

Are you pessimistic about the future of the church? Then *Futureproof* is for you. Not that Steve McAlpine is unrealistic about the challenges before us. But he gives us reasons for hope and ideas for action. Eschewing superficial or trendy solutions, *Futureproof* digs deep into Scripture to prepare us to live well in our changing context and offer true hope in an anxious world.

Tim Chester, Faculty Member, Crosslands Training

If, like me, Stephen McAlpine's previous book caused you to ask, "Where do we go from here?", here is the answer. It has the same clarity and punchy impact as before. A really good and profoundly helpful book.

Alistair Begg, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

A positive, encouraging read for anyone wondering whether Christianity has a hope of surviving the decades to come. (Spoiler: it does, and has a great hope to offer the culture, too.)

Jennie Pollock, Author, *If Only*

It's often said that it's far easier to expose the failings of our society (and the church) than it is to suggest healthy, realistic and, above all, manageable responses—but Steve has managed to do both beautifully. As well as continuing to reflect on the bewildering changes going on in our world, this book offers a richly biblical, sane and thoughtful way forward. Read this book, be encouraged and throw yourself into God's great project to offer hope to a hopeless world!

Gary Millar, Principal, Queensland Theological College

I invariably find Stephen McAlpine a trusted and insightful commentator on current events, and especially on the relationship between the church and the culture around it. In *Futureproof* he sets his sights on *future* events and offers commentary that is just as helpful and just as perceptive—commentary that will help the church live well in this day and prepare itself for days soon to come.

Tim Challies, Blogger; Author

This is so helpful for all sorts of Christians to read. Steve manages to combine nuanced gracious engagement with Western values, alongside specific practical suggestions. He offers shrewd cultural comments and observations but they are always driven by biblical priorities.

Matt Fuller, Senior Minister, Christchurch Mayfair, London

Stephen McAlpine —

How to live for Jesus in a culture that

keeps on changing

Future

proof

Futureproof
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To Jill, Sophie and Declan, for walking into the future with me with gospel grace. And to the staff at Mimz Barber Shop, for the beard-trims, the banter and the curiosity about the matters in this book.

Contents

Introduction	9
1. The Church of Back to the Future	15
Part One: A Lasting Future	
2. Out-Purpose the Culture	31
3. Out-Relate the Culture	47
4. Outlast the Culture	63
Part Two: A Flourishing Future	
5. Polarisation: How to Flourish as a Community	79
6. Technology: How to Flourish as a Participant	97
7. Culture Wars: How to Flourish as a Citizen	115
8. Ecology: How to Flourish as a Steward	131
Afterword	149
Acknowledgements	153
Notes	155

Introduction

So you're outside church on Sunday after the evening service when the DeLorean sports car from the classic '80s movie *Back to the Future* suddenly appears hissing and steaming in the car park. The famous gull-wing doors creak open. Emerging from the plume of smoke, an older—much older—version of your pastor runs over to where your startled fellow congregants are milling around.

“Quick!” he shouts breathlessly, fumbling around in his pocket. “We don’t have a moment to lose! I’m your pastor from 30 years in the future. Things have changed. They’ve changed a lot. I’ve drawn up a list of things you’re going to have to start working on now if you want our church to be around then.”

Once you’ve gotten over the craziness of what has just happened, you all gather round him, eager to hear what the future will be like. Questions about hoverboards and their actual existence fade away as this future pastor breathlessly maps out the twists and turns of culture and society coming down the line.

You all lean in as he describes the way governments will view their citizens; the scientific advances that will call into question what it means to be human; the culture's vision of the good life; the place and role of Christianity in society, and whether it will have a role or a place that is even recognisable to us today. He unpacks how environmental and social challenges will be being tackled—or not being tackled.

All of this presents direct challenges to the church. All of it calls for a considered decision by the church to put into place a discipleship program that will be an effective counter to the more challenging aspects of the future secular culture. But you're beginning to feel confident that your pastor from the future has given you enough insight for you to know what to do from this point on. He's filled in the picture distinctly enough for you to know where the key challenges lie.

All too soon he looks up. "Time's up! I've got to go now or I'll miss my moment!" Despite protests and pleadings from some in the group who want to hear more, he is insistent. And within no time at all, the DeLorean screeches out of the car park and down the road, a row of sparks lighting up the air behind it. A police siren suddenly wails close by. Clearly someone was doing 88 mph in a 30 mph zone.

A Futureproof Church

Our culture is constantly changing. Wouldn't it be incredibly helpful if someone from the future came back

to help your church figure out how to remain faithful and fruitful within those changes? It would clear your mind if someone were able to tell you some tried-and-tested strategies for navigating a Western world that is hostile to the gospel message, a workplace that is devoted to values not aligned with Christian ones, or an online culture that sweeps people up in ways that seem impossible to predict. After all, who knows what is coming down the line and how it will affect Christians? How do we futureproof ourselves?

This book is not a crystal ball. I can't give you a definitive guide to exactly everything that is going to happen. It's all well and good being a futurist, but what we know as "black-swan events"—once-in-a-lifetime things like September 11 or the COVID-19 pandemic—inevitably upset the best- (and worst-) laid plans of mice and men.

Nor is this book a litany of complaints about ways in which the church is failing to keep up with the culture or speak into the culture, or anything else. If I wanted to see such a list, then I'd only have to go on Facebook and read through my feed for 15 minutes. It seems everyone has an opinion on what the problem is and how the church is supposed to fix it—or how the church is part of the problem.

But I do know for a cast-iron fact that the church *is* futureproof. And I want to help us think through why, and how we can lean into that in a way that prepares us for whatever twists and turns our culture takes in the next 30, 50 or 100 years.

The Task Begins Now

Because of the death, resurrection, ascension, rule and imminent return of Jesus, the future of the church is assured. Jesus himself made that claim when he stated that the gates of hell would not stand up to the advance of his church (Matthew 16 v 17-19). If the worst of the worst cannot stop the inevitable triumph of Jesus and his church, then nothing lesser can. Yet of course that does not mean we just sit back and wait. The discipleship task for those who know that the future is assured *then* is to do the work of futureproofing the church *now*. We're working our salvation *out*, if you like—in the knowledge that God is working it *in* (Philippians 2 v 12-13). We need to ensure that we are readying and equipping ourselves now for whatever the future looks like.

This task begins now. We will not get to the future and be able to shore up non-existent foundations. The time to build communities that will be resilient and strong in the face of perhaps hostile governments is now. The time to grow in a gospel hope that renders us non-anxious and open-hearted in a fearful and shrivelled age is now. The time to put aside every weight of individual and collective sin in order to be holy and hopeful in a godless and nihilist era is now.

This book is designed to help us begin the futureproofing process: not by predicting every minute detail of the future (and especially not the existence or otherwise of hoverboards) but by examining the directions and

convictions of our society across a wide spectrum of issues, and then extrapolating out from there to see where they might take us. It will explore Western culture's anxieties about the future and how these anxieties play themselves out.

Armed with these broad insights, we will then take what the Bible says and apply it to a variety of possible future pressures, exploring how we can live for Jesus in a constantly changing culture. Not just for our own sakes but for the sake of the anxious who are looking for hope in times of rapid and nausea-inducing change.

This Scripture still stands:

*His divine power has given us everything we need
for a godly life through our knowledge of him who
called us by his own glory and goodness.*

(2 Peter 1 v 3)

Fun fact: *every* generation of God's people has been futureproofed. We have everything we need. Time to figure out how that is going to play out in practice in this changing and challenging age.

1. The Church of Back to the Future

Events catch us out. I began writing this book in my study, with sun streaming through the windows, my newsfeed filled with images celebrating the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. There were articles recounting the 70-year reign of an iconic monarch; pictures of crowds of people across the United Kingdom holding street parties and draped in Union Flags; and messages of support and admiration from across the world and the political spectrum. President Joe Biden of the USA, President Emmanuel Macron of France, our newly elected prime minister in Australia, Anthony Albanese, and many others lined up to praise the amazing 96-year-old whose rule had spanned a period that began just after the Second World War.

In that first draft I wrote about the joyous celebrations, colourful and unanimous in their affirmation that her reign, just as much as the equally famous reign of

Elizabeth I back in the days of Shakespeare, was something worth celebrating. In the midst of all the tumult—internationally, nationally, and indeed personally within her own family—the queen had literally been regal, a steady hand in unsteady times.

Yet several months later, as I began editing this book, my daughter—who loved the queen—was texting me, worried that the monarch was about to die. It had been a constant concern for her as the queen had become frailer. And in fact, Elizabeth II did pass away that very day.

It turned out that the Platinum Jubilee celebrations were indeed the final hurrah. Not just for the queen, but for the way of life that she embodied, the values she espoused. The queen's reign represented a period of change like no other in recent history, as we moved from the industrial age of World War II through a technological age in the Cold War era and into our current digital age. The Western world is incredibly different to the way it was when Elizabeth was crowned.

But the changes run deeper than that. Think about this: Elizabeth only became queen because her uncle, Edward VIII, abdicated so that he could marry the love of his life, the divorced American socialite, Wallis Simpson. Elizabeth's father—and ultimately Elizabeth herself—only ascended the throne because the marriage of the king of England to a divorced woman was a bridge too far. The Church of England would not countenance it because Simpson's ex-spouse was still living.

Yet now? The new king, Charles, divorced Princess Diana. He married his lover, the equally divorced Camilla Parker Bowles, whose ex-husband still lives. But there were no formal objections to Charles taking the throne—neither from Parliament nor from the Church of England.

Things have changed, and changed a lot. And of course, by the time you are reading this, things will have moved on apace. Change will have been our only constant. And clearly not always change for the better.

The shift in the moral standards that we demand from a king is only one symptom of the huge differences that now shape our world. It's clear, for example, that we are more divided than ever. Every time a new prime minister or president arrives on the scene, they promise to bring unity—and that lasts a couple of weeks before the hostilities recommence. Division is deeply entrenched. Both sides of politics increasingly see the other as not simply wrong but “bad” or “evil”. Polls back this up. In the US, an Axios survey discovered that roughly half of Democrats and Republicans view the other side as both ignorant and spiteful, with a mere 2-4% viewing the other as “kind”, “fair” or “thoughtful”.¹

Social media amplifies and rewards these divisions. We no longer read as widely as we once did, preferring to consume media that confirms what we already think, rather than pushing into ideas that we find troublesome or challenging to our view of the world. Meanwhile Twitter bots, created and backed by rogue governments,

are poisoning our politics. Smartphones and social media have radically changed how we communicate with each other and how we absorb information on everything from what a politician did or didn't say to what kind of nappies we should buy. The looming shadow of AI promises more changes still—with unresolved issues around copyright, privacy and employment just starting to peep over the horizon.

What about what it means to be human? It seems impossible nowadays for government health departments to define what a woman is—something that activists applaud, comedians mock, and corporations enforce. Parents are faced with radical “diversity programs” in their children’s schools. What do we do when our children announce that their best friend now has a different gender, or they themselves do?

Meanwhile church attendance in Western countries is collapsing with the rise of the “nones” and the “dones”. In Australia in 2022, the proportion of people self-identifying as Christians shrank to 44%, down from 61% just ten years prior.² This is repeated across the Western board.

Questions arise. Can our public ethics—grown as they are from biblical roots—be maintained in a post-Christian setting? For believers, what is going to happen as the Christian sexual ethic goes from being viewed as merely wrong to being denounced as bad, dangerous and unsafe? Is it only a matter of time before our governments and

courts legislate to remove children from parents deemed “unsafe” for holding to a Christian vision of human identity and flourishing? It seemed unthinkable a decade ago, but not now.

We can predict trends and patterns. We can watch decisions made in one year come to their logical conclusions in the next. But the pace of change and the sharp turns mean many of us are suffering from a cultural nausea. It would take an exceptionally confident person to say with any certainty what the next five years will look like, never mind the next 30. The future is a roller coaster, not a cable car. Strap yourself in!

The Future of King and Church

If you have read all of this without having heart palpitations, then check your pulse! Much of what I have described is very confronting—to Christians and secularists alike. It’s no surprise that the level of anxiety in the West has skyrocketed. My wife is a clinical psychologist, and she is booked out for months. During the delayed Tokyo Olympics in 2021, she made the point that if there were a mental-health Olympics, anxiety would be the absolute gold-medal winner. Anxiety lies over our Western culture like a pall.

Yet, as Christians, who are called not to be anxious both by Jesus and the New Testament writers, we have a sure foundation for the future, grounded in the resurrection

and return of King Jesus. Our King is one day coming to rescue his subjects, and he will usher in a new creation. This should make it possible for Christians to banish that crippling society-wide anxiety, replacing it with hope and confidence.

In fact, it was in the midst of their own turmoils in a brutal Roman Empire that the earliest Christians found their hope for the future. To their joy and surprise, they realised that the future had already begun in the resurrection of Jesus:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy, he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you. (1 Peter 1 v 3-4)

Those words were written by the apostle Peter—a man who at one time was so anxious about his own personal future that he even lied about knowing Jesus (Matthew 26 v 69-75). What had changed? The resurrection had convinced Peter that Jesus was indeed God’s King, and that if he could conquer death, there was nothing outside his power. This enabled Peter, from that point on, to live large! To live anxiety-free.

Now of course there is a type of anxiety that is part and parcel of every human life—perhaps about matters such as the health or fate of a loved one. The apostle Paul

admitted to feeling anxiety in his concern for the church (2 Corinthians 11 v 28). But Paul's anxiety was not the crippling, pervasive anxiety we see in our culture today. Australian pastor and author Mark Sayers sums this difference up:

*In our day anxiety has become one of the significant ailments of our world. Yet it is also a signal that something is desperately wrong in our world. We must differentiate between the individual mental health challenge of anxiety, which a minority of individuals in every culture experience, and the systemic anxiety that our contemporary culture's structures create.*³

Only a non-anxious structure can counter an anxious one. And the church can be a non-anxious structure, no matter what the circumstances of the future hold. It ought to be, given our understanding of Jesus and his kingship. As Paul wrote:

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4 v 5-7)

The Lord Jesus is not merely nearby in terms of proximity; he is nearby in terms of his return! The King is coming. We can pray to God and be guarded by his peace.

Paul's words are not so different to the comfort that Jesus offered in Matthew 6:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear ... The pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (v 25, 32-33)

Anxiety about the future can be banished by the fact that God is our heavenly Father. God sits in heaven—and the key point here is not his distance from us but his rule over us. His is the kingdom. God has control of all things, even our futures. We don't need to worry.

This lack of anxiety—or at least the conditions that can banish anxiety—must be Christianity's best-kept secret! I am not sure that, if the general public were asked to provide some of the defining characteristics of the church, the term “non-anxious” would be top of the list. But it ought to be.

Being a Christian does not preclude worry or fear. We ought to take seriously the anxiety experienced by those with mental-health issues within our church communities. Yet as an entity, we should not be defined by anxiety. Neither fear about the future nor anger about the increasingly post-Christian direction our Western culture is heading in should be features of a church confidently awaiting the day of Jesus' return.