



Shards of Light

The Case for Christ that Cuts through the Haze

You've seen the new freedom that secular thinkers have when it comes to attacking Christianity: the jokes, the headlines, the snide attacks on Creationists, on the Bible, on the church and its sorry history. Victorian Baptist pastor Geoff Leslie reflects on how these criticisms remind him of another, more hopeful, side of the story.

It can be disheartening that the people we are praying for and those we think may be interested in Jesus are well and truly exposed to these negative messages. They hear, loud and clear, that believing the Bible or trusting what the preacher says is out-of-date, stupid and unintelligent.

We have hoped that we will meet someone on the bus who is quietly sobbing with a sense of sin and guilt – our message is expert at answering that – but nobody seems to feel that way today. And if they did, they'd go to a medical professional who would treat it as a condition to be managed or medicated, not cured. Sure, people still have a 'God-shaped hole in their heart' but the barrage of noises, entertainment, diversions and pop-up solutions to life papers it over and few are aware of it.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly given this context, people are still coming to faith. I have met many people over the years who have heard the quiet door-knock in their heart, a wistful longing in their soul for a deeper connection or a dissatisfaction with contemporary life fixes. But the appeal has changed, the meaning of faith is in a fresh context; the old formulae need re-thinking. Fleeing from the fear of Hell seems out of place and grandiose promises of prosperity and health are repugnant.

What is there about the Christian message that stands with integrity in the deeply hostile environment of contemporary Western culture? What do new believers see that is significant, desirable and important?

As I've mixed with people on the fringe of faith, I've identified four aspects that seem to be credible and relevant for people today.

1 A Caring, Inclusive Community

It may seem presumptuous to describe the church as a place of welcome, acceptance and care when the public is battered with reports of churches and leaders behaving badly. However, it remains true that the everyday local church contains a host of incredibly altruistic, caring people who genuinely do good. When accidents strike, when babies are born, when loved ones are dying or when people are simply finding life tough, people rally beautifully with meals and prayer support. And community life can be rich, working with others, singing together, finding a place to belong.

2 A Better Life

How did David find the strength to face a giant? By faith in God. How did Paul endure suffering? By the comfort and hope found in Christ. From cover to cover, the Bible testifies that opening our hearts to God brings joy, peace, courage and hope.

For many Christians, hope of a better life does not match their reality. Their life is a difficult as the person's next to them. My hunch is that for these people, their inner life is probably the same as the person's next to them as well. It takes a bit of discipline – prayer, meditation and devotional reading – to cultivate awareness of the presence of God. There is great power when we feel the flow of the Spirit, giving confidence and insight, wisdom and determination. While our everyday circumstances may be the same as the person's next to us, life has greater purpose and hope and loneliness is banished by the presence of a Friend. Our tangled messy lives are slowly straightened out.

3 Life After Death

The reasons we don't talk much about the afterlife are many. They include the modern demand that religion should have an immediate usefulness and not just kick in when we die. Also, our need-to-know-what-when-who-how minds are frustrated by the lack of clarity about what happens after death. Even Biblical scholars are scratching their heads.

When Paul says, "Our citizenship is in Heaven"¹ he is talking about the character of our life in this world and the place from where Jesus will come to restore the Earth. I don't find Biblical support for the idea that Heaven is our real, happy home and Earth is unimportant. Much of the Bible is actually about building the Kingdom on Earth. We are not waiting here, killing time, hanging around for the party to begin.

However, one great certainty that Christians can always celebrate is that our relationship with Jesus is not severed by death, that, "Neither life nor death... can separate us from the love of Christ."² We can have confidence to meet God when the final siren sounds for this age. It is a hope that is not lost on those who attend a Christian's funeral and compare it with the hope-less passing of those with no such faith.

4 A Summons to Mission

Strangely, none of these appealing traits is as important to me as the invitation I have from Jesus to join Him in His mission to bring in the Kingdom of God. The great dream of the reign of Jesus on Earth was inaugurated when He began to, "Set free the oppressed, open the eyes of the blind and proclaim Good News to the poor."³ He called people to join Him in the mission, to work together as a community and spread the Kingdom.

This invitation summons me out of myself to a life of meaning and blessing. It's picking up the call of Abraham to bring blessing to the nations, it's finding the good works, "Prepared for us to do"⁴ and by our engagement with the community proclaiming the right of Jesus to be Lord of all life.

I'm inclined to believe that people find this invitation to risk-taking adventure appealing. The church can stop competing with other advertisers offering wares that promise life or happiness. Instead, we lay down a challenge to join a revolutionary movement. The keepers of the status quo should be alarmed! Jesus' mission is subversive and wonderful, alternative and disturbing; it is not for the fickle and flighty, it is not fashionable or faddish. It beckons us to hope, purpose and vision.

So, on the days when I read another church-bashing article in the newspaper or hear even more critical comments about Christianity from my neighbours or feel worn down by being a minority in a majority secular society... I remind myself to not be despondent. There is another side of the story: There are shards of light cutting through this haze. God is still at work in the world, shaping a new community and drawing people to Himself. This powers my prayers, creates a cohesive meaning for all the daily tasks of life and gives me courage to continue to identify as a follower of Jesus.

Reflect:

- How do you feel when Christianity gets a beating in the media?
 - What is it about Jesus or His people that entices you to live a life of faith?
 - How does the summons to mission 'beckon you to hope, purpose and vision'?
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Geoff Leslie

¹ Phillipians 3:20

² Romans 8:38

³ Luke 4:18

⁴ Ephesians 2:10