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The Gospel as Public Truth: Swanwick Opening Statement

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The Gospel and Our Culture: The Gospel as Public Truth

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Bible Reading: 2 Corinthians 3: 17 - 4: 18

I am tempted to begin by borrowing the familiar litany of a British Rail senior conductor. Welcome to customers joining the programme at Swanwick! This is the delayed 1984 Nottingham Conference! We apologize for the delay, which was due to difficulty in making contact with overhead power lines, and some need to discuss the destination!

It is not out of place to remember the origins of this enterprise ten years ago. The starting point was a growing concern in the mind of the General Secretary of the British Council of Churches, Philip Morgan, that the BCC was being constantly asked to react on behalf of the churches to specific issues thrown at it by the secular world, and did not have the chance to reflect more deeply on the underlying factors in society of which these issues were symptoms. This concern was brought to a focus by a sermon preached to the General Synod of the Church of England by the late Sydney Evans, Dean of Salisbury, in which he spoke of "The End of Renaissance Man". The question: "What is happening to our culture, and how do we address this culture with the Gospel?" needed to be asked in some depth if the churches were to be faithful.

The earliest work on the theme was led by Kenneth Slack, whose early death was a heavy blow to the church in this country. A national conference was planned for Nottingham in 1984, but it became clear that more study and discussion were needed. Bishop Hugh took over the leadership and, with the help of Dr Lawrence Osborn, set in motion and carried through the study programme which bore fruit in the volume of papers which you have received. Meanwhile Dr Beeby, as part-time co-ordinator, with the help of Mrs Rosemary Hay, struggled to cope with the growing volume of responses to the programme from many parts of the world. Our little rowing boat was making only slow progress until we were unexpectedly hailed from a large tug going in the same direction, who offered us a towing rope. I refer, of course, to the Bible Society, and am

happy that the skipper in the person of Richard Worthing-Davies is with us here. With their administrative expertise, and with their deep commitment to making the Good News known, they enabled us to hold three regional conferences and to carry through the work of organizing the present consultation. Equally unexpected and equally delightful was the action of the Mennonite Church in the USA in making available the wisdom and experience of Dr Wilbert Shenk, who has been working particularly in the development of an international network of missiologists to work over a ten year period on the issues involved in bringing the Gospel to modern Western society. For all of this we are profoundly grateful.

In the passage we have just read, St Paul speaks of the boldness with which he and his fellow Christians announce the Good News they are commissioned to tell, by open statement of the truth commending themselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. Boldness is not an obvious feature of the contemporary church in this country. We often feel it necessary to apologize for the boldness, not to say triumphalism, with which some of our forebears took the Gospel all over the world. We are happy that Christianity is now a world religion and that it is spreading rapidly in what we call the Third World. But we are apologetic about missions and missionaries. We do not like the language of confident affirmation. It is associated in our minds with the desire to dominate.

But this boldness in Paul is paradoxically linked with the weakness and powerlessness of the church. It is not in spite of this powerlessness, but precisely because to share in the passion of Christ is to share in his risen power, that this weak and wounded church can share in the resurrection victory and reflect the glory of God. To affirm the Gospel as public truth and to make the claim with boldness, is not to claim anything for the church, or to aspire to worldly power for the church, but to direct attention to the crucified and risen Jesus. That, as I understand it, is what this programme is about. We are engaged in planning missionary strategy. But any serious programme will evoke criticism, and ours is no exception. Well founded criticism can concentrate the mind and help us to think more clearly about what we are doing. I propose, therefore, to take the two main lines of criticism which we have encountered as a way of presenting the main thesis of this Consultation - namely that the Gospel is public truth - as sharply as possible. The two lines of criticism relate to the two key words in our title. On the one hand, there is the suspicion that in talking about "the Gospel" we are side-stepping the critical questions about biblical authority which the modern world has learned to ask. On the other hand there is the suspicion that in talking about public truth we are motivated by nostalgia for a lost security, for the time when Christianity was either acknowledged or enforced as public truth - a nostalgia for a lost Christendom. The substance of what I want to say this evening, and of what I believe this programme stands for, is that - yes - we cannot go back to the past in either of these respects; but also, and this is the point, that we cannot stand where we are. To see criticism of our contemporary culture as nostalgia for the past, and to imply that there is no third possibility for the future, is surely a failure both of imagination and of courage.

Let me take these two poles of our theme in that order: first the epistemological, concerning what we can know as truth, and secondly the political concerning what we can do in the world of public affairs.

1. The Epistemological

There was a time when the Gospel was public truth. For a thousand years, the thousand years which shaped Europe into something more than a peninsula of Asia, the Bible was just that: the book, the one book which was heard by everyone week by week in the course of community worship. To acknowledge its authority was in no sense a personal decision. It was accepted truth. And, of course, we can never go back to that situation. Once critical questions have been asked, they can never be erased. They have to be answered. Once the critical faculty has been aroused, there is no way back to pre-critical innocence. An angel with a flaming sword guards the path back to the garden. To affirm the Gospel as public truth has to be a personal decision. And all of us who are shaped by the critical tradition on which Europe had prided itself since Descartes as its

most precious possession, are conscious of the fact that, in the eyes of most of our contemporaries, to affirm the truth of the biblical story is to be guilty at the best of naivety, and at the worst of intellectual dishonesty. Is it possible to have, in a culture which prizes the critical faculty above all other intellectual gifts, what Paul Riceur has called "a second naivety"?

The first part of the answer to that question is to remember that, if we are heirs of Descartes, we are also - in these closing years of the 20th century - very much the heirs of Nietzsche, the guru or godfather of the post-modernists, post-structuralists and the deconstructionists of our time. It was Nietzsche who foresaw that the critical principle, if given the primacy which it has had in the modern period, must necessarily destroy itself, that it would be impossible to speak about truth, and that the will to power would be the final arbiter. The reason why the critical principle, if given the primacy, must destroy itself is that one can only criticize any claim to truth on the basis of beliefs which, in the act of criticizing, the critic treats as true; and, furthermore, that in all our efforts to discover the truth we depend upon words, concepts and models which, in the effort to grasp the truth, we use uncritically. All critical questioning relies on beliefs which, in the critical act, are held uncritically. And, of course, it is always possible to turn round and direct the critical questioning against these uncriticized beliefs, models, concepts. But, once again, one can only do so on the basis of beliefs which are, for the moment, held uncritically.

The truth, of course, is that no rational discourse of any kind, and no enterprise of discovery, can proceed except by taking certain things for granted. These things themselves, of course, can also be subjected to criticism, but only by taking other things for granted. There has to be something accepted as given, as data, as – in the traditional Christian language – dogma. Dogma has become a bad word. As Dorothy Sayers said, any stigma is good enough to beat a dogma with. Dogmatic is a term of abuse except when it is used to describe a theologian in a Scottish University. But, of course, we all depend on dogma all the time. The difference is not between those who rely on dogma and those who do not; it is between those who know and are explicit about the dogma on which they rely, and those who are unaware of their dogmatic basis because they have picked it up from the world around them, from what Peter Berger calls the plausibility structure that governs their society. In the very first of our conferences on *The Gospel and Our Culture*, held in Salisbury by invitation of Sydney Evans, I apologized for using the word dogma because it had made some people so angry, and was rebuked by a senior teacher in a comprehensive school who said: "Do not apologize. I know that in my school dogma reigns in every classroom, except, of course, religious education, where it is treated as rubbish".

The Christian church is that society which does not take its dogma from the reigning plausibility structure, but explicitly takes as starting point for all its searching, learning, teaching and acting, the story which the Bible tells with its determinative centre in the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of the Word, by whom and for whom all things were made and hold together. This is not an attempt to return to a pre-lapsarian naivety. It is the conscious acceptance of the responsibility which rests upon all human beings to seek the truth and to affirm and publish the truth as they have found it, or as Christians would say, have been found by Him who is the truth.

The key word here is responsibility. In the Christendom era, when the Christian dogma reigned as public truth, the individual man or woman did not have to take personal responsibility for, and did not face the risks involved in, affirming the Gospel as public truth. So also in our contemporary society, where the Christian faith is tolerated as private opinion but is not permitted a role in public debate about public issues, the individual is relieved of responsibility. He or she can affirm the Gospel as private belief, but is not expected to proclaim it as public truth which all people ought to believe because it is true. In a society where the Christian faith has been privatized, we are free to affirm it within the security of our churches and our homes. We are not called upon constantly to test it by exposure to all the truth claims that come from the whole human enterprise of learning – whether secular or religious. But to hold it thus as private belief is an implicit denial of its truth. We can only hold it to be true if we are willing to proclaim it in

every human context, in every human culture, and in every kind of human discipline. It is as we so expose and test it that the full range of its truth begins to dawn upon us. That is why the world mission of the church is an abiding necessity for the integrity of our confession, and also why we must understand this world-mission as a two-way process, as not only a unilateral announcement of the Gospel, but also as a continuing exegesis of the Gospel as we discover its implications in a thousand human situations.

The key word here is "responsibility". Our culture has schooled us, by the work of the misinterpreters and popularisers of science, into believing that there is available to us a body of factual information about the universe and ourselves which is not a matter of faith but of certain knowledge, a kind of knowledge in which there is no element of human subjectivity. It is, in fact, a view of the world from outside, as though the human subject was not part of it. And the world, so understood, provides no grounds from which one could affirm that some things are good and some bad. It is a world from which values are excluded. Values are regarded as a matter of personal opinion. They are subjective, in contrast to the objective world made known to us by science. One takes personal responsibility for affirming them, but is under no obligation to affirm as public truth. In respect of the world of what are called "facts", no personal responsibility is involved. The subject is not committed. They are not "what I believe" but simply "what is the case".

This deep split in our culture between matters of fact and matters of faith is traced by the Jesuit theologian Michael Buckley back to the work of Thomas Aquinas in grafting Aristotelian methods of reading into the older biblical tradition. Michael Polanyi, in his effort to reconstruct the epistemological basis for science, asks us to go back to Augustine with his slogan; "I believe in order to understand". Polanyi seeks to show that all knowing, including the vast range of knowing which science had opened up in the past three centuries, has to have its starting point in faith. The idea that there is a kind of indubitable knowledge available to us, a kind of knowledge which involves no personal commitment and no acceptance of responsibility by the knower, is an illusion.

It is an illusion which explains much of the contemporary malaise of our culture. There is a growing number of responsible people who warn us of the nihilism into which we are drifting. There is much talk about the need for values, but these values have no ontological grounding in the real world as it is interpreted to us by science. The talk about values is perhaps the best proof that Nietzsche was right in his forecast. Values, if they are regarded as something outside of the world of what we call facts, are expressions of the will. They are things that we desire, not rock solid realities on which we can either build or be wrecked. There is overwhelming evidence of a loss of faith in a worthwhile future, a loss of any sense of meaning, of any sense of the sacred - of that which ought to command our reverence and our obedience. And perhaps it is enough to point to the fact that the drug traffic is now one of the main international issues, and that the traffic is created almost entirely by the insatiable demand for drugs in the most affluent, the most developed, the most thoroughly modernized societies.

We cannot go back to Eden. We cannot be content to remain as we are. There is possible, and there is required of us, what we might still call a second naivety, in which we consciously and responsibly acknowledge as the basis for all our thought and action the story of God's creative and redeeming work. We can tell this story with no trace of embarrassment that we might be thought to be some sort of primitive illiterates. It is those who are unaware of the unexamined dogmas that control our society who are naive in the original sense. And if we are accused, as we are by some theologians of the heresy of fideism, we shall reply quite simply: "Show us any kind of knowing which does not have an act of faith as its starting point". And so, as Paul tells us in the passage we read, we do not need to hide, but can be very bold, and by open statement of the truth, commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But that, as Paul further tells us, means conflict. We shall come back to that later.

2. *The Political*

Let me turn secondly to what I have called the political side of our concern. What can it mean in terms of public life to affirm the Gospel as public truth?

Once again the first thing to be said is that we cannot go back to the Christendom model. Surely we ought not to despise it. We ought not to forget the magnificent achievement of those centuries when the barbarian tribes that had migrated from Asia into its western extremities were schooled into the society we now call Europe, a Europe which we hope will not be just a common market but a common home. But we cannot go back. Perhaps at this point it is worth remembering that there is an offer to go back coming from a force which is perhaps a mirror image of Byzantine Christendom. After the collapse of communism as a political force the only spiritual and political power which seriously challenges our culture is Islam, with its vision of a theocratic society under the rule of God as interpreted by the Prophet. Islam is rejecting both capitalism and communism, and is putting questions to our culture which require to be answered. I think we have to listen to the questions, but not accept the answers which Islam gives. But, quite certainly, the questions will not go away, nor is there any infinity of time in which to discuss them. Once again we cannot go back, but we cannot stay where we are. Many critics of this programme accuse us of hankering after a restored Christendom and seem to suggest that our present liberal free market society is the best we can hope for. I think that this is a failure of imagination and an abdication of responsibility.

Both capitalism and Marxist communism are products of the Enlightenment, but today, after the collapse of the command economies of the USSR and Eastern Europe, it is the liberal, capitalist, free market economy which dominates the world scene as the unchallenged model for all societies. Its inward substance is, as I have argued, a form of rationality which allows no place for moral values in a world of what are called facts. The outward and visible form of this is a globally extended, increasingly integrated financial and economic complex which is far more powerful than even the most powerful national governments. Unchallenged now by Marxism, it extends its power into every human community and locks them more and more firmly into its operations. With the vast developments of information technology it can operate globally and with almost instantaneous speed. Its central idol, if one may name it so, is the free market, and economic growth is the supreme goal. These two are the final arbiters in human affairs. The free market is no more, what it has been from time immemorial, a useful instrument for continuously balancing supply and demand. It has become the governing power which even powerful national governments cannot challenge. It was a lady not accustomed to bowing before superior power who said: "You cannot buck the market".

The consequences of according final authority to the free market are already familiar to us. The first is the polarization of all societies and of humanity as a whole, into the more and more affluent and the more and more deprived. One single statistic will be enough to illustrate what we all know. According to the figures given by the UN, in the year 1960 – the launch of the development decade, the richest billion of the world's people received 30 times the income of the poorest billion. In 1990 the corresponding figure was 150. One does not need to be committed to ideals of equality to know that there is a limit beyond which the fabric of human society will not hold in face of such disparities, and a limit beyond which governments which seek to maintain the existing order lose their legitimacy. In the long run the absolute sovereignty of the free market cannot co-exist with political stability.

The second consequence is the destruction of the environment, about which we hardly need to be reminded. It is sufficient to say that if what is called the developing world were to achieve the level of affluence which the developed world regards as normal, the planet would be uninhabitable.

The third consequence is the elimination of long-term planning in favour of immediate or short-term advantage. We are amassing terrible problems for our grandchildren and their children.

These are familiar topics of lamentation, and it might be thought that I was merely indulging in the usual rhetoric of the political left. The trouble with this rhetoric is that, while it rightly draws attention to realities which cannot be forever ignored, it addresses only symptoms and fails to deal with the root of the matter which lies at a deeper level, at the level of fundamental beliefs, of ultimate commitments, in fact of idolatries. We are dealing with something which has the depth and power of a religion whose cathedrals are the great shopping malls and supermarkets where families come week by week for the liturgy of consumerism. We know very well that when we talk with individuals who seem to hold key positions in the financial economic-industrial complex, the bank managers and the executives of the great multi-national corporations, they will confess that they are powerless. They are the instruments of the powers behind them - the consumers, the shareholders, the customers. We are dealing not with flesh and blood but with principalities and powers. The power of an idol can only be destroyed by the power of a true faith in the living God. We are in the business which has always been the business of the missionary church, we are in the business of conversion. Nothing less radical than that measures up to the realities. We have to affirm the truth that the market is not supreme; there is one who has by his victory on the cross disarmed the powers so that they are robbed of their claims to absolute sovereignty. It is only when the issues are posed at this level, the level of ultimate commitment, the level where the idols are unmasked for what they are in the presence of the living God, that the degrading of human life under the reign of the free market can be tackled. But what does this imply? Does it mean a return to a theocratic state? Again, No. I would like to take the image which Richard John Neuhaus used in the title of his book *The Naked: Public Square*. There was a time when the public square was dominated and – to a degree – controlled by the church. That time has gone. The public square is dominated by other powers, ideologies, world-views. The church has withdrawn into the private world, and when Christians take their part in the life of the public square they do so on the terms set by the secular disciplines as they have developed in the past three centuries in conscious independence from Christian doctrine. What is needed is not that the Church should ride into the public square like an army with banners to re-establish its lost control. What is needed is that the Church should equip its members so to take part in the struggle of beliefs and ideologies in these several disciplines so that the understanding of the nature and purpose of human life which we have been given through the Gospel may challenge the assumptions which at present control these several disciplines.

May I take as an example the only discipline in which I ever earned an academic degree, namely economics. When I started to study economics at the University I had to grasp and make my own a whole set of concepts and models which were strange to me. Only by accepting them could I make any progress. But when I look back, 60 years later, I see that I was accepting assumptions about human nature and human behaviour which are at variance with those that I now accept as a Christian. Can we, can the church, so sharpen our instruments that we can enter into serious dialogue with economics as it is now understood, not with the expectation that ours will be the only voice, but with the expectation that the voice of the Gospel, the voice which calls human beings to be what they were created to be, is heard in the debate. Our Muslim friends, who are in general much more confident about their faith than we are, have secured the establishment of a lectureship in Muslim economics in one of our great universities. It would be a sign that we had begun to understand our situation if there were also a lectureship in Christian economics. The fact that this suggestion would be regarded as ridiculous by many Christians is a marker to tell us where we are.

That is one illustration from one particular discipline of what is – as I understand it – the *raison d'etre* of this movement and of this Consultation. I hope that in each of our eight sections there will be an effort not merely to produce written statements, but also to develop realistic strategies by which the Christian voice can be heard in the continuing discussion of public issues which makes up our public life. And by "the Christian voice" I do not mean what are called "Christian values". I have said enough about this already. I mean the Christian belief about what is the case, about human nature and destiny, about what are the realities with which every human

being must in the end come to terms. I know that, of course, we are not the first people who have tried to do this. I know that there are many here who are already committed to this kind of enterprise. I am sure that we shall find allies in many places.

I repeat that it is a failure of imagination to think that there is no third possibility beside a return to Christendom and an acceptance of the present. But it is also a failure of courage. The public square will be a place of conflict where one can be wounded. Let us call to mind again the words of St Paul which we heard earlier. The boldness with which the apostle speaks has as its corollary his suffering. He speaks of bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus that the life of Jesus may be manifest in us. Once again it is a matter of taking personal responsibility for holding beliefs which can be contested and contradicted, holding and affirming them as truth. I think we have been deceived by the use of the word "secular" into thinking that the public square is religiously neutral territory where all beliefs have an equal right to be present. But this is not so. The public square is already occupied by other powers. Secular society is not a society devoid of beliefs: it is a society governed by a very particular set of beliefs, beliefs which have shown their power over the past three centuries to neutralize the Christian faith and reduce the church to irrelevance in the public debate. To claim that the Gospel is public truth is to enter into a struggle in which we can expect to be wounded. But these wounds are the authenticating marks of the missionary church.

And that brings us back to the great passage which we read from the second letter to the Corinthians. This is perhaps the greatest missionary text in the whole Bible, and yet it has been strangely neglected in missionary preaching. Paul sees the church as a body which corporately reflects the light of a new day and is therefore full of hope and of confidence in the midst of conflict. He speaks of a boldness which is not the triumphalism of a worldly success, but the confidence that comes from knowing that if we share in Christ's passion, we also share in his risen life – that life which is the foretaste of a new creation. People who have had contact with the growing churches of Africa and Asia often comment on the contrast between the spontaneity with which Christians in those churches talk about their faith and the shyness and embarrassment which seems to overcome us European Christians when we try to share our faith. Paul talks here about a veil, a covering, which prevented the glory of God from shining out in full splendour. Well, it is a different kind of veil that we are dealing with here. It is a consequence of the privatization of our faith which makes us timid and embarrassed when it is a matter of entering into the public debate about politics, economics, culture. The world-view which controls our public life is such that a simple declaration of the Gospel is felt to be simplistic, naive or even intellectually dishonest. Paul's words invite us to shake off the veil that our culture puts over our faces so that we may with our timidity or embarrassment reflect in our words and our corporate life the glory of the new creation which has dawned in Christ, and so, as Paul says, by open statement of the truth commend ourselves to everyman's conscience in the sight of God.

Again the key word is responsibility. We are called to take responsibility for affirming as true that which can be and is disputed. We are not in the kind of academic discussion (perfectly proper in its place) where all options are left open. That kind of discussion can only be an interim exercise. In the end all options are not open, and there is no neutral stance from which we can survey all the possibilities. The programme and – in particular – this Consultation is a strategy conference. It is about finding ways to make the Gospel a serious issue for the public square. It will be hard work for these six days. But we shall be refreshed and kept from straying through the shared worship of each day. And I believe that God will honour our commitment.

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