

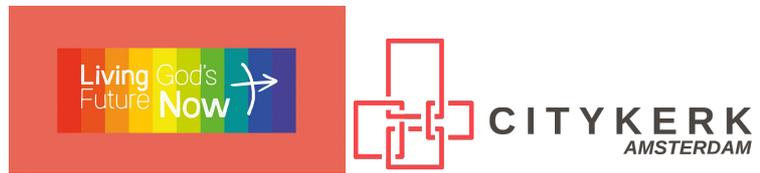


Open Like Never Before

On the first day after my summer break, I suddenly saw it: Coca Cola's new slogan. *Open Like Never Before*. A sentence intended to encourage a society that is limited by COVID-19. For me – as a non-regular coke drinker – it works. *Open Like Never Before*. Four simple words to remember, to build trust, to challenge – they are really helpful. I wish we had invented this slogan, my mind kept saying. We as in church. Coca Cola knows very well what an economy of meaning enhances. It is all about opening up, indeed, really opening – of course in a context of all sorts of limitations. A challenge to cafes and churches. An invitation to governments and citizens. Not 'just open again'. Be more open today than you were yesterday. Not back to normal, but go further, to something new. Whatever the intentions of the marketeers of Coca Cola were, the church can consider their slogan as a summary of the gospel.

I am well aware of the fact that these theological reflections will not come to everybody's mind. It must have to do with the fact that I have read a lot of stuff about marketing. And that I feel enthusiastic about a book which has been translated into Dutch recently: 'A Future That's Bigger Than the Past: Towards the Renewal of the Church'. It was written by Samuel Wells, vicar in London and an important voice in the Anglo-Saxon academic theology. His book was based on a series of lectures that together represent the vision of *HeartEdge*, a network of 400 churches all over the world. The church I serve is part of this network, as well.

So what does the word 'future' mean? To Wells it is not just the day of tomorrow or the era after COVID-19. In theology, future is an eschatological term. It means that we already know a little bit about how it will end. Because the church is fueled by the visions of the prophets in the Old Testament. God will establish a new world, on justice and righteousness. The message of Jesus about God's Kingdom brings focus into these visions: this is what really matters, this will happen soon. Revelations, the last book of the Bible, brings these things together and gives Jesus a central position: one day, he will renew everything. *New Like Never Before*. The biblical prophets have always painted a vision for the future in the context of something that will become part of the past very soon. The future is always bigger than the concrete present – which is passing by as we speak. That is why Egypt will not win. Nor will Babel, Jerusalem or Rome.

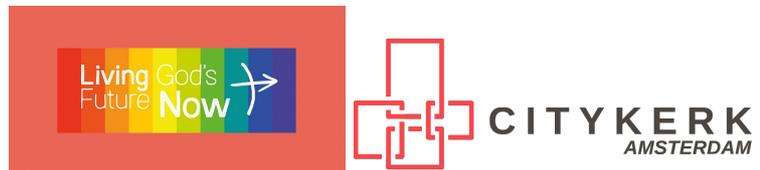


Which past is vanishing at this moment? For Wells it is in short: a certain type of society, and (therefore) a certain type of church that oriented itself on that type of church. During his whole career as a theologian and a vicar, Wells is putting the philosophical, social and economic challenges of our time into words. In this book, he writes extensively about: (a) everything is expressed in euros nowadays; (b) we all feel that we miss an inspiring moral framework; and (c) we lost the balance between economy and ecology. Wells challenges churches and individual Christians to relate to these questions. All sermons, house groups and books on Christian ethics should be about these subjects. The Dutch novelist Arnon Grunberg said that people wished each other a happy world's doom in Vienna a century ago. Nowadays, we see the same defeatism. Well, Coca Cola doesn't believe in that. And the Christian church even less. So, what is your only hope in times like these? That there is a future anyway. And that it is even bigger than the past.

As is stated several times before in this paper, Wells shows in an inspiring way to which current debates Christians can contribute. These can be encouraging words. But it is even better to form alternative communities within society. Groups of people who believe that the past – in the personal or collective sense – doesn't have the final say. Because God will always do something bigger. For Wells, the true church is community-centered and on that base, it can take very different forms.

In the subtitle of his book, Wells advocates for renewal. In his opinion, this means that the church should learn how to do business. Church is business. When he says that, people react surprised or worried, and that explains directly why there are so many financial problems in churches. It is a blind spot. That's a little bit odd, because Jesus was a carpenter and Paul tentmaker. Today, they would have been software developer and truck driver. Besides, Jesus told many parables about business, and the same goes for Paul's metaphors. Why would church be the exception? The 'c' of commerce is one of the four c's that form the base of *HeartEdge* network (the three others are community, charity, and culture).

Commerce offers three chances; according to Wells they are instrumental, exemplary and social. *Instrumental*: a lot of churches need money in the pocket. So, think of something and rent out the church building. *Exemplary*: in your conduct of business, you can express your concern for humanity and environment. And *social*: by choosing a business form that causes social impact indirectly. This is not a specific frame for the church, but a scheme which is also familiar to Coca Cola. We live in times of poor spirituality and companies are aiming at the soul of consumers. It



would be better if the church takes the initiative, instead of being critical without doing anything. What if the church would really be 'open like never before'? And by the way, what if Coca Cola would actually be like that? Practice what you preach, right?

His profundity as a theologian enables Wells to speak about business in such an open-minded way. Sometimes they are mingled with each other. For example, look how Wells speaks about 'commerce', while learning some lessons from the parable of the unjust steward: generosity is the best investment and doing business is mainly about making friends. I would love to speak or even preach about this at the main office of Coca Cola. Furthermore, Wells doesn't stop saying that, while economy evolves around the principle of scarcity, God's kingdom is built on abundance. Never is there shortage, there is always more than enough. Despite the differences between Coca Cola and the church, they both share this longing. It is even the fundament of their business-model. That's why 'their' commercials and 'our' sermons sound similar sometimes. Simply because people are driven by the desire for a future that is bigger than any past.

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Translated by Hanna Blom-Yoo