



The Bible and our Contemporary Mission

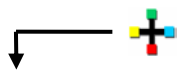
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J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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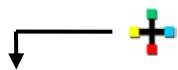
I am deeply grateful for the honour of being invited to give this lecture in memory of one so greatly loved and honoured as an expositor of the scriptures. I am especially grateful for the fact that you have invited one who is not a Roman Catholic to stand in this succession. Those of us who are still, sadly, 'separated brethren' are sometimes tempted almost to envy the joy with which so many Roman Catholics are today rediscovering the bible, while we Protestants who have chanted the slogan solo scriptura have sometimes behaved as if we found the bible remote and tedious. The movements of thought in the past two centuries have brought many in the Protestant churches to a position where we are almost ashamed to appeal to the authority of scripture, or else uncertain about how to do it. And since this uncertainty cuts at the root of any real missionary witness, and since the one in whose honour this lecture is given was a great lover of the scriptures, I have chosen as my theme 'The Bible and our Contemporary Mission'.

Let me begin with an affirmation which is perhaps obvious and yet is necessary and basic. We are Christians and we have a mission because God who is creator and sustainer, source and goal of all that is, has sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to reveal his glory and to redeem fallen creation. If this is not so, then the Church is merely an aspect of culture, a school of thought, the bearer of an ancient tradition alongside the many other traditions which go to make up the complex fabric of human history. That is how the Church is often viewed in India, that land of religious pluralism, and that is how it is viewed by very many in this country. By contrast, the language of the Church is, from the beginning, the language of testimony. We bear witness that God has spoken, that God has acted, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. St Paul never identifies himself as a teacher, a thinker, a philosopher; he is always simply and plainly a messenger, an apostle, one sent with a message to deliver.

And that - everywhere and always - is the role of the Church. We cannot speak to the world as the bearers of any wisdom, insight or practical experience superior to that of others. We are simply witnesses who point to Jesus and say: 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. There, in Jesus Christ, is the face and the form and the fulness of God'.

But that means that we have to direct men and women to the scriptures. They are the primal witness to what God has done. Apart from the New Testament we do not know Jesus, and apart from the Old Testament we do not understand the New but misunderstand it on the basis of presuppositions brought from elsewhere. The Church, therefore, depends always and everywhere upon the scriptures. Of course in saying this I do not mean to foreclose the long debate between Catholics and Protestants about the roles of scripture and tradition. Since the work of the World Conference on Faith & Order at Montreal in 1963, and the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, much of the bitterness and confusion has been removed from this debate. We can now agree (in the words of the Montreal Conference) that 'we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel, testified in scripture, transmitted by the Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit'. That is a statement on which (I believe) we are all agreed.

But if that agreement has stilled (for a time at least) the ancient controversy between Catholics and Protestants, it has not prevented another much more difficult problem from arising. At the same Montreal meeting which produced that statement, we heard a lecture from the great biblical scholar Ernst Kasemann who almost shattered the conference by his assertion of the almost unlimited diversity and mutual contradiction which (he claimed) modern scholars find in the New Testament. From its beginning the ecumenical movement has sought in the bible which we all share one of the great sources of



unity. On the contrary, said Kasemann, the bible is so full of almost unlimited diversity that the canon of scripture 'legitimizes more or less all sects and false teachings'.

A multiplicity of messages?

Here in a sharp and even shocking form was presented the problem which we face when we try to confront our modern western culture with the message of the bible. We are at once asked: 'Which message?' The critical work of scholars over the past two centuries - analysing, dissecting and separating all the elements that have gone to the formation of scripture - has left us, apparently, not with a message but with a whole medley of contradictory messages. When one speaks in a group of theologians of 'the gospel' one is immediately asked: 'Which gospel? Paul's or Luke's or John's?' And even if you find answers to these questions, you are asked whether the records really convey the words and deeds of Jesus, or are only interpretations remote from the actual happenings and shaped by all sorts of other interests. And if you turn to the Old Testament the problem becomes even more acute. Your talk about the prophetic teaching on social and economic justice is interrupted by the question: 'Which prophet? If Amos, why not Isaiah? And if Isaiah, was he not contradicted by Deutero-Isaiah, and he again by Trito-Isaiah? And why do you appeal to the Exodus tradition of revolt against oppression instead of to the advice of Jeremiah to the exiles to pray for the good of their oppressors?'

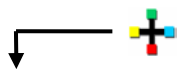
Perhaps I am exaggerating, but the difficulty is real and formidable. How, in the face of these questions, can we speak about the message of the bible? And if we cannot, how can we bring about a real missionary encounter with our modern secular or (perhaps) pagan world?

Gospel and Culture

When we ask these questions we are in the field of missiology, of the issues involved in communicating the gospel to a people and a culture. The experience of missions in other parts of the world can help us to see the issues involved in communicating the gospel to our own people.

Missionaries have always had to wrestle with the question: How can we communicate the gospel to this people in the language and style of their culture so that they can really make it their own? In Protestant missionary circles the key word for many years was 'indigenization'. Catholics more often used the word 'adaptation'. But both of these words convey wrong pictures. Indigenization has often meant trying to use the traditional styles of culture (words, concepts, liturgy, architecture, music, visual art) to communicate the gospel. The difficulty here is that, in every culture, there are conservatives who cling to these things and radicals who are in revolt against them. By following this path of 'indigenization' the missionary allies himself with the conservative elements (the ones least open to change) and alienates those who are looking for something new. On the other hand the term 'adaptation' suggests that the missionary possesses - so to speak - the pure unadapted gospel which he then adapts to suit the new culture. But this blinds the missionary to the fact that what he brings is not a 'pure unadapted gospel', but in fact a version of the gospel shaped by his own culture. This approach blinds him to the fact that a true missionary encounter will always confront both the missionary and the people to whom he goes with the necessity for change. A true missionary encounter, like the meeting of Peter with the household of Cornelius (Acts 10), will profoundly change both the missionary and the community to whom he brings the gospel.

It is because these two words are inadequate that, in recent times, the dreadful word 'contextualization' has been coined. The word is a monster, but a useful one. It draws attention to the fact that a communication of the gospel will be such that it is heard as addressing the real context of the hearers - which includes both their past traditions and also the contemporary issues which face them now. It will speak to people at the point where, now, they face the fundamental issues of life. If you want a beautiful biblical paradigm of what I am trying to convey, consider that verse (Acts 26:14) where Paul interrupts a speech in Greek to tell king Agrippa that God spoke Hebrew. Paul was a man of two worlds, two cultures. He was at home in the imperial, metropolitan world of which Greek was the language. He was making his speech in Greek in the presence of the representatives of the imperial power. He is using their language to communicate to them the glorious secret of the gospel. But at the crucial point of his story, where he tells of how God spoke directly to him, he says that God spoke in Hebrew. God addressed



him not in the language of public life, but in the language of the home and the heart, in the mother tongue. But, and this is equally important, the word which God spoke was not one which affirmed and endorsed his deepest feelings and desires. On the contrary it challenged him at their very centre. 'Why do you persecute me?' The word challenged the very central thrust of his whole life. What he took to be devotion in God's service was revealed as an attack on God himself. It called for an abrupt stop and a total U-turn in his life.

This double character is the mark of true missionary communication. It speaks right to the heart and conscience, which means that it must speak in the language of our deepest feelings and commitments. But it does not merely confirm those feelings and commitments; it calls them radically in question. To put the same point negatively, a true missionary communication does not come as something in a foreign language, so that I have to emigrate out of my culture in order to hear it; I hear it as the person that I really am. On the other hand a true missionary communication does not merely confirm my selfhood; it calls the whole direction of my life in question. This is what is meant by genuine contextualization. Where this is lacking, the result is either irrelevance (the message may be interesting but it does not concern me existentially) or else syncretism (the message is merely absorbed into my already settled patterns of thought).

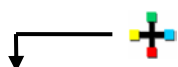
There is at the present time a huge literature on the subject of contextualization. One can read in missionary journals essays on the problems of contextualizing the gospel in all the cultures of the world from China to Peru. And the writers are always careful to point out the dangers of

syncretism - the danger that in trying to be 'relevant' one may simply allow the Christian message to be absorbed into the native culture. But is it not strange that there is so little sign of serious wrestling with the problem of contextualization in relation to the most resistant of all contemporary cultures, namely the tough, confident, resilient paganism of our 'modern' western world? Would it be unfair to characterize much of our contemporary Christian speaking and writing as a sort of timid syncretism? To put it more explicitly: have we not got into a situation where the biblical message has been so thoroughly adapted to fit into our modern western culture that we are unable to hear the radical challenge, the call for radical conversion which it presents to our culture? In other words, are we in the Christian churches of this country really committed to a genuinely missionary encounter with our culture as it is today?

Questioning our assumptions

What do I mean by 'our culture'? My dictionary defines the word as follows: 'The sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another'. This includes language, religion, politics, economics, law, custom and tradition, the arts - everything which goes to make up the shared public life of a community. The key to it all is language, which is the primary vehicle of our shared life. If one has lived all one's life within one culture and spoken one language, then one is not conscious either of culture or of language. Language is just the way you say things, and culture is just the way things are. It is only when you step outside your native culture, learn another language and share in another way of living that you become aware of your own culture as something which is not just 'how things have always been and always will be'. I have spent most of my life in India and exercised most of my ministry in the Tamil language. Now I live in England and minister in English. I am compelled to look at this English culture and ask: What is it? What is this 'modern' culture which has now spread with dominating power into every part of the world, shaping the lives of 'educated' people in every country, and yet so completely different from anything that went before and from anything that you will find today in the villages of Africa and Asia and the Pacific Islands? How can we 'see' this culture of which we are a part and which has shaped all of us?

A convenient - even if arbitrary - point at which to begin the answer to that question is that movement of thought in the mid-eighteenth century which those who shared in it called the Enlightenment. That is not a wholly arbitrary choice for starting point. Of course the roots of our modern culture go back into very much earlier times. The point is that at that moment the peoples of western Europe seemed to go through a sort of conversion experience. Things which had been in preparation for many centuries seemed to come suddenly to vivid consciousness so that (like the man in the gospel) they were



compelled to say: 'We were blind but now we see'. Light had dawned. The darkness had passed away. Ancient dogmas and superstitions were now seen for what they were - illusions. Now things are seen as they really are. And so 'enlightenment' seemed the proper word to describe it. And in the confidence that the true nature of things had now come to light, European man set out to enlighten the rest of the world and to create what we often call 'the modern world'.

The Enlightenment and after

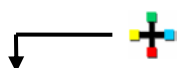
What, exactly, was it that the men of the Enlightenment saw so clearly? To answer that question will help us, I think, to see our own culture with fresh eyes. At the risk of gross oversimplification let me suggest what were the key elements in the 'vision' of the Enlightenment.

- (a) Fundamental to all else was the new vision of things provided by Newtonian science. The brilliance of Newton's achievements seemed to light up the whole horizon. The 'real' world was now brought to light behind the appearance - an infinite world of moving bodies, from

the atom to the stars, operating according to fixed laws which could all be expressed in mathematical terms. The method which was embodied in Newton's Principia would provide the tools for analysing and understanding all the phenomena and penetrating to the reality behind them.

- (b) That reality is best described as 'nature'. Nature is the sum total of all that is observable. In fact nature takes the place of God as the ultimate reality with which we have to deal. Consequently the idea of revelation becomes superfluous. We learn the secrets of nature not by revelation but by using the methods of science to discover how nature operates.
- (c) 'Law' is no longer the expression of the will of a Lawgiver. Laws are the necessary relations which spring from the nature of things. They are not 'given' but discovered by patient observation and analysis.
- (d) Human reason and conscience are competent to understand what is and what ought to be. Anything which invades this autonomy in the name of revelation is to be rejected. Very specially the ecclesiastical dogma of original sin, with its implication that human reason and conscience are not to be trusted, is an infamous slander which must be silenced for ever.
- (e) The methods of science are adapted to the various elements in nature to be studied. They do not depend upon any prior truths such as those alleged by theologians. Each science is autonomous. Economics, for example, is no longer a branch of ethics but a 'value-neutral' explanation of how economic 'laws' operate. Theology can have nothing to say to it.
- (f) In line with the affirmation of the autonomy of reason and conscience is the central place given to the 'rights of man'. Mediaeval society had been based on the idea of the duties owed by each person according to his station in society. To the men of the Enlightenment what was 'self-evident' was the equal 'right' of every human being to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Happiness on earth rather than glory in heaven is the proper goal of human existence.
- (g) To secure these rights, governments have been established. Government, therefore, increasingly takes the place of God as the guarantor of happiness. The nation-state becomes the focus of ultimate loyalty beyond which no other appeal is allowed.

If this shockingly superficial summary may be accepted for the present purpose, then three comments on it are in order. First, we have to acknowledge the immense achievements of the Enlightenment. It would be blind and foolish to underestimate the liberation which has come through the establishment over such a wide field of freedom of enquiry and of conscience, through the work of science and technology, and through the removal of ancient superstitions. These things are so obvious that I do not pause to enlarge on the list. Secondly, we have to recognize that the agenda of the Enlightenment has not been completed. Very specially in the field of human rights there is, as I do not need to remind you, an enormous unfinished task before our contemporary world. But, thirdly, I think we have to say that we face all around us the signs of the collapse of the 'Enlightenment' world-view. A world which has been completely 'explained' by the methods of modern science has become a world without meaning. Modern western man no longer has the faith that science and politics can solve his problems. The mushroom cloud that the atomic bomb throws up



darkens the whole horizon for us today. Even medicine, the most benign aspect of modern science, no longer has the complete confidence of our generation. There is a return to things which the Enlightenment thought it had banished for ever - astrology, witchcraft, the 'occult'. (In many English bookshops today, if one asks for a book of theology, one is directed to the shelves labelled 'The Occult'). Above all, the faith of the eighteenth century that enlightened men and

women could build a perfect world on earth is now a forgotten dream. There is little faith in any better future, and therefore nothing to give meaning to what we do in the present. We have reached the end of the age of the Enlightenment.

If one goes on to ask: How did the churches respond to the challenge of this new world-view? I suppose that one could answer somewhat as follows. The Roman Catholic Church fought a rearguard action against the Enlightenment, put up barriers against it, but did not develop an effective missionary strategy in relation to it. The Protestant churches, without much of a fight, retreated into the private sector and left the public world to the assumptions of the Enlightenment. In the field of education there was, indeed, some struggle to retain the hold of the traditional view, but before long this also was abandoned and the condition for university entrance was no longer an acceptance of the Christian dogma but an adequate grounding in the world-view of the post-Enlightenment age. From the eighteenth century onwards, the characteristic form of living Protestant religion has been pietism, the religion of the heart, of the home, of the private sphere. Since the Second Vatican Council we are in a new situation. The great contemporary movement of renewal in the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II looks (at least to an outsider) in some respects like a coming to terms with the Enlightenment. The crucial question, it seems to me, is whether this will be a surrender to the Enlightenment, such as happened in Protestantism, or the beginning of a truly missionary encounter with the culture of the Enlightenment. That, it seems to me, is one of the most important questions for the universal Church in our time. And that question brings us back to Thomas Worden and the theme of this lecture, for one of the central issues involved in a missionary encounter with our culture is the question: How do we appeal to scripture as the source of authority for our mission? How do the scriptures actually function in our missionary practice as we seek to commend Christ to our pagan society?

The Protestant Response

At the risk of simplifying complex issues let me suggest, to begin with, what has happened to the authority of the scriptures in the experience of the Protestant churches in the post-Enlightenment period.

(1) There is, first of all, what one might call the separation of the horizons. For the greater part of history the bible has been read as if it was part of the reader's own world. That is how an ordinary villager in India or Africa reads it today. The biblical characters are contemporaries of the reader, people in his own world. Our culture, on the other hand, has learned to recognize the distance between our world and the world of the bible. With immense scholarly labour it has sought to recover that ancient work, to understand the ideas that controlled it and so to understand what the original writers meant when they used the words we now read. Moreover, since the bible consists of many layers of material, each being in some respects a re-interpretation of earlier material, modern scholarship tries to show how later writers interpreted earlier writings in an uncritical way as if they were part of their own (later) world. In other words, modern scholarship has taught us to separate the two horizons of meaning - that of the original writer and that of the twentieth-century reader. Consequently we no longer hear the biblical characters speaking to us as our contemporaries. We examine their words with meticulous care, as scraps of evidence from a remote past. We disentangle the different strands, analysing, dissecting, assessing and comparing - all from the standpoint of our contemporary understanding of 'how things really are'. There is no longer a conversation between two subjects, the biblical character and the modern reader. It is now strictly a subject-object relation. The modern scholar is the subject, and he treats the biblical material as the object of his research. He examines it, but does not permit it to examine him. By creating a distance between his own world and that of the bible, he silences that other world. He alone is in control. One is reminded of the African woman who, when asked why she

always carried a bible, replied: 'There are plenty of other books I can read, but this book reads me'. Or, from another culture, one is reminded of that moment in Karl Barth's recollections where, sitting in his garden at Safenwil, he suddenly discovered in the midst of his study of the Epistle to the Romans, that Paul was addressing a word to Barth - a word which was to shake Barth and through him the Christian world.

(2) Modern scholarship, following the models of modern science, has worked by analysing and dissecting the material into smaller and smaller units and then re-classifying and re-combining them - obviously on the basis of a Modern understanding of 'how things really are'. One might take as an illustration the brilliant work of Wellhausen in disentangling the various strands of the Pentateuch, which then enabled scholars to break down the original shape of the material and re-organize it on principles derived from nineteenth-century ideas of evolution and progress. The student could not understand the message of the Pentateuch by reading it in its canonical form, but only by first learning about J, E, D and P. The result was that the text could only say what nineteenth-century thought allowed it to say.

(3) Modern scholarship claimed to be 'objective and 'neutral', not presupposing the truth of the biblical vision, or requiring as a precondition acceptance of the biblical faith, but simply describing what really happened. But the biblical texts are written 'from faith to faith'. Their whole purpose is testimony. It is to evoke faith. As the writer of the Fourth Gospel has it: 'These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (Jn 20:31). In relation to this purpose the 'neutral' standpoint is not neutral; it is a decision not to believe. And, of course, it is a decision based on, what 'modern man' thinks it possible to believe. The 'objective' standpoint is the standpoint of the person who happens to stand in the midst of this particular culture among the cultures of the world.

(4) It follows that the very thing which the text is concerned to say is lost in the process of critical analysis. Modern critical scholarship has tended to regard as legitimate only those questions which it was equipped to answer. Its methods can be happily employed with enormous devotion and skill in deciding - for instance - whether the Last Supper took place on the 14th or the 15th Night. They are not equipped to provide an answer to the question whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. In a well-known passage C.S. Lewis has caricatured a certain kind of biblical study in the picture of a man crawling on his hands and knees through the jungle with a magnifying glass looking for grass-seeds, and unable to see the elephant standing in front of him.

(5) Modern scholarship has often thought that it could achieve 'objectivity' by examining the scriptures without any commitment to the faith which they seek to evoke. But such a claim to objectivity would be illusory. All scholarly work is sustained through its laborious hours by some interest. The scholarly study of scripture within the believing and worshipping community (which can be as intellectually rigorous as any) is sustained by the interest of the believer in understanding more fully the revelation in Christ. The scholarly study of scripture within a secular university may include many interests, but they will certainly include an interest in getting the work published and having it approved by scholars in the same field. The acknowledged authority is the guild of academic scholars. As one biblical scholar has drily remarked: 'If Moses didn't write the Pentateuch and Jesus did not preach the Sermon on the Mount, then who is to be trusted? Why, the professor of course!' And, as I have said, the professor becomes an accepted authority if he asks the questions which his science is capable of answering.

I hope I have not caricatured the situation in this brief account of our problem. I am assuming that we are concerned about a missionary encounter with our culture. But the way we read the scriptures is a part of our culture. And we can not bring about an encounter by retreating into a ghetto. We cannot, for the purposes of our faith, remove ourselves from our culture and read the scriptures with the pre-critical innocence of an African villager. If we are part of this post enlightenment culture, and if we accept its assumptions for most of our affairs, and if we then

try to return to an uncritical fundamentalism, we are not innocent, but dishonest. And we are avoiding the missionary encounter.

Encounter and Conversation

How can there be a real encounter between the bible and our culture? How can the bible be



set free to address its own word to our culture? Or, rather, how can the Church which is set within our culture so present to our culture God's word in scripture that the world can hear and believe? To ask these questions is to pose the agenda for many decades, but let me, as I struggle with this question, suggest a few affirmations which must be made.

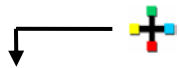
1. We cannot attempt to hide the fact that between our modern world-view and that of the bible there is a radical discontinuity. It is a matter of two quite different faith-commitments, neither of which is capable of being demonstrated from the other. It is sometimes said that before you can persuade modern western man to take the bible seriously you must give reasons which will convince him that it has something to offer. But such reasons would have to rest upon the very assumptions which the bible calls in question. The operative word here is not demonstration but conversion. There is no escape from the call of radical conversion. And that, surely, is not something which is peculiar to our culture. When Paul said that the message of the cross was a scandal to the Jew and nonsense to the Greek he was recognizing this radical discontinuity. It is only to those whom God calls to be his witnesses that the cross is the manifestation of the power and wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:2-24). No human reasoning can demonstrate, but the living God can convert. There is an analogy here (no more than an analogy) in the concept of the 'paradigm shift' which has been introduced into the study of the history of science by Thomas Kuhn. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn examined the processes involved in the transition from one 'paradigm' in science to another - for example, from the physics of Newton to that of Einstein. He shows that there is no way by which one can demonstrate the truth of Einstein's physics from the premisses provided in Newtonian physics. There has to be a shift of perspective which is more in the nature of a conversion than a demonstration. But while from the point of view of the earlier paradigm, the latter is not demonstrable, from the point of view of the later it is possible to show continuity. From the point of view of Einstein's physics the Newtonian laws are true for bodies in slow motion. Just so a person who lives within another world view cannot be convinced by logical argument that the biblical view is true, but a person who has been converted to the Christian faith can look back and see how God was leading him in his pre-Christian days.

I am referring to something which is no more than an analogy, but perhaps it may help us to recognize both that there is a radical discontinuity between the 'modern' world-view and that of the bible, so that the truth of the latter can never be demonstrated on the presuppositions of the former; and also that to affirm this discontinuity is not to abandon rationality to some sort of bare fideism. It will also help us to remember that, however sophisticated our missionary methods may be, it is the work of God the Holy Spirit, and his only; to convert the soul to the truth.

2. Our culture is afraid of an alleged revelation which appears to invade the sovereign territory of the autonomous reason and conscience. The Enlightenment was, in part, a legitimate revolt against a false dogmatism backed by coercive authority. Our culture rightly prizes the liberty of conscience and the freedom for enquiry which the Enlightenment won for us. It wants to preserve that freedom - freedom to study all the facts without prejudice and reach our own conclusions. In fact, as we have seen, enquiry is never neutral in the sense of being free from all presuppositions. No enquiry is possible for a totally vacant mind. Yet we have to repeat that the Enlightenment was justified in its rejection of dogma imposed by coercive authority.

What we have now to do is to show that this protest of the Enlightenment is not by itself enough to secure the freedom and the full maturity of the human person. On this three points have to be made:

- (a) There are great areas of understanding which are not accessible to the purely objectifying, analysing, criticizing reason. There is a kind of truth which is more fundamental than that which is available to a subject examining an object, a kind of understanding which comes only by being open and receptive to goodness and beauty which kindle our imaginations, enlarge our sympathies and evoke our love and admiration.
- (b) Supremely, there is the kind of understanding which arises between persons, an understanding which is not grasping, not mastery, not the comprehending of an object by a subject, but rather a mutual relation



between subjects neither of whom seeks to master the other, but both of whom are open in humility to the freedom of the other to be himself, to speak his own word, to act according to his own conscience. This is the kind of knowing which the bible speaks about when it speaks of knowing God. Its true content is love. It is a kind of knowing which is loving.

- (c) Thus when we speak of revelation and appeal to the bible for its form, we are not speaking of a series of propositions imposed by an alien power on the mind of man, invading and limiting the proper autonomy of his reason and conscience; we are speaking of the appeal of a personal love which seeks not to coerce submission but to evoke love. Of course this appeal is not a disembodied voice. It is the voice of the one who is, who was and who will be; it is the voice of God the supreme reality by whose word alone all that is real came to be. But it is the non-violent appeal of love, not the coercive imposition of beliefs to be accepted apart from the willing response of reason and conscience.

3. The one who speaks in the bible is the one who can never be enclosed within any of the predicates we propose for him. When we use the word 'God', we have to remember that that word has been used, and is still used, for a bewildering variety of objects of belief, from the most refined mental constructs of the academic philosopher to the crudest artifact of the village carpenter or goldsmith who fashions an idol for his village shrine. What do we mean when we speak to 'modern' man of God? At one of the supremely critical moments in the biblical story, when Moses, out in the desert, encounters the call of God to liberate his people, his first question is: 'Who am I that I should go to liberate your people?', and the answer is: 'I will be with you'. At once that leads to the counter-question: 'But who are you? What is your name?', and the answer is 'I will be who I will be'. That, certainly, is the true meaning of the Hebrew text, not the Greek rendering ('I am who I am') which has given room for the assimilation of the biblical vision of God to a metaphysical Absolute. Moses will know God only in responding to his call, in following where he leads. To know God is to trust him and to follow him into the future in faith, love and hope.

So it is also in the New Testament. Jesus speaks of himself as the way, the true and living way (Jn 14:6). Now the meaning of the mysterious word given to Moses is made clear. To know God is to follow Jesus in the way that he went, in the way that he is. It is not to have a concept of God as part of my mental world. It is not a theoretical knowledge but a relationship of discipleship in faith, love and obedience. It is to follow Jesus in the way that he went, which was the way of love and obedience to the Father as his will was made known in the contingent happenings of an actual human life.

4. That is why Jesus says to his disciples that he has much yet to teach them which they cannot bear at once. They will learn it from the Holy Spirit who will be their advocate when they are put on trial by the world, who will be the prosecutor who causes the world to question its own fundamental categories (sin, righteousness and judgment), and who will lead them into the truth

as they follow him in love and obedience. Thus, knowing God means following Jesus the Son on his path of love and obedience to the Father in the power of the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Son, and who is ever showing us new things as we faithfully follow.

5. This dynamic, trinitarian way of speaking about God and about the knowledge of God, is very different from the ideas of God and of revelation against which the Enlightenment thought it was revolting in the name of human freedom. Certainly it calls for radical conversion. It cannot by any means be fitted into our modern post-Enlightenment view of the human situation. All attempts to commend the message of the bible by making it conform to the so-called requirements of modern thought are futile. There is a radical discontinuity. Nothing less than conversion is involved. And that conversion can only be the work of the Holy Spirit. Only God can convert the human soul. But there are three things that we can do:

- (a) We can show that the axioms and assumptions of our modern culture are not simply an objective account of 'how things really are', but are themselves questionable and vulnerable. There are other ways of understanding the world and coping with it.
- (b) We can show that what is offered in the bible is not a series of alien dogmas imposed

upon the mind and conscience in violation of their proper freedom, but an invitation from the loving God to respond in loving and faithful and hopeful obedience to his redeeming action in history.

- (c) We can seek, by the help of the Spirit, to manifest in our corporate life as churches the reality of the new life in the Spirit in such ways that people will be able to believe that the Lord whom we serve is not a tyrant who, robs us of our freedom but a saviour in whose service alone perfect freedom is to be found.

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