

Time Running Out: Welcoming the Day of Opportunity - July 1987

After a five-year battle between scientists and environmentalists, a Californian-based company, Advanced Genetic Sciences, and a group at the University of California plan to test bacteria genetically engineered to prevent frost damage to crops.

The first tests are to be on strawberries and potatoes in a test plot surrounded by a 30-foot buffer of pure soil. The test will be monitored by the US government's Environmental Protection Agency for its effect on insects, plants, soil and water.

Jeremy Rifkin, leader of the environmentalist group Foundation of Economic Trends, continues to fight the planned release of these genetically manipulated organisms, fearing that the bacteria could become dominant in the upper atmosphere, preventing the formation of ice crystals in clouds and resulting in drought on earth.

Escape hatches

On reading this report, buried on page 19 of The Independent newspaper, I couldn't help the instant clash of thoughts and feelings. Is there no end to man's interference in nature? What kind of future is lurking in the shadows of man's unending pursuit of knowledge? Is it possible that somewhere in the not-too-distant future a dreadful mistake in this field of science will make sci-fi movies such as Aliens an horrific present-day catastrophe?

While on the subject of catastrophes, constant analysis and TV reports on famine, war and disaster have anaesthetised people to the emotional and mental impact of human tragedy. It's natural for most people to turn away from the ugly side of life. We don't wish to identify with what's going on. We choose to tell ourselves that the exploitation of a hurting world is the result of someone else's bigotry or despotism — and is therefore someone else's responsibility. We look for escape hatches rather than face up to the underlying causes of 5000 suicides in Britain each year. We turn a blind eye to the slaughter of the innocent through abortion, with 411 babies murdered in the womb each day.

In seeking personal happiness and gratifying our own needs we forget that 164,000 children each year become the innocent victims of divorce petitions as families collapse.

Praying with crossed fingers

Instead of facing reality, the average person in Britain spends 30 hours 38 minutes each week in front of the TV screen. Much of it consists of taking the daily dosage of media tranquillisers in the form of soap operas and game shows — the escapist's fantasy world.

Occasionally, something happens that breaks through our emotional and mental defences — reports of famine in Africa, an earthquake in Mexico and, closer to home, the Zeebrugge ferry disaster. Even then, most people breath deeply, saying, 'God, what a tragedy! What luck I wasn't there.' Most people believe in God. But so often he's allied to the vague force they call 'chance' — 'If God doesn't work, maybe luck will.'

This approach is highlighted in the message President Reagan is reported to have sent to Mrs Thatcher prior to her visit to Moscow earlier this year for summit talks with Mr Gorbachev: 'God bless and good luck.' That's tantamount to saying, 'Let's pray — with our fingers crossed!' Climax of the age We mustn't settle in the dangerous ruts of ignorance and escapism. Everything today points towards our generation witnessing the climax of human wickedness linked with demonic activity.

Through reading the New Testament we know that the predicted return of Christ will be preceded by a world sharply divided between two kingdoms — the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of God's Son. World society will manifestly collapse as its politics become increasingly filled with deception. True scientific advance will be threatened by the egotistical aspirations and jealousies of the power-hungry.

International business will continue to bury millions of people in poverty as it pursues profits, while millions of starving people, like some skeletal army of the living dead, will be on the move in search of a place to survive. In addition to affecting innocent victims, AIDS will continue to wreak vengeance on those who allow their consciences to be seared (1 Timothy 4:2) by living in promiscuity.

Harvest time

On the other hand, the kingdom of God is becoming more apparent. We are experiencing a powerful move of the Holy Spirit within the church. This is having an impact on millions of people in all continents of the world. Peter Wagner, Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, has stated, 'By conservative estimates, every day sees 78,000 new Christians. Every week 1600 new churches start in different places in the world .

'In 1900 there were an estimated 50,000 evangelicals in Latin America; today there are over 50 million, and the projection for the year 2000 is 137 million.'

He reports that in the Hindu kingdom of Nepal, where the preaching of Christianity is officially forbidden, the church has grown from 500 baptised believers in 1976 to over 60,000 today.

In China, which contains 25 per cent of the world's population, the communists drove out all missionaries in 1949/50, leaving behind an estimated one million Chinese believers who suffered intense persecution under the Cultural Revolution.

Today, estimates place the number of Chinese believers as high as 50 million, with this incredible growth being promoted by widespread spontaneous outbreaks of supernatural wonders and signs in every province in China. This work of the Spirit continues in that vast country, where no fewer than 27,000 people become Christians every day!

Where are you in all this?

It's inevitable that at some time a clash will come between these two kingdoms. Jesus and his disciples were aware of both the pressure and potential of their time. They lived among an oppressed people whose national identity and personal self-image had been trampled on for generations.

They committed themselves to working the works of God on a scale that would establish the kingdom of God as a present reality rather than the vague hope held out by a devout few still locked into Judaism.

The followers of Jesus confronted the world system and the moral values around them, disturbing political and religious leaders alike by their preaching and power. Jesus was deeply conscious that the message he carried wasn't merely based on a religious or philosophical difference; he was bringing a word that was to be life or death for millions. He refused to support the religious or political hierarchies of his time so as not to hinder the progress of God's purpose through him.

Knowing that his time for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom was limited, he said, 'As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work' (John 9:4).

The river flows on

Following his resurrection, the early church threw themselves with zealous abandon into the task of fulfilling the great commission to bring the kingdom into all the world. Utterly disregarding personal welfare, they pursued their objective. Indeed, it is very difficult to identify the mobile pilgrim community of the first generation with the static Christian churches of our day.

With passion and power they surged across the world, like pent-up waters bursting through a dam, rushing down the valleys and carrying everything in their swirling torrent. Paul cried, 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Corinthians 9:16), and explained his sustained drive in the words, 'Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 3:13-14).

Today, a new political and social consciousness is emerging in the church, coinciding with a new search for security and hope in the world.

Although it is true that established religion continues to show statistical decline, spiritual enquiry is increasing. The thousands of home-groups throughout the land, meeting around God's Word and ministering to each other's needs, is only one indication of the potential for change in the nation.

Forward thrust

It is essential that we advance on all fronts with new zeal and commitment. We must submit our career prospects, economic welfare and dreams of comfortable security to the challenge of bringing the gospel to the needs of our cities, towns and villages. Like Jesus, we must work 'as long as it is day' because 'night is coming, when no-one can work' (John 9:4).

Thousands of you reading this article need to apply this statement to your personal setting. It isn't anything to do with being called into 'full-time ministry'. It's being a full-time Christian wherever you are — in politics, social work, business, carpentry, education, accountancy, homemaking, plumbing. You need to do God's works where you are and while you still have the opportunity.

Here are some practical steps you can take in doing this:

- Speak up in situations where Christian values are either threatened or need to be established.
- Be uncompromising in your life and speech. Remember that, although speech is free, you have to earn the right to be listened to! Don't be afraid to dissociate yourself from smutty and suggestive talking and from wrong behaviour.
- Be bold in praying for those who are sick and hurting.
- Take every opportunity to affect political or social policy for the betterment of people around you.
- In your employment or profession think soundly, work diligently, communicate clearly and behave considerately.
- Be warm to those around you. Remember that your business associates or workmates want your friendship. Don't be aloof or indifferent

- Make fresh contact with family and relatives, remembering that Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding of friends attended by his mother and brothers (John 2:1-12). Let that contact give your relatives pleasure, not pain.
- Jesus was human enough for the ordinary people to receive him. Don't be over-religious in your speech or mannerisms — putting on a special voice when you pray or moving your head in a 'reverent' fashion. Never speak as though your brain has been programmed from birth with a dictionary of religious clichés.

Warm contacts

Let me share with you what happened recently in one of the new churches we work with.

The church leader conducted a survey among 35 people in the group. They were asked to make a list of all their 'warm' contacts. By that he meant people who were showing an interest in the testimony and way of life of the Christians. The 35 people listed 470 warm contacts. Now, instead of trying to reach the whole city at once, they are focusing their attention on these people.

Make a list of your warm contacts. Share openly with them the story of God in your life. Display readiness at all times to understanding their situation and enter into it. Willingly listen, counsel and act for good wherever you can. Then pray in the Spirit for those people.

As a team we're receiving reports which, when totalled, indicate that hundreds of people are finding Christ every week in this country. There's an increasing pace of conversion taking place.

It's a day of opportunity we mustn't miss. Let's together rise and do the works of God who sent us, while it is still day, so that soon we can cry out joyfully, 'Welcome to the coming King!'