



*On the Gospel as Public Truth: Response to the Colloquium*

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Eleven-page response to a colloquium in Leeds in August 1996. Twenty-five scholars from the neo-Calvinist, Kuyperian tradition contributed papers for discussion, followed by Newbigin's written response. The event was organized by Mike Goheen. See also two papers by Newbigin which were used in preparation for the conference: a transcription of the audio recording 94gps, and the later published 98cmsc.

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1. I must begin by expressing my deep gratitude to those who organised this meeting. It was for me a very great honour and privilege to meet a group of people so seriously interested in what I have been writing to warrant the long journeys and the expenditure of time which they devoted both to the preparation of papers for this meeting and to the meeting itself.

Since June I have again listened carefully to all the papers, and reflected upon the issues raised both in these papers and in the discussion at our Colloquium. The following is an attempt at a preliminary response.

2. I think I ought to begin by drawing attention to the fact that I have never had a training in philosophy and have never held an academic post in theology or philosophy. My formation and ministry has been as a preacher and pastor. I am therefore accustomed to use words in the general and popular way in which they, are used in preaching and discussion. Those who have been kind enough to study my works have been accustomed to using words in a precise technical sense. This has led to misunderstandings of my intention. I may give but one example. In my writings I have referred to the divorce between economics and ethics and have criticised this divorce. My critics have accused me of seeking to bring entirely alien concepts to bear upon the sphere of economics. Yet the same critics have affirmed that economics must be under the ultimate law of God which is the law of love. I do not see any radical difference between what I intended by my words and what these latter words seem to mean. At the same time I recognise that this criticism of my wording does not arise only from the fact that I was using words in a loose popular sense and my critics in a precise and technical sense. It arises also from the doctrine of sphere sovereignty, which is so central to this neo-Calvinist theology.

3. Before going on to discuss this central idea, I want to record one definite result of the Colloquium as far as my own thinking is concerned. In the papers which were under review at the Colloquium I used the phrase “a Christian society”. I have now come to the conclusion that this was a mistake and that I must avoid completely the use of this phrase. There are two reasons for this. The first is that however carefully one tries to define one’s terms it is almost inevitable that this phrase evokes in the minds of the hearers the concept of Christendom in its medieval sense. I have found that all attempts to dispel this idea are in vain so long as I use the phrase “a Christian society”. I have therefore concluded that I must entirely avoid it.

The second reason is more fundamental. My discussions in Leeds and my reflections on them afterwards have convinced me this phrase implies or suggests a stable equilibrium within a society, which is in fact impossible within the confines of a fallen world. I am indebted at this point to Bob Goudswaard’s paper in which he spoke about the dynamism which the Gospel introduces into the public sphere, and to the concept of spiritual warfare which also played a role in his paper. I have come to see that all attempts to envisage a Christian society in the sense of one which has achieved a stable state amid the conflicting claims of different religions and ideologies are illusory. I do not think that the Bible authorises us to expect any such thing within history. I think we have to recognise that until the second coming of Christ we live in a world where the truth can only be affirmed in conflict. What we must pray for is that we may learn to engage in this conflict exclusively with the weapons of the spirit.

4. I come now to the central concept of “sphere sovereignty”. Here my reflections can be divided into two parts – empirical and theological.

The empirical objections seemed to me more and more obvious the longer our discussions continued. It seems to me simply impossible to divide human activity into these separate compartments through the State as a central concern for justice, but the concern for justice has to operate in all human spheres. True that the economic order has a central concern for good stewardship. It also has to be concerned with justice. In order to secure justice in the economic sphere the State has to interfere in it, but in doing so it must also pay attention to the norms of stewardship. True that the basic principles of family life are not the same as those of a business corporation, yet we have been learning from the Japanese in recent years that the good stewardship of business can be vastly improved by incorporating some of the principles of family life.

Moreover, the roles which these different areas of public life have to fulfil vary according to historic circumstances. The first missionaries went to Africa where there was no effective healing service. They took it as part of their calling to heal the sick, and in this they were surely following our Lord’s command. It is also true that in the course of developments the work of medicine may develop away from its Christian roots. The main responsibility may be taken over by the State. There are simply no supra-historical norms by which it can be decided in every situation what is the proper role of each of these spheres.

It is true that in the course of the discussion preponderance of the reformational position agreed that from time to time there must be some osmosis between the different sectors of society, but the truth is surely that human society as a whole has a fluid character in which it is impossible to point to trans-historical norms in the light of which every particular temporary and local adjustment has to be judged.

5. But this brings me, of course, to the theological question. Reformational tradition affirms that there are such norms. They are referred to as “creation norms” and “law words”. I am still not clear about where these norms are to be found. One thing negatively is clear: they are not to be found in the Church. The anti ecclesiastical anxiety of this school is one of the most striking features to an outsider. Let me leave that aside for a moment.

Where exactly are these “norms” to be found? In some of the papers it is said that they are to be found simply by observing the way in which things actually happen. In one of the papers it is said that we learn the norms of family life and of parenthood by watching the ways the children are parented and do grow up. In one of the papers it was even said that these spheres have a

revelatory character distinct from God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. This I find quite astounding. It would appear to negate the doctrine of the four and cannot be seriously meant.

Before our meeting in Leeds I confess that I had thought that it was believed that these norms could be discovered from the text of scripture. I did not find this affirmed in any of the papers or discussions. I think I can understand the anxiety which is reflected in the many points at which I was accused of importing something from outside into the practice of, for example, economics. This point can be rightly made in the negative form which was devolved in Bob Goudswaard's paper. The point he was making, if I understand rightly, was that since the economic order was intended by God to serve for good stewardship, when the economic order something else, e.g. private greed, then disaster follows because it is a violation of God's intention. With that I totally agree. But to say that economic order is under stewardship and that it meets disaster if it is misused is not the same thing as to say that we can find norms for economic life by examining the way in which business corporations behave. Surely none of us mean that?

6. So what is the relation between God's order, God's creation norms, and the actual practice of human life in politics, economics, education, the family, etc? The answer of the Christian faith is that the nature of God's order has been revealed in the incarnate life of Jesus Christ; that he is the word through whom all things were made; that in him all things have their coherence; that they are made for him all finally to be reconciled in him. There is no other place where we are to look for God's norms. Here I stand with the Barman declaration.

And if I say this I must of course answer the question "how is Jesus known to us today"? The answer to that question is in the life of the community which he built into existence to be the continuing agent of his reconciling work according to the words spoken to the first apostles "as the Father sent me so I send you". Concretely this means a life in which the scriptures are read, studied, pondered, read as a whole, read in their entirety, read with their central clue in the incarnation, ministry, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. A community in which you obey Christ's commands in baptism and the eucharist, and in which through all these ministries we are led by the holy spirit into a deeper unity with the Father and the Son, and are therefore enabled, in fellowship with one another, to reach wise judgments regarding the will of God for the particular situations and particular spheres in which we are situated.

7. And this of course brings me to the anti-ecclesiastic polemic of this neo-Calvinist school. One of the things that became clear to me from the papers and the discussions is that this is perhaps the result of deep disappointment at earlier failures to reform the established Church in the Netherlands. Whether or not that is true, I must certainly protest against the impossible dualism which runs through all these papers between the body of Christ and the Church as an institution in history. When St Paul writes to the Corinthians with the words "you are the body of Christ" he is addressing a visible body of living men and women who are also, as we know, in many ways profoundly sinful and corrupted. The idea of a supra historical, invisible Church has often tempted Christians. But it is an illusion. The Church, like the Christian is "simul justus et peccator", but it is the only Church we have and the idea that we can be part of the body of Christ in some way independent of this historical reality is sheer illusion.

At some points in the discussions it was suggested that the Church is that particular sphere of human life which is concerned with the faith dimension of human existence. Again, this is absurd. All human activity pre-supposes faith. There is no human activity on any other basis. What distinguishes the Church from other human corporations is that it is that body which has been sent into the world by God for the specific purpose of being the sign, instrument and foretaste of His kingdom. God's kingly rule is at work of course in all spheres of human life. His providence upholds all spheres of human life. His mercy surrounds all spheres of human life. The Church is not simply one of these spheres. It is the place, the only place, to exist solely for the purpose of bearing witness to the one who is the word made flesh.

I must therefore totally reject the criticism which was made of my statement that the Church's first contribution to society is to be itself a true community. It is only necessary to point to the sustained teaching of Paul, especially in Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians. He affirms it

is the fact that Jews and gentiles are able to share in a single community in Christ that the truth of the gospel is being made manifest to the world.

8. One of the papers contributed at Leeds is the one from Al Walters about my treatment of the principalities and powers. Here I must say that his criticisms have a great deal of weight in them. I think he is right in pointing out the weaknesses of my treatment, both as regards the exegesis of scripture and as regards the internal coherence of my arguments. I have to confess that I ought to do some real re-thinking. It is, however, difficult for me now with my blindness to do detailed exegetical work. I am quite prepared to accept that the reference of the angels at the Churches in Revelations to the powers was mistaken. However, I think there was more to my argument that Walters grants. I do not doubt the existence of invisible heavenly powers, both good and evil. But the question at issue is the relation of these to the structures of human life, such as the State. No-one doubts that the powers referred to in Romans 31 are the powers of the Roman empire, but how is one to come to terms with the fact that this same entity is referred to in terms of the demonic characters in Revelations 13. When Walters says that he does not understand my statement that the powers are created in Christ; that they have been disarmed in the Cross and that they will be ultimately abolished at the end, I must simply pass his question on to St Paul for I was simply repeating the teaching of Colossians 1 15-20, Colossians 2 8 and following, and 1 Corinthians 15. Walters may be right in questioning the connection I made between the stoicheia and the powers, and he may be right in saying that this term refers to “the basic principles of the world”. But in that case why does Paul warn his’ readers not to become subject to these principles? “The basic principles of the world” sounds very like “the creation norms” of which the Dutch tradition speaks, but in that case St Paul’s passage in Colossians 2 8 and following would have to be regarded as a warning not to fall into the grip of the philosophy of Dooyewaard!

9. There is one issue which is perhaps marginal but should be cleared up. In several of the papers there is reference to my phrase “a committed pluralism” and to the phrase of Os Guinness “a charted pluralism”. I must explain that these two phrases refer to two quite different ideas. When I used the phrase “committed pluralism” I was contrasting it with “agnostic pluralism”. By the latter I referred to the relativism which assumes that truth is unknowable and therefore all opinions are to be tolerated. I contrasted this with the pluralism of the scientific community in which a plurality of approaches or lines of research is accepted as a necessary condition for finding the truth. There is a plurality of ways of approach, but there is a commitment to the belief that there is one truth: that in so far as the findings of scientists conflict one another the argument has to be pursued until one or other, or both, are proved wrong. This is quite different from the charted pluralism which is a phrase occurring in the debate about the structure of society. This, as I understand it, refers to the necessity of some kind of agreed concordat or coalition negotiated among the different religious communities to make possible an ordered public life.

10. But this idea of a charted pluralism brings us to the very heart of our problem. I think perhaps the most helpful place to discuss it in respect of education. If education is, as is rightly said, a covenant transaction between the younger and the older generation in which the former have the responsibility to hand on and the latter to receive, renew and revitalise the tradition that controls the community, then we face, of course, the problem of communities which live side by side on the basis of very different traditions. In two of the papers it is suggested that education should be the responsibility of the various faith communities, recognising, of course, that secularism is a faith alongside of the various religions, and that the duty of the State, which has to ensure justice, is to provide equal funding for all these different schools. It is recognised, of course, that there are limits here. The principle of justice may have to be brought to bear on the practices of some religious communities. The question will have to be asked whether, for example, giving complete independence to Muslim schools would be doing justice to Muslim girls.

But leaving aside such problems as this, it seems to me that this proposal raises two difficult questions.

Firstly, if we accept that it is part of the duty of the State to ensure the possibility of all its people living together in some kind of peace, there is an obvious danger that if all citizens are shaped from their earliest years by distinct, and sometimes contradictory, faith traditions, it may be very difficult to avoid the fragmentation of society. It is often remarked, for example, that many of the troubles of Northern Ireland arise from the totally segregated schooling of Protestants and Catholics. As the State has a responsibility to provide for all future citizens a type of formation that will enable them to live together in mutual understanding and tolerance, people I suppose agree that there are a great many issues upon which people of different faith commitments can agree to cooperate for limited purposes – there can be coalitions of different communities with widely different beliefs for the limited purpose of securing some ends which are desired by all the participants. It could be that education is one of these. That would mean designing a curriculum which allows students to allow a real understanding of faith commitments which motivate their fellow citizens. Here, of course, I have to point out that this requirement is not met by a school system which is shaped by the secular ideology of liberalism, and treats the different religions as matters of private piety, which cannot challenge the principles governing the curriculum as a whole.

This brings us to the second question. If we are to have a school curriculum which trains children to understand the sometimes contradictory faith commitments of their fellow citizens and to tolerate them so that even though they may believe them to be false they are nevertheless accepted as part of the total national community, on what can this curriculum be based? I have seen that it cannot be based on the secular ideology because this must require that the public good is served by using the best resources of autonomous human reason apart from any alleged divine revelation. Nor could it be achieved in a fully Islamic society. In such a society, in so far as Islam is in power the teaching in public schools of religious beliefs contrary to those of Islam must be suppressed. It would seem that only the Christian gospel can provide the basis for such public schooling. The reason for this is the unique character of the gospel itself which enables us to know that God has provided a space and a time during which there is freedom to disbelieve and to disobey the rule of God, and in which the reality of the rule of God is known as a matter of faith but not of sight. It is thus not in spite of their faith but on the basis of their faith that Christians must be prepared to affirm the freedom of dissent.

11. This leads us to the paradoxical conclusion that it is only on the basis of the Christian faith that non-Christian belief can have freedom of exercise. I find it very difficult to work out the practical implications of this, but nevertheless I cannot avoid this conclusion. One can put it negatively by saying that if the residual Christianity which still survives in the Western liberal democracies should further evaporate to the point where it could exercise no serious influence on public life, the consequence would be in the first instance that the purely secular interpretation of the human situation would take control. We would have the situation which is represented in the growing number of rulings by the US Supreme Court which eliminate anything in the nature of specific Christian affirmation from the public sphere. That could only lead to the acceleration of the descent into total moral decay which we are witnessing at the present time.

The other possibility, and perhaps the next stage, would be that Islam would enter into the vacuum and have a free field to achieve its goal – namely the Islamisation of the western world. As I said earlier on, I have come to see that it is futile to talk about a Christian society if that means some kind of stable state achieved in some problematic future. We are left at the point where the New Testament certainly teaches us to be – namely we are engaged in a spiritual warfare where we will be called upon to engage continuously from day to day in the struggle to affirm the truth of the gospel in every part of the public realm, and that can only happen if the Church (by which I mean the institutional Church which is the only Church there is) recovers its confidence in the gospel and undertakes far more seriously the task of equipping its members to discern the contemporary implications of Christian obedience in all the different sectors of public life. These

members in turn will not be able to sustain this spiritual warfare except in so far as they are continually nourished by the word and sacraments of the gospel and the continual renewal of their discipleship through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian fellowship.

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