



The Gospel as Public Truth

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J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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A description of the purpose and thesis of the National Consultation of The Gospel and Our Culture Movement in association with the British and Foreign Bible Society, held in The Hayes, Swanwick, 11-17 July 1992.

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The Consultation called to meet under this title at Swanwick in July 1992 is invited to consider a thesis. It is not a meeting for the pooling of ideas from whatever quarter, but for the testing of a thesis proposed by those who have convened the meeting. The thesis is that the Gospel is public truth. Critics have (very reasonably) asked for clarification at several points. What is meant by 'the Gospel'? What is meant by speaking of it as 'public truth'? And what kind of authority can 'the Gospel' have in a secular pluralist society? This paper is an attempt to offer clarification with the hope that it will facilitate the work of the sections during the Consultation.

The Gospel is an account of things which have happened. It is not a proposition in metaphysics or a programme for ethics and politics, though it has implications in both these spheres. It is narrated history, and (like all narrated history) it is told with a belief about its meaning. This belief is that the story tells what God has done for the redemption of all creation and its reconciliation to the source of all being.

The story is made available to us through the living memory of the Church, the community which from its beginning has been enabled by the work of the Holy Spirit to recognize in Jesus the one sent by the Father for the salvation of the world. This community has kept the memory alive by preserving, cherishing and handing on from generation to generation the earliest records of Jesus, the words and acts of the earliest witnesses, and that body of writing which was sacred scripture for the Jewish people and therefore for Jesus and his disciples and which tells the story for which the ministry of Jesus is the hermeneutic key. This whole corpus of writings has been recognized and accepted by the Church as providing the norm by which subsequent developments in the interpretation of the Gospel and of its implications are to be tested.

The first-communicators of the Gospel were the eye-witnesses who could say: 'That which we have seen and heard we declare to you'. They were well aware that their story could be and would be rejected, and that only the word of the Holy Spirit could convince people of its truth. But they did not draw the conclusion that its truth was a private matter for the individual. They did not avail themselves of the protection which Roman law provided for the exercise of religions of personal salvation. They affirmed that the message which had been entrusted to them was one which concerned the destiny of the whole human race. The one who had died and risen again was the saviour and judge of the world. The news was of vital concern to every human being. It was public truth. Fidelity to it required the momentous decision to withhold acknowledgement of the emperor as supreme power. They accepted the price which had to be paid for this fidelity.

To affirm the Gospel as public truth does not mean, therefore, that belief in the truth of the Gospel is to be ensured by the use of political power. It has been made clear from the beginning, though often forgotten in subsequent centuries, that the form of the affirmation is given once and for all in the witness which Jesus bore in his dying. The fact that the cross is at the heart of the Gospel, and that it was the powers of state, Church and popular opinion which sought to silence the divine word, must forever forbid the Church to seek an identification of the Gospel with political power. But the Gospel, the good news with which the Church is entrusted, is that God raised the rejected Jesus from the dead and that he is now alive and at work in the community which he sent forth to tell the story. This means that he is the rightful bearer of God's rule even though that rule is now veiled in weakness. With all its weakness, sinfulness and compromise, the Church is the body entrusted with the responsibility of bearing witness to the fact that the one whom Jesus called Father is the Lord and will be the judge of all without exception. This is public truth.

In contemporary 'modern' culture, the model of public truth is to be found in timeless law-like statements, ideally capable of being stated in mathematical form. From its early roots in Greek thought this model has been powerful in European culture. Perhaps the most important example is to be found in the enormous influence of the work of Isaac Newton on the thinkers of the 'Age of Reason' in which modern Western culture was shaped. Since that time it has been common to identify 'public truth' with matters which can be stated in this form. The word 'scientific' is used to distinguish knowledge of this kind from claims to know which rest on faith. What is forgotten is that the entire 'scientific world-view' rests on assumptions which are accepted in faith but cannot be proved true otherwise than in the actual practice of science.

To affirm the Gospel as public truth is to invite acceptance of a new starting point for thought, the truth of which will be proved only in the course of a life of reflection and action which proves itself more adequate to the totality of human experience than its rivals. To claim that the Gospel is public truth is, therefore, certainly not to seek some kind of dominance for the Church. It is to embark on a journey of faith which looks for final justification only at the end. It is not to seek for the Gospel any coercive power in the arena of public debate but it is to insist that the Gospel must be heard as an affirmation of the truth which must finally govern every facet of human life. It is not to ask that the Gospel should exclude all other voices, only that it should be heard. The universal recognition that Jesus is Lord is something promised for the end, not for the present age. To affirm the Gospel as public truth is not to assert dominance but to invite dialogue. The announcement of things which have happened is not the fruit of dialogue but its starting point, for the meaning and implications of what is announced have to be learned in dialogue. For news of things that have happened we depend upon competent witness. Dialogue is not a substitute for reliable information: The first responsibility of the Church is to give faithful witness to the things that have happened. But this must lead on to dialogue, for the witnessing community

does not know in advance what the message will entail, what will be the consequences of its acceptance in the several areas of human life. The New Testament itself shows that the Church, as it moved out from its roots in Israel to all the nations, had to learn (and be surprised by) what its implications would be (e.g. Acts 10 and 11). In the same way the Church has to learn what the implications of the Gospel might be for the worlds of (for example) economics, education and healing. This can only come about through dialogue in which, as Jesus promised, the Church must learn new things (John 16: 12-15). And it is important to remember that, in this same context, Jesus told his disciples that they must expect hostility and rejection. The Church must not aspire to any other kind of authority than that of the crucified and risen Jesus. The final 'proof' the thesis can only be at the end of history, at the final consummation of which the resurrection of Jesus is pledge and first-fruit. The Swanwick Consultation is an opportunity for dialogue in which we seek to discover the implications of the Gospel for the various sectors of public life. The starting point is the Gospel itself, the narrative of those events in which the Author of all being has acted to redeem and reconcile an alienated creation and to direct it towards its true end. And since the super-abundant grace and glory of God surpasses all our powers of thought and imagination, we may confidently expect and pray for new understandings of the scope of God's purpose for our society and new energy for the doing of our part in it. The Consultation will be an opportunity not only for dialogue but for praise and celebration.

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