# Priorities for Christians engaging our culture

*by Dr David Phillips, BSc, PhD, ThA*
*National President, FamilyVoice Australia*



VoxBrief
*August 2010*
FamilyVoice AUSTRALIA

© FamilyVoice Australia

***Christians who step out of the comfort zone of the church and into the world of cultural engagement are confronted by a bewildering array of issues. Should we be concerned about the economy, health, education, the environment, abortion, defence, housing, violence, the family, corruption, democracy or what?***

***When constrained by limited time and resources, are some issues more worthy of being addressed by Christians than others? If so, what are the priority issues for Christians engaging our culture?***

When we make decisions about priorities, we apply values that we consider important. What a person believes affects what he does. We live as we believe!

Not only do individual people live out their beliefs, so do cultures and nations. This is starkly portrayed in Charles Dickens' novel *The Tale of Two Cities*, set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution of 1789. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

At that time, England was greatly influenced by the Christian faith, following the Wesleyan Revival earlier that century. France, on the other hand, was in the grip of the humanist-inspired Enlightenment. Dickens contrasted the Christian-inspired rule of law in Britain with the brutal Reign of Terror in France.

The legacy of those two contrasting worldviews can still be seen today in London and Paris.

The twists and turns of London streets, and the numerous backstreets so loved by London taxis, witness to the respect for private ownership of property in English law. The origin of that respect is the Judaeo-Christian commandment: *You shall not steal.*[1] This is but one of the Ten Commandments which have had an honoured place in English law since King Alfred the Great.[2] The English respect for private ownership of property was shown after the Great Fire of London in 1666, which destroyed much of the city, when the homes and businesses were rebuilt on the same allotments.

The contrast with Paris is stark. The grand Avenue des Champs-Élysées, and the magnificent roads radiating out from the equally grand Arc de Triomphe, were built with scant regard to the previous owners of the land. The "general will" of the people had no place for "trivialities" such as private ownership of property. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famously sinister words, "Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than he will be forced to be free."[3]

Since beliefs and worldviews have such a great impact on life as we know it, what core beliefs of the Christian faith should illuminate a Christian engagement with our world?

## Priorities

Since the earliest days, Christian believers have been baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[4] This understanding of God as one being in three persons, later described as the Trinity, has been the touchstone of orthodoxy for the Christian church throughout its history. The doctrine of the Trinity is not some idea dreamed up by ivory-tower philosophers and theologians. It is the way the early church integrated the real life experiences of the apostles and other disciples as they encountered Jesus of Nazareth through his life, death and resurrection.

As the disciples experienced Jesus' ministry they were eventually forced to confront the question: "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"[5] Later, Peter answered the question in his memorable words: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."[6] Finally, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead put his divinity beyond doubt.

Jesus is clearly a distinct person from the Father, because he prayed to the Father. Nevertheless his relationship with the Father is so close that he could say: "I and the Father are one."[7] Likewise, the Holy Spirit is in such a close relationship with the Father and the Son that Jesus, speaking of the Spirit, told his disciples that the Counsellor "will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."[8]

In short, God has revealed himself to us as three persons in perfect relationship. God is essentially personal and relational. As Christians engage the culture in which we live, the core values we should uphold are relational.

What then are the primary relationships we experience in this life?

## Discipleship

The most important relationship for Christians in this life is surely that with our heavenly Father, through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, as we engage our culture, a top priority should be to preserve our freedom of religious belief and practice. Protection is needed not only for religious *thought* but also for *speech* and *actions* informed by religious belief.

My wife and I visited Sweden in 2004. Not long before, a Swedish pastor named Åke Green who had preached a sermon on homosexuality was convicted of homosexual vilification and sentenced to a month in prison.[9] We spoke to Swedish Christians who would no longer dare publicly to criticise homosexual behaviour. Pastor Green was later acquitted on appeal, but the Christian voice had been effectively silenced.

Freedom of speech is not tested by uttering platitudes. Nor should it protect defamation. Freedom of speech is about the right to debate issues, challenge opinions and provoke controversy. Freedom of association is equally important, so that the people of God may gather together for mutual encouragement. Christians in the house church movement in China have suffered severely in recent decades for exercising freedom of association contrary to government directives.[10]

Christians should vigorously defend freedom of speech and actions informed by religious belief, subject to few constraints, such as laws against defamation and threats to public safety, order, health, or morals.[11]

## Marriage

The second most important relationship for Christians in this life is that of marriage.

The created order established by God in the beginning included the fundamental ingredients of marriage. God created people as male and female,[12] with the intention that a man should be united with his wife[13] and that they should be fruitful and increase in number.[14] Jesus referred to these statements as the establishment of marriage.[15]

As part of God's created order, marriage forms a vitally important element of his purpose for mankind. It is protected by the commandment: "You shall not commit adultery."[16] It was honoured by Christ through the performance of his first miracle during the wedding at Cana.[17] Jesus strongly defended marriage in a discussion with his critics about divorce[18] and in two parables he compared the kingdom of heaven to marriage.[19] Furthermore, the church is pictured at the end of the age "as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband," the risen Christ.[20]



Thus every Christian marriage has the potential to be a living picture of the gospel, reflecting the relationship between Christ and the church.[21]

The essential biblical ingredients of marriage are well captured by the definition incorporated into the Australian Marriage Act in 2004: "the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life".[22] It is a union, not just a relationship; it is between a man and a woman; it is voluntary – forced unions don't count; it is a commitment for life; and it excludes all other such unions.

The responsibility of the wider society in relation to marriage is to hold it in honour – as the writer to the Hebrews stated: "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."[23]

Society is called by God to honour marriage by granting it special status – marital status. Marriage deserves legal recognition not given to other relationships. Married couples should receive privileges not available to others. Marriages should be protected from arbitrary unilateral dissolution. Over recent decades, society has tragically failed to honour marriage – at great social cost.

A Christian priority should be to advocate restoration of marriage to an honoured status.

## Human dignity

One of the most awesome experiences of a married couple in this life must surely be the arrival of their first child.

The birth of a perfectly formed but completely helpless baby is a moment of both wonder and delight. One can understand Eve's excited exclamation at the birth of Cain: "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man."[24]

The quest to understand the origin and nature of life, particularly human life, is the holy grail of modern biology. What is life? How did life begin? Such questions were the driving force behind the human genome project.

The Psalmist contemplated such questions with awe and wonder: "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made."[25]

We must always remember that human dignity derives from being made in God's image.[26] God calls us to respect human life at all times, for we are accountable to him for the lives of others:

*Whoever sheds the blood of man,*
*by man shall his blood be shed;*
*for in the image of God*
*has God made man.*[27]

Another priority for Christians engaging our culture must be to advocate respect for human life at all stages.

## Parenthood

The third most important relationship for most people is that between parents and their children.

God's very first command to human beings – the cultural commission – starts: "Be fruitful and increase in number."[28] In other words, have children! This is echoed in the Lord's message to the exiles in Babylon through the prophet Jeremiah: "Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease."[29]

The importance of the family in God's sight is emphasised with the commandment to honour our father and mother.[30] The apostle Paul reminds his readers that this is the first commandment with a promise: "... that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."[31]

The reason for the strong emphasis on the integrity of marriage and the family unit in Scripture is clear. The primary means of transmitting the faith from one generation to the next is from parents to their own children. The prophet Malachi reminds God's people that he hates divorce because he is seeking godly offspring.[32] The responsibility given to parents is very clear: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."[33]

Proverbs echoes this emphasis: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."[34] And the apostle Paul encourages fathers to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord.[35]

The biblical principle of parents having responsibility for determining the education of their children is upheld in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948:

Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.[36]

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Australia is a signatory, also reflects this principle:

The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.[37]

A priority for Christians engaging the culture in which we live should be to uphold the prior right of parents to raise their own children, including determination of their religious upbringing, education, health care and discipline.

## Society

The fourth most important relationship for most people is with other people in their community.

How can people best live together in peace – with both freedom and order? Scripture addresses this question in some detail.

The origins of Christian attitudes to national governance are found in the reluctant institution of the monarchy in ancient Israel. Unlike other ancient nations such as Egypt and Persia whose sacred kings ruled as priests with almost divine authority, in ancient Israel a clear separation was maintained between king and priest, between palace and temple.

The kings of ancient Israel were to have limited authority – subject to the laws of God, as spelled out in Deuteronomy:

*When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.*[38]

Subsequently, the Israelite kings were held accountable to the laws of God through the prophets, notably Samuel, Nathan and Elijah.[39]

During the period of exile in Babylon, when God's people lived under an alien pagan ruler, they were instructed to seek

the peace and prosperity of the city where they lived. They were to respect and serve the rulers, provided this service did not compromise the worship owed to God alone.[40] The people's duty to God was again clearly separate from their duty to the king.

At the time of Jesus, taxes levied by the Roman authorities were greatly resented by the people. When challenged about this, Jesus clearly rejected political power for himself with his memorable reply: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."[41] The apostles Paul and Peter continued to assert this principle of respect for governing authorities, since they derive their authority from God even though they may not acknowledge him.[42]

Nevertheless, this respect for governing authorities has limits. When Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin and ordered to cease teaching about Jesus, they replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"[43] This example of civil disobedience was similar to the courageous stands taken many years earlier by Daniel and his friends in Babylon.[44]

The biblical ideals of limited power for rulers and the separation of church and state – both accountable to almighty God – arise from two fundamental Judaeo-Christian insights: the dignity of man and the frailty of man. In recent centuries, as history attests, this Christian worldview has provided fertile ground for the development of democracy. Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, in his book *Conviction and Conflict*, comments:

*Christian ideas about the dignity of the human person, the necessity of personal faith, and the importance of individual responsibility have all contributed to the development of democratic ideas... While aware of democracy's limitations, most Christians have seen the force of Reinhold Niebuhr's argument that democracy is not just about freedom and choice but about protection from oppression: 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.'*[45]

A priority for Christians engaging our culture should be to uphold our system of constitutional government, which enshrines the biblical principle of limited government powers as a safeguard against tyranny.

## Implications for the nation

What are the implications of these priorities for Australia, the nation in which we live?

British anthropologist J D Unwin, in his seminal 1934 work *Sex and Culture*, reported a connection between flourishing cultures and sexual norms. After studying 80 different societies, including the civilisations of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Hellenes, Romans, Anglo-Saxons and English, he concluded that no nation that rejected monogamy in marriage and premarital sexual chastity lasted longer than a generation after it embraced sexual hedonism. Unwin stated it this way:

*In human records there is no instance of a society retaining its energy after a complete new generation has inherited a tradition which does not insist on prenuptial and postnuptial continence.*[46]

Nations that valued monogamous marriage and sexual abstinence were creative and flourished. Unwin described this as "cultural energy" that can only be maintained when sexual activities remain restricted within marriage. Harvard sociologists Carle Zimmermann, in *Family and Civilisation* (1947),[47] and Pitirim Sorokin, in *The American Sex Revolution* (1956),[48] have reached similar conclusions.



More recently, David Aikman, former Beijing bureau chief for *Time* magazine, in his book *Jesus in Beijing*,[49] reports an astonishing experience of 18 American tourists visiting Beijing in 2002. In a scheduled lecture at China's premier academic research institute, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, a scholar told the group:

*One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.*

What then can we say about the implications for the nation of the Judaeo-Christian value system? Does it matter whether we worship only Almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit; whether we honour marriage; respect human life; defend family life and limit government power? The evidence is that it does matter. If Australia loses the Christian worldview on which it was founded, we risk our culture, our nation and our future.

## Implications for the church

What are the implications of these relational priorities for the Christian church?

One of the great challenges facing the Christian church in Australia today is its decline in recent decades. From the beginning of last century until the Great Depression, over 96% of Australians described themselves as Christian – as shown in census data from 1901 to 1921. The first census after the Great Depression, in 1933, revealed a sharp drop to about 86%, which was maintained for the next three decades until the 1960s.[50]

Since the 1970s the religious affiliation of Australians has steadily changed. Christian allegiance has fallen until, in the 2006 census, it was only 64%.[51]

Estimates of church attendance are more uncertain, partly due to the variety of methodologies used. Hans Mol in *Religion in Australia* reports estimated weekly church attendance rates between 22% and 38% during the second half of the 19th century and possibly a similar range in the first half of the 20th century.[52] Gallup Polls between 1947 and 1962 recorded figures for weekly or regular attendance between 23% and 35%.[53] In *Who goes where?* Peter Kaldor reports estimates from various social surveys of at-least-monthly attendance ranging from 44% to 36% between 1950 and 1970.[54]

The period from 1970 to 2001 saw a steady decline, with claimed at-least-monthly attendance falling to about 20% and weekly attendance as a proportion of the population estimated at 9% from the 2001 National Church Life Survey.[55] This decline in church attendance since about 1970 roughly matches the decline in census-based Christian allegiance over the same period. What happened in the 1970s to trigger this decline?

If individual denominations are considered, the picture becomes more complicated, with some growing and others declining. Peter Kaldor addresses the question of switching denominations in *Winds of Change*.[56] He reports that 12% of church attenders surveyed in the 1991 National Church Life Survey had switched denominations in the previous five years.[57] This is more than enough to account for the 5% denominational switchers in the five years between the 1996 and 2001 surveys.[58] The growth of the booming churches is not enough to arrest the decline in Christian allegiance or church attendance in Australian society.

What about the next generation? What are the biggest influences on young people today as they develop their life and faith and worldview? Philip Hughes of the Christian Research Association addresses this question in *Putting Life Together*, based on interviews of 160 high school students.[59] When asked about the important influences in working out their lives, family and friends were seen as major influences by 79% and 78% of students respectively – far ahead of school (42%), church (23%) and religious education (16%).[60] Furthermore, when

asked where they go for help, 49% definitely relied on themselves, 31% on friends and 26% on parents – again far ahead of teacher (2%) or chaplain (2%).[61] Clearly, parents have a major role in shaping the values, faith and worldview of their children – potentially far greater than their school or church.

The important influence of parents is also seen in church attendance. Among young people aged between 13 and 24 who worshipped at least monthly, at least one parent also attended in 69% of cases. Where the whole family attended, 98% of young people also attended. An important factor is the enthusiasm of the parents about their faith. Among young people who considered at least one parent enthusiastic about his or her faith, about 80% also attended. Among those whose parents were not considered enthusiastic about their faith, only about 30% attended.[62]

The spiritual leadership of fathers seems particularly important. Researchers in Switzerland, conducting a study of linguistic and religious groups in that country in 1994, asked questions to determine whether a person's religious practice carried through to the next generation.[63] The study found that if both parents attended church regularly, then 33% of their children also attended regularly. If only the mother attended regularly, then a mere 2% of the children followed her example. If only the father attended regularly, 38% of the children also did – even more than if both parents were regular attenders! A startling conclusion from this study is that the father's spiritual leadership is a crucial factor.

The picture emerging from these studies is that the transmission of the Christian faith to the next generation today is primarily in the hands of the Christian parents. The most favourable environment for raising Christian children is with parents who have a good marriage with a happy home and good relationships with their children and who are themselves enthusiastic about their Christian faith.

The future of the church depends critically on the quality of the primary relationships of marriage and family life, and on the spiritual leadership of parents - particularly fathers.

## Conclusion

**As Christians respond to the cultural commission – God's call to create a culture under the lordship of Christ – we should focus on priorities that flow from God's essential Trinitarian nature. As three persons in perfect relationship - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – God is essentially relational in nature. Since we humans are made in His image, we also are essentially relational beings.**

**Christians are called to promote and protect the most important relationships in life: our relationship with God, the relationship of marriage between a man and a woman, the relationship between parents and their children, and our relationships with others in the wider community.**

**These priority relationships have huge practical implications for both the nation and the church. History tells us that nations fail when they abandon sexual restraint and respect for marriage and family life. A nation is only as strong as its constituent families.**

**In recent decades the church in Australia has been failing to transmit the Christian faith to the next generation. The future of the church is critically dependent on the quality of Christian marriages and family life, and on the spiritual leadership of parents - particularly fathers.**

## References


1. Exodus 20:15.
2. "Alfred the Great", Wikipedia; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_the_Great
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762), Book 1, Section 7.
4. Matthew 28:19.
5. Matthew 8:27; cf Mark 4:41; Luke 8:25.
6. Matthew 16:16; cf Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20.
7. John 10:30.
8. John 14:26.
9. "Swedish pastor vindicated", *Light*, February 2006, p 7.
10. Aikman, David, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, Monarch Books, Oxford, 2003.
11. Article 18 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1996* (ICCPR), Article 18(3) states: "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."
12. Genesis 1:27.
13. Genesis 2:24.
14. Genesis 1:28.
15. Matthew 19:4-6.
16. Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18.
17. John 2:1-11.
18. Matthew 19:1-8; Mark 10:1-12.
19. Matthew 22:1-14 and 25:1-13.
20. Revelation 21:2.
21. Ephesians 5:21-33.
22. *Marriage Act 1961* (Cth), s 5(1) marriage.
23. Hebrews 13:4.
24. Genesis 4:1.
25. Psalm 139:14.
26. Genesis 1:27.
27. Genesis 9:6.
28. Genesis 1:28.
29. Jeremiah 29:6.
30. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16.
31. Ephesians 6:2-3.
32. Malachi 2:15.
33. Deuteronomy 6:6-7.
34. Proverbs 22:6.
35. Ephesians 6:4.
36. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*, Article 26(3).
37. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1976*, Article 18(4).
38. Deuteronomy 17:18-20.
39. Kings had their rights and duties prescribed (1 Samuel 10:25) and were held accountable to the laws of God through the prophets (eg Nathan and David in 2 Samuel 12 and Elijah and Ahab in 1 Kings 21).
40. See Jeremiah 29:7 and Daniel.
41. Matthew 22:21.
42. See Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17.
43. Acts 5:29.
44. Daniel 3.
45. Michael Nazir-Ali, *Conviction and Conflict: Islam, Christianity and World Order*, Continuum, London, 2006, pp 130, 132, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Nisbet, London, 1945, p vif.
46. Unwin, J D, *Sex and Culture*, Oxford University Press, London, 1934; cited by Louis P Sheldon, *The Destruction of Marriage Precedes the Death of a Culture*, Traditional Values Coalition, Washington DC; http://www.traditionalvalues.org/pdf_files/deathofmarriage.pdf
47. Zimmerman, Carle C, *Family and Civilization*, 1947; 2nd abridged edition with James Kurth (Editor) published by Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 25 January 2008.
48. Sorokin, Pitirim A, *The American Sex Revolution*, Porter Sargent, 1956.
49. Aikman, David, 2003, *op. cit.*, p 19.
50. "Religious affiliation", 1301.0 - *Year Book Australia 2006*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 24 January 2007.
51. "Cultural diversity", 1301.0 - *Year Book Australia 2008*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 7 February 2008.
52. Mol, Hans, *Religion in Australia: a sociological investigation*, Thomas Nelson, 1971, pp 12-13.
53. Ibid,. p 14.
54. Kaldor, Peter, *Who goes where? Who doesn't care?*, Lancer Books, 1987, Fig 2.2, p 22.
55. Bellamy, John and Castle, Keith, *2001 Church Attendance Estimates*, NCLS Occasional Paper 3, NCLS Research, Sydney, February 2004.
56. Kaldor, Peter, *Winds of Change: The Experience of Church in a Changing Australia*, Lancer Books, 1994.
57. Ibid., Ch 16, p 226.
58. Bellamy and Castle, 2005, Table 2, p 7.
59. Hughes, Philip, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research*, Fairfax Press, 2007.
60. Ibid., Fig 48, p 175.
61. Ibid., Fig 7, p 65.
62. Ibid., Figs 49 & 50, pp 177-9.
63. "Les caractéristiques démographiques des groups linguistiques et religieux en Suisse", by Werner Haug and Phillipe Warner of the Federal Statistical Office, Neuchâtel, Chapter IV in *Les caractéristiques démographiques des minorités nationales dans certains Etats européens*, Volume 2, Population Studies No 31, edited by Werner Haug and others, published by the Council of Europe Directorate General III, Social Cohesion, Strasbourg, January 2000; cited in *UK CHRISTIAN HANDBOOK Religious Trends 3*, 2002/2003, Section 1.6, "Religion in Switzerland"; and by Robbie Low (vicar of St Peter's, Bushey Heath, from 1988 to 2003), "The Truth About Men", http://trushare.com/83APR02/AP02LOW.htm