraveling. In February 2020, the *Journal of Missional Practice (JMP)* completed an edition addressing this question: [What's Next?](#) Energized by conversations around God's mission in disruptive change, we addressed the unraveling through an engagement with Tom Holland's book, *Dominion*. Holland had raised important questions about the direction of the West and the *JMP* wanted to do some reflecting on the 'what's next' question. From the vantage of a year, our questions completely missed what was coming at us right then, in terms of a pandemic, let alone naming future trends. Even as word filtered in about a virus in Wuhan, across western democracies there was little sense it was something we had to attend to. A few virologists saw what was coming, hardly anyone else did. Disruptive change usually happens outside our ability to predict. Mark Lilla of Columbia University wrote about this in a *New York Times* essay:

The best prophet, Thomas Hobbes once wrote, is the best guesser. That would seem to be the last word on our capacity to predict the future: We can't...a truth humans have never been able to accept. People facing immediate danger want to hear an authoritative voice they can draw assurance from; they want to be told what will occur, how they should prepare, and that all will be well.[\[4\]](#)

In truth we are continually shaping the future in our ordinary everyday interactions. Neither augurs nor experts nor data nor trends can give us the predictive power to manage outcomes and be 'future proof'. Reality is very different. We're not given such Faustian control. In Paul's words, *we see through a glass darkly*. When drawn by these future sirens, we fail to understand that it is only in the present that the future emerges. It will always be important to listen to those who evaluate probabilities and, on that basis, warn us about paying attention and being prepared. In Vancouver, where Alan lives, the probability of a devastating earthquake is very high. It's wise, therefore, for us to make preparations. But the belief we can predict and plan for

what's next is problematic. The desire to predict what's coming and so manage the present is alluring. This naming *what's next?* becomes how we lead. A lot of institutions work this way. Experts are paid to name the trends and predict futures. Because these notions of *future* and *next* are so firmly established in our imagination, too many church leaders believe they have to know the future in order to address the unravelling of their churches in the present. The lure is strong. Like our reflexive need to click our iPhones, we're conditioned to believe we can plan for what lies ahead and, so, manage the unravelling. This is not the proper confidence that should shape God's people.

PROPER CONFIDENCE

Questions about how our churches address this aftershock, the unravelling of the modern project, go to the centre of where our confidence lies. Our confidence in the systems, roles, and habits for which we were trained, the 'tradition' that used to bring us success, doesn't help anymore. Our trust is shaken in the aftershocks. American theologian, Willie Jennings, points to this false confidence in an interview with Elizabeth Oldfield (the podcast, *The Sacred*, August 12, 2020).^[5] He argues that an implicit image lies at the heart of theological education in the West shaping how we form people. That image is of a white, self-sufficient man who embodies what Jennings views as three demonic virtues: possession, control and mastery. These, he argues, are what shape our confidence and they are killing us.

When our confidence lies in these three virtues we will look for ways to effectively reinstate our abilities to manage and control our environments. It's natural for us to search for something that helps us regain that kind of confidence. This is not a Christian imagination. It is not the basis for confidence as God's people. It lies elsewhere. The phrase 'proper confidence' is used by Lesslie Newbigin in his 1995 book by that title, *Proper Confidence*. It has to do with epistemology (how we know) and discipleship. The methods we use to know reveal where our confidence lies and what we believe is needed to be faithful disciples. Are we opting to future proof our churches or risking joining the Spirit in the unraveling? For Newbigin the western imagination divided our ways of knowing between fact (science) and belief (faith). In showing this dualism to be false, he proposed a different basis for our confidence and, therefore, our discipleship. A confident knowing of God's purposes is different from managing or predicting futures based on trends or data. The starting places we choose makes all the difference as to what we believe are gospel-shaped engagements with the unraveling. Our starting point tells us where our confidence (discipleship) is located. Newbigin gives an extended argument for rooting our confidence in the Christian story. What follows summarizes his accounting of how churches can confidently respond in the aftershocks of a dying era.

As Christians we find our confidence in a story that is unfinished and which, therefore, offers no certainty in any 'scientific' sense. No predictive rationality can provide us with a certainty that enables us to predict futures and manage outcomes. This story closes that route. At the heart of the Christian message is a new 'fact' - God has acted in the world through a people and, finally,

through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This fact henceforth determines all our thinking and acting. A new starting point, a new place of confidence has been revealed to us in Jesus. This revealing tells us who we are (identity) and how we are to act (discipleship).

This confidence tells us how we are to act (discipleship) in the aftershocks now shaking the churches to the core. The one true story about the meaning of the world is rooted in the fact that God, in Jesus, stepped into the vulnerable risk of relationality with the other. Our knowing what to do in the unraveling (confidence) doesn't come from predicting futures or managing outcomes but in the risk of relationality in our neighbourhoods. The Incarnation was a startlingly risky act - entering the unpredictable maelstrom of human anxiety, with all its needs for power and control, to reweave life. Our confidence is in the conviction that we discover how the Spirit is remaking the world only in this risk of relationality. This kind of discipleship cannot predict outcomes but it creates the spaces where we will perceive what God is doing and know how to join with Jesus in the remaking of the world.

In the aftershocks congregations and their leaders are anxious to save themselves and fix their institutions. There continues to be this default to a confidence in management and prediction. But the future which the Spirit is forming can't be predicted or strategized within trends and algorithms. The Spirit is ahead of us in the ordinary, in our neighbourhoods. In this confidence we are being invited to join with Jesus in the risk of relationality in our communities. Don't be deceived: to be 'future proofed' is to be without God. Discipleship lies in a different direction.

With thanks to St Chad's Sanctuary, Birmingham, UK for the photograph, and with good memories of a wonderful day with asylum seekers at Rowheath Pavilion.

[1] Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020.

[2] Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, London: Little, Brown, 2019.

[3] Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, London: SPCK, 1995.

[4] Mark Lilla, "No One Knows What's Going to Happen", *New York Times* 22nd May 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/22/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-prediction-future.html> Last accessed 14th May 2021.

[5] Willie Jennings and Elizabeth Oldfield, *The Sacred Podcast*, 12th August 2020. <https://thesacredpodcast.podigee.io/81-71-willie-jennings> Last accessed 14th May 2021.



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