

ALMOST BEYOND BELIEF – EUROPE AND THE WEST AFTER CHRISTENDOM

For John and Mair, my parents and first teachers, who raised me in the faith.

PREFACE

‘AN EMERGENCY’

This is an emergency!
It's time to move now ... quickly!

So starts the chorus to the first track on Godfrey Birtill's album *Dread God*¹. I share the conviction. For Christianity in Europe and the West, this is a critical time. But what to do? What's wrong? We don't seem to know – at least, not with any clarity.

BACKGROUND

I've written this book to try to sketch out what's been going on in the West since the Christian message came to Europe – the continent which would eventually take it to the ends of the earth. When I started, my original concern was to brief those who want to pray for Europe, and want to help others to pray. If you're going to intercede for something or somebody, it usually helps to have some background. But then I realised that many pastors too don't know as much as they usefully might about the context in which they minister. If the point of Christian preaching and teaching is to apply the principles of the faith to contemporary life, we who are preachers and teachers need to understand the world around us as much as we understand the gospel. Finally, some time later, it dawned on me that, because the Western world derives from Europe, and

¹ *Dread God: The faith & the fear*, Godfrey Birtill & Band with Betel of Great Britain, live; 2003© Whitefield Music UK Admin Copycare, Hailsham. Track 1 is co-written by Godfrey, his wife Gill, and Sue Mitchell.

Europe is part of the West, I ought to be writing about the West as well as Europe.

What I have to say I'm saying as a pastor². Not that I'm currently leading a congregation – although it used to be my privilege to do so. For the past fifteen years I've been involved full-time with the global prayer and reconciliation networks, working mainly on spiritual mapping and historical research. Also, I've worked a bit on the theological issues thrown up by what pray-ers and reconcilers get up to. The primary call on my life is to be 'a watchman'. A watchman watches what the Lord and the Devil are up to; the Church and the world; Jews and gentiles; Christianity and other faiths; the West and the rest; and so on. A watchman also, like Mary, 'ponders these things in his/her heart'. Beyond the desire to ponder, I've felt led to analyse what I observe, to research the questions thrown up by what my attention is drawn to, and then to develop systematic teaching from what I learn – but wanting to teach practitioners, not intellectuals. So I write from the perspective of a pastor who's a watchman. My general understanding about pastors is the traditional one: once a pastor, always a pastor; true eldership being what a person is, not a job they're entrusted with (despite some current thinking on the matter). So, if I have negative things to say about either the Church (in its institutional form) or its leadership, I'm talking about 'us', not 'them'. When I say 'Church' here, I mean the global or universal Church – the one Body of Christ – rather than any of the lesser manifestations that, however appropriately or inappropriately, attract the designation 'church'. For the purposes of the book, I'm thinking about that part of the universal Church found in the Western world.

In mid-1994, just before I moved on from leading a congregation in Doncaster, in the north of England, the Lord spoke to me very clearly in that town's Southern Bus Station, which lay just beyond the boundary of my parish. He would often

² I don't actually accept the validity of the concept of 'pastor' – or of 'congregation', for that matter. Why will become clear as I write about the Church.

speak to me in that depressing place. “The Church is failing,” he said. I don’t know why, but I thought he’d just told me that I personally had been failing. Immediately, though, I knew that that wasn’t what he’d meant. So I asked him to explain. “If you were to get 10% more people and 20% more money over a 12-month period”, came the response, “you’d think you were winning ... I look at the town.” And because I’d given my heart to praying for Doncaster – *my* town – I didn’t need to hear any more. It was a city, really, and a city well out of control. The words I heard that day changed my life.

As the son of a pastor, and then – following ten years in the military – a pastor myself, I’d always been much more focussed on the Church than on the world beyond the Church. But ever since 1994 it’s been the world that’s had my attention. Sometimes people suggest it’s a shame I’m no longer leading a congregation. But I’ve always known that I was led out of authority within the formal structures so I could focus on what was happening beyond the institution – led out, I believe, because institutional Church structures have such an inward pull. What I long to be able to do is impart something of a passion for the world – the Lord’s creation that he loves – to Christians, because this isn’t as common in the Christian community as it might be; nor as common, sadly, as loving the attractions of the world is. By ‘a passion for the world’ I mean loving the world, God’s creation, as it actually is – not as we’d like it to be, or think it is.

A WORD ABOUT METHOD

The most important things you need to know about where I’m coming from are these: I regard Scripture as trustworthy and authoritative, but I’m not a fundamentalist (that is, I treat the Bible as a variety of different kinds of documents as well as being – ultimately – one book); I’m Pentecostal by experience, but first-and-foremost an evangelical; I’m in the Protestant tradition, but not anti-Catholic or anti-Orthodox; I regard myself as part of God’s Church

that has existed down the ages – and hence as ‘catholic’, if not ‘Catholic’; and I’m a gentile believer who accepts that the Jewish part of the Church is the what the rest of us believers are grafted into (Rom 11: 11-24).

This book is in no way designed as a piece of scholarship (if it were, it wouldn’t be very convincing). It isn’t meant to be ‘history’ either. It’s simply me telling the Christian West’s story as I currently understand it. I depend on *The Times* newspaper – by which I mean ‘The London Times’ – and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) for my regular briefing on what’s going on in the world. I appreciate the debate that *The Times* is, as well as its function as a source of news. It provides a fair amount of the information and opinion about contemporary matters which I quote in the book³. And the BBC’s intention to be objective and impartial – inevitably not always achieved – I find most valuable. Beyond that, I take/see *The Sunday Times* and *The Economist* on a more occasional basis. I’m a middle-class white male with a Welsh – and so Celtic – mother and an Anglo-Saxon father (with Huguenot blood), and I write consequently from that British perspective. I’ve had a privileged education, much of it in ‘the classical tradition’ (that is, derived ultimately from the civilisation of ancient Greece and Rome). As part of my training for ordination I studied academic theology at a secular university (very different from studying, say, evangelical theology at a faith-based university).

Academic books have been another important source of information and understanding for me. Living near Cambridge, access to the amazing library system of Cambridge University has been of the greatest help, and I want to express my gratitude to that university for allowing me this facility. The books I quote from are nearly all either volumes I’ve located there, or that I have at home – mainly the former. One thing I’d like to achieve is to make accessible, to those who read my work, what I find salted away in the world of academia: for instance,

³ I’ve purposely disregarded the conventions concerning the inclusion of long quotations. My concern has been to let those with expertise that I don’t have speak for themselves.

the discussion and debate about 'Post-Christendom' which, though really important, are hardly known to most Western Christians.

Although I spend a good deal of time researching, and by now have a fair general knowledge of the world and the Church across the nations, I'm not trying to offer a thorough account of anything. Particularly as regards the present day, I write about what I know: the Church as I've experienced it and have happened to hear or read about it; and the world around me as I've become aware of how it is and how it functions. At some time in the future I'd be interested in producing a more systematic treatment of what I write about here – but that'll have to wait.

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK

The most important thing I have to say is that Christendom is over, and that the Church in the West needs to grasp the (drastic) implications of this and live its life accordingly. Also I want to stress my belief that Europe and the West are nothing less than the present manifestation of the Roman Empire – that is, of ancient Greece and Rome – and that this explains a lot that urgently needs understanding and acting on.

THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE

Chapter 1 serves as an Introduction, and gives a very basic outline of the story of Europe and the West. In it I define some of the concepts that arise in the story, and make some comments. At the end of the chapter I quote some recent prophecy, which helps me, at least, understand what's going on at the moment, and where the West may be headed.

PART 1 Chapter 2 is a reminder of the social condition of (some of) Western life today. Chapter 3 looks at the spiritual state of the West. In chapter 4 I consider the current state of the Church.

PART 2 Then we jump back in time. Chapter 5 looks at 'the preparation for the gospel' – those many, very-important things which were in place, when Christ came, and afterwards, to facilitate the spread of the gospel across the world. In chapter 6 I take a look at the story of God's people in the Old and New Testaments, and the way things were meant to be in the Church age, according to the New Testament – but all too often haven't been. Chapter 7 considers the way things changed fundamentally and developed after the time of the (first) apostles.

PART 3 Chapter 8 looks at another time of dramatic change, initiated by the Emperor Constantine in the earlier 300s AD: the beginning of Christendom. Following this, chapter 9 describes what happened after the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the West – the so-called Dark Ages, the earlier part of what's more generally known as the Middle Ages. It was then that the modern West and its Church were formed in the womb, as it were. Chapter 10 runs from the time, around 800 AD, when the Western Roman Empire and Christendom can be said to have been re-born, to the end of the Later Middle Ages – the period in which what would become Europe emerged. This was a period of transition from chaos and poverty through to the launching of a civilisation that would prosper (though not without some massive problems) for more than a thousand years, until today – but also, at a more fundamental level, 'the Age of Faith'.

PART 4 Part 4 is about the development of the modern world – and the decline of the hold of the Christian faith on Europe's corporate imagination. Chapter 11 looks at the take-off of what was recognisably becoming 'Europe'. Chapter 12 continues the story, taking it from the Renaissance (the recovery of classical learning – mainly that of Greece, but also that of Rome) through to the

Reformation (that transformation of substantial parts of the Catholic Church caused partly by a crisis in the life of the Western Church, and partly by the Renaissance which provided the context for it).