



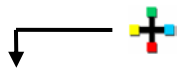
## Speaking the Truth to Caesar

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*This is an extract from the third chapter of Bishop Newbigin's forthcoming book Truth to Tell, which will be published jointly by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. and WCC Publications. Author of many books on mission and ecumenism and for many years a missionary in India, the Rt Rev. Lesslie Newbigin was the first director of the WCC's Division of World Mission and Evangelism.*

There is certainly a long and rather sad history of alliances between the church and particular political programmes. The church has been committed to the defence of the divine right of kings, of oligarchy against democracy and of free-market capitalism against communism. In Britain the Free Churches were so comprehensively committed to the Liberal Party that when the latter collapsed they went into a decline from which they have not recovered. The church cannot be totally identified with any of these causes. And yet it cannot be indifferent to them.

Perhaps the most important thing to say, and it is important even if it is negative, is this. The affirmations of the Barmen Declaration would have made no impact without the anathemas. The Declaration names and rejects a false ideology. It does not tell the German people what to do in the area of politics. It affirms the truth of the gospel and, in its light, condemns the reigning falsehood. I think that perhaps that is the first thing to say about the duty of the church in relation to political issues. The church has to unmask ideologies.

Walter Wink in his series of volumes on the principalities and powers has helped us to see afresh the relevance to our situation of the biblical language about the powers. It is not true, Wink reminds us, that the church's message is only addressed to individual people. It is, according to Ephesians 3:10, to be made known to the principalities and powers. We meet these powers, as the New Testament tells us, in such entities as the state, the law, tradition, religion. These powers, although ordained by God, because they did not know the true wisdom of God, combined to crucify the Lord of glory. But while we meet them in these forms, they have a reality which is not exhausted by these visible representatives, Caiaphas and Pilate and Herod, so that our wrestling is not with these men of flesh and blood, but with the powers which are represented in them. And

these powers, while created in Christ, and for Christ, and having therefore a positive function in God's economy, can be and have been corrupted. They are corrupted, become demonic, when they are absolutized, given the place which belongs only to God. The good gift of kinship in the narrower and wider family is corrupted

into the evil of racism. And the good gift of individual personality is corrupted into the evil ideology of individualism.

The ideology which the Barmen Declaration sought to unmask and to reject was the ideology of nation and race and blood. The ideology which we have to recognize, unmask and reject is an ideology of freedom, a false and idolatrous conception of freedom which equates it with the freedom of each individual to do as he or she wishes. We have to set against it the Trinitarian faith which sees all reality in terms of relatedness. In explicit rejection of an individualism which puts the autonomous self at the centre and sees other selves as limitations on our freedom, we have to set the basic dogma entrusted to us, namely that freedom is to be found by being taken into that community of love given and received which is the eternal reality from which and for which all things exist. This rejection of relatedness as the true road to freedom is seen in the easy dissolution of the marriage bond, in the break-up of families, and in the massive development of consumerism. Its most formidable manifestation is the contemporary ideology of the free market. Here again we have an example of something good being corrupted. It is clear, and the lesson has been driven home in the past twelve months, that free markets are the best way of continuously balancing supply and demand. But it is also clear that when the free market is made into an absolute, outside of rational control in the light of ethical principles, it becomes a power that enslaves human beings. The free market is a good servant but a bad master. It is not necessary to argue the point that, if we take the human family as a whole, what is experienced as freedom by a minority is experienced as bondage by the majority. Adam Smith himself recognized that free markets would work for the common good only if certain moral principles permeated society. His successors have detached economics altogether from ethics and made it an autonomous science. For purposes of such a science, human beings are supposed to be motivated only by self-interest. The basic unit of society is a human being who, with single-minded purpose, seeks to acquire the maximum of goods and services with the minimum of effort. At an early stage in the evolution of free-market capitalism it became obvious that it was producing the abominations of child labour and the destruction of human health and dignity. In a moral revulsion against these things, developed nations introduced the legislation which limited the operations off market and created what we have known as the "welfare state". Much of this legislation is being dismantled in some of the developed societies, but the ecological threat now confronts us with new evidence that the free market cannot be left uncontrolled. The idea that if economic life is detached from all moral considerations and left to operate by its own laws all will be well is simply an abdication of human responsibility. It is the handing over of human life to the pagan goddess of fortune. If Christ's sovereignty is not recognized in the world of economics, then demonic powers take control.

It is not the business of the church to make an alliance with either the right or the left in the present political scene. It has to unmask the ideologies that permeate them and offer a more rational model for the understanding of the human situation. Both sides in the argument use the language of the rights of the individual. On the one side there is the right of every individual to do what he wants with what he has lawfully earned. On the other side there is the right of every individual to have her needs met. The argument is unresolved on rational grounds for two reasons. First, in a society which has no accepted public doctrine about the purpose for which all things and all persons

exist, there is no basis for adjudicating between needs and wants. A rational person would want exactly what he or she needs to fulfill the purpose for which we exist. In the absence of a public doctrine about that purpose, the dispute between wants and needs is unresolvable. Secondly, both parties rely on the concept of the rights of the individual. These rights are part of public doctrine enshrined in legislation. But rights are totally void of meaning unless there are parties who acknowledge the responsibility to meet the claim of right. Since there is no corresponding public doctrine about human responsibility, the multiple and contrary claims to right can only destroy society.

The language of "rights" is, of course, a product of the Enlightenment. The older Christian society spoke about "duties" which were owed to God and to the neighbour. In the language of the Enlightenment, when rights are violated we speak about justice; in the earlier language one talked about sin and punishment. The sin is against God, and the punishment is his work, in whom punishment is only the dark side of mercy. The church, in its general domestication into the culture of the Enlightenment, has adopted the same language; it speaks much of rights and of justice, little of sin and punishment. If there is no judge, then justice is as each of us defines it and rival claims for rights are mere conflicts of interest which rend the fabric of society to shreds. We have the responsibility to bear witness that there is a judge of all the nations, and that his judgment is replete with mercy, and that the clue to all public issues as to all personal life is to be found at the one mercy-seat where the sin of the whole human race was both judged and pardoned.

If, then, the church is not to identify itself with any particular political programme, and yet cannot leave political issues out of her concern, as though the sovereignty of Christ did not extend beyond the walls of the church, what can be said by way of guidance in this area? I come back to the Barmen Declaration as a model. Each of its clauses has an affirmation and an anathema. The first duty is affirmation. The church must affirm the truth of the gospel, the fact of the sovereignty of Christ as sole Lord and Saviour, and the Trinitarian faith, the given starting point, the dogma which must shape all our thinking and devising. To affirm this in season and out of season, whether they hear or refuse to hear, is in fact the most radical political action that we can take. Behind the rather violent charge of apostasy made by Peter Berger and his colleagues there is this element of validity. It is the case that many Christians have a rather tepid faith in this fundamental dogma and therefore tend to invest the zeal and the commitment which are properly owed to it in particular moral and political causes. We get the widespread phenomenon of single-issue Christians, Christians for whom the whole of Christianity is equated with support for a particular cause and by whom the church is valued only as it supports that cause. Moral and political commitment which are legitimate implications of the Christian faith in a particular situation are allowed to displace the fundamental dogma. And it follows, of course, that those who regard other issues as the urgent ones for here and now, are effectively excommunicated. Once again, that which is good and proper at its own level is corrupted when it is absolutized.

Therefore, together with affirmation there has to be anathema. We have to reject ideologies which give to particular elements in God's ordering of things the central and absolute place which belongs to Christ alone. It is good to love and serve the nation in which God has set us; we need more, not less true patriotism. But to give absolute

commitment to the nation is to go into bondage. Family and kinship are precious gifts to be loved and cherished, but racism is a corruption of what is good. The mutuality of man and woman in God's image is among the most precious of God's gifts, and feminism may be a legitimate protest

against the evils of male dominance, but if it becomes the focus of ultimate commitment it becomes idolatrous. The free market is a good way of balancing supply and demand. If it is absolutized and allowed to rule economic life, it becomes an evil power.

If the church is clear and bold in its affirmations of the truth of the gospel as the reality by which all human enterprises are to be tested, and in its unmasking and rejecting of the idols whose worshippers fill so much of the not-so-naked public square, then there is room for a great venturing in relation to specific issues. This implies that different Christians will commit themselves to different causes but will not excommunicate one another for so doing.

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