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# THE CHURCH AS WITNESSING COMMUNITY

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The purpose of our gathering today<sup>1</sup> is to think together about the witnessing task of the church in the current cultural landscape. Our theme is the church's vocation to be a community that bears public witness to what the gospel announces about God's purposes for human life and fellowship. We may perhaps put our question in these terms: how do the judgement and mercy of God manifest in the Christian gospel shape the social and cultural testimony of the Christian community?

We should be clear from the outset that the primary issues are as much theological as they are moral, political and social. Indeed, the burden of what I want to say today is that whatever clarifications we may have to offer about matters of culture and public life can only have any genuine Christian cogency and helpfulness if they are rooted in theological clarifications. Cultural testimony must emerge from the church's constant and singular preoccupation, which is to give attention to God's self-declaration in the gospel, and to allow its thought, speech and action to be broken and remade through its hearing. The community of Jesus Christ is a community which is brought into being by the gospel, sustained in life by the gospel and summoned to bear witness to the gospel; and because that is true, the church can only be what it is if its entire life and activity emerges out of the event of starting again with the gospel. For the community of Jesus Christ, there is simply nowhere else to begin.

Because of this, I want to devote a good deal of the time allotted to me to talking about matters which are at first glance only indirectly related to what some may regard as the real substance of our discussion. I have very little to say about the decline of mediating structures in late capitalist societies, about the shifts in public life from virtue-based to contractual and heavily legislated modes of social relation, or about the decline of received traditions of wisdom. That's not at all because these are

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<sup>1</sup> A paper given at a conference on Culture and the Gospel, in Westminster College, Cambridge, in March 2001.

unimportant issues: quite the opposite. But I am clear in my mind that if our Christian witness about such matters is to be just that – *Christian witness* – it must emerge from the church renewing itself in a lively, repentant and overawed sense of the sheer reality of the gospel, its claim and its promise; that is, witness must emerge from theological engagement. Three considerations in particular lead me to press the claim of theological attention to the gospel in thinking about the church's social and cultural witness.

### THEOLOGY AND GOSPEL

We need to give theological attention to the gospel, first, in order to resist the moralism which so easily afflicts the church's social and cultural testimony. By 'moralism' I mean the fatal turn by which the church's human responsibility and action become the centre of gravity in its dealings with its context. When that happens, then gospel, church and witness all are distorted. 'Gospel' is instrumentalized; it becomes little more than an incitement to busy human activity, a backcloth to religious social undertakings. 'Church' becomes identified with a visible human project, an historical force, conservative or radical – a mode of human endeavour, proposing values and engaging in social and cultural debate as just one more voice at the table. And 'witness' becomes a matter of commenting on the social and cultural environment, with greater or lesser degrees of critical acumen. But moralism founders on the fact that the gospel is not a set of cultural imperatives or a blueprint for social action, but the announcement of the eschatological reality of God and God's saving governance of all things. The church is not merely a visible social quantity but the invisible new creation, the presence in history of the new reconciled humanity which can never be just one more social order. And Christian witness is not policy recommendation: it is the astonished indication of the divine reality which wholly transcends our social and cultural competence. If, therefore, we are to be protected from moralism, it can only be by being faced with the gospel as something which *resists* us, which cannot just be harnessed to whatever social and cultural projects we consider it ought to pull in its train. And the task of theology is just that: to exemplify the church facing the resistance of the gospel.

We need to give theological attention to the gospel, second, in order to ensure the Christianness of our social and cultural testimony. The church is often burdened with a sense of anxious and earnest responsibility to speak to all manner of issues set before it. Such responsibility can often issue in a kind of instability or lack of concentration, an excessive

reactivity which quickly disables Christian testimony. There are many issues on which the church will have little to say of direct relevance; indeed it will always be the case that its witness will have a necessarily strange and tangential character, simply because it persists in talking of God. The church's witness is *witness* – testimony to something laid upon it from outside; it is not the church casting around for something to say. The church is therefore neither at liberty nor responsible to address *quodlibet* whatever questions may come to it from whatever sources. Only because it has a very specific character – only because in a sense it has only one thing to say – is the church able to address the culture in a hopeful and humane way. But the church may never assume that it has already learned and put safely behind its specific character as the gospel community. In the matter of the gospel, the church is always only a beginner; and so it must begin from the beginning by doing its theology.

We need to give theological attention to the gospel, third, because Christian witness in the social and cultural sphere rests upon a Christian understanding of reality. To put the point technically: Christian witness presupposes Christian ontology. More straightforwardly: Christian witness rests upon a 'reading' of reality, a given sense of how the world really is, and therefore of how humankind should act in the world. The rule here is this: the church thinks the world is a different place from the place which the world thinks itself to be. Christian social and cultural witness testify to the fact that human society and culture are enclosed by the reality of the gospel. They are determined at all points by the saving history of God with us which the gospel declares. Like anything else, they become intelligible on the basis of the facts of the gospel: that the purpose of God the Father to reconcile all things to himself has once and for all been established; that in the power of the Holy Spirit that reconciliation is dangerously and miraculously present; that the reconciliation of all things which is the goal of human history and culture is secure. Whatever else it may say, Christian social and cultural witness must say these things: that the human condition is what the gospel declares it to be, that we are not free to be human apart from that reality; that our social and cultural activity will only be *truthful* if it is in accord with what the gospel tells us about our nature and the purpose which God has for us; and that if we ignore or subvert or improve upon that nature and purpose, we condemn ourselves to wretchedness. Close to the heart of Christian social and cultural witness is thus the command to testify to the truth.

It is often objected that to speak in such terms is to interpret but not to transform the world. But the contrast is specious. Indeed, the elevation of transforming the world to self-evident superiority over thinking truthfully

about the world is one of the deepest idolatries of modernity, the idolatry of historical constructivism, which has infected secular and Christian social thought alike. To think truthfully about the world is not to remain in a world of abstraction; it is to indicate what the world *is*; and we can only act truthfully – in accordance with our natures and the nature of the world – if we grasp its truth; and we grasp its truth by being grasped by the gospel. And one of the ways in which the church is grasped by the gospel is by doing theology.

#### WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Christian social and cultural witness emerge from the church's hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But what is involved in hearing the gospel? The church hears the gospel as Holy Scripture is read in the assembly of those who gather to praise the Lord Jesus in proclamation, sacrament, fellowship and service. But this 'hearing' is much more than indolent passivity; nor can it be made a matter of comfortable routine. The church hears the gospel in the repeated event of being encountered, accosted, by the word of gospel as it meets us in the reading of Scripture in the midst of the community of faith and its worship. Hearing the gospel in this way involves repentance and faith, that is, constantly renewed abandonment of what the gospel excludes and embrace of what the gospel offers. Such hearing can never be finished business. Hearing the gospel is not a skill we may acquire nor a material condition in which we may find ourselves, but a spiritual event which happens in prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and in which we are always at the beginning.

What does the church hear when it hears the gospel? When we try to define the gospel, we need to resist the temptation to make it into a manageable and relatively tame message, something which can perform useful functions in our religious and cultural worlds, and which we can make our own by annexing it to our own viewpoints or projects of social transformation. The gospel cannot be owned; it is not raw material to be 'used'; it cannot even be 'known' in any straightforward way, as if it were simply one more helpful piece of religious information. This is not to say that the gospel is vague or indefinite: nothing in the New Testament suggests that the gospel is other than something clearly expressible, with a sharp and perceptible outline and content. But what is perceived and expressed in the gospel is mystery. That is, the gospel concerns God and God's actions, and so is known only in the miracle of revelation and faith, and present among us after the manner of God, that is, spiritually, and not as some kind of religious or ecclesiastical possession. In one real sense,

the gospel is not 'observable'. Once we lose sight of this, and convert the gospel into just another Christian cultural commodity, then it very rapidly becomes 'something which would survive as Good News apart from faith and without God'.<sup>2</sup> Thus: 'We do not have the Gospel, but we hear it. We do not know it as we know other concepts, but we receive it anew again and again.'<sup>3</sup>

Once again, we ask: what does the church hear when it hears the gospel? The gospel is 'the gospel of Christ'.<sup>4</sup> Jesus himself, the proclaimer and embodiment of God's good news, *is* the gospel. He is not simply its bearer, the instrument through which the good news reaches us. To say that would be to reduce him to the status of prophet or herald, and reduce the gospel to some theory or message separable from Jesus and applicable as such to social and cultural affairs. But: Jesus is not a function of the gospel; he is its sum and substance. His person and acts, his proclamation, his humiliation and exaltation and rule over all things constitute and do not simply illustrate the gospel. 'If we were to sum up the content of the Gospel in a single word, it would be Jesus the Christ.'<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is the gospel because in and as him God intervenes decisively in the history of sin and death. In and as Jesus, God reconciles all things to himself, putting an end to humankind's hostility and alienation and restoring us to freedom, fellowship, and hope. In and as Jesus, God makes all things new, and ensures that the creation, broken by disorder and condemned to perish, will attain its true end and be glorified. In and as Jesus, the 'gospel of God'<sup>6</sup> becomes reality. And because of this, the gospel is good news, in three senses.

### *Good News*

First, the gospel is good news because in it we encounter God's gracious work for us and our salvation. The heart of the gospel is not a piece of human religious teaching, a pattern for human spiritual experience or a call to human moral commitment. It is *God's* gospel: originating in God himself, it concerns his presence and action, and points human life to its true fulfilment in fellowship with God. And, moreover, because the gospel

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<sup>2</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, 1933) p. 368.

<sup>3</sup> E. Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia, 1961) p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thes. 3:2; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Rom. 15:19.

<sup>5</sup> G. Friedrich, 'εὐαγγέλιον', in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2 (Grand Rapids, 1964) p. 731.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thes. 2:2, 8f.; 2 Cor. 11:7; Rom. 1:1; 15:16.

is the gospel of God, then encountering the gospel is – or ought to be – a confrontation with something deeply disturbing, something which is even, as one great twentieth-century theologian put it, ‘a thing of terror’.<sup>7</sup> If the gospel is the place where we find ourselves face to face with the sovereign presence and activity of God, in a way which is ultimate and unqualified, then the gospel is always against the grain of our expectations. It will not occupy a place which we reserve for it in a scheme of our own devising, for the gospel ‘is not a truth among other truths’ but that which ‘sets a question-mark against all truths’.<sup>8</sup> If this is true, then the gospel sits rather uneasily with those styles of church life and theology which make a comfortable home for themselves in a particular culture (whether radical or traditionalist), putting down roots and setting themselves the task of confirming or, perhaps, ameliorating or even transforming their surroundings. The sensitivity, good will and cultural and social scrupulousness with which such projects are undertaken may make it difficult for us to see how they are always exposed to the very considerable danger of making the gospel about something less than God – and therefore something less than good news of God’s utterly transformative action.

Second, the gospel is good news because in it we have set before us God’s act of eschatological deliverance in Christ. The intervention of God which is the content of the gospel is not merely one further factor in the history of the world, one more matter to be borne in mind as we adjust ourselves to reality. It is *the* factor, that which establishes the entire renewal of human life and history. The gospel concerns God’s achievement of and manifestation of radical newness. This re-ordering of human life from the very roots is accomplished by God in and as Jesus, whom the gospel declares to be ‘Lord’ (*cf.* 2 Thes. 1:8) – that is, the one in whom God’s irresistible and wholly good purpose for the creation is effected. In Jesus, the gospel tells us, a fundamental break has been made in the human situation, in view of which scepticism, vacillation, indifference, uncertainty, fear, hopelessness and joylessness have all been taken care of, set aside as things which do not match up to the new situation in which the whole creation has been placed. For the gospel is the presence of salvation, the freeing of all things from disorder and confinement and the gift of life in fellowship with God. The gospel is the active reality of God’s grace, God taking up the cause of those whose sin has eaten away at their humanity. It is the undefeated reality of the blessing of God. Certainly, the gospel constitutes a judgement of human life in its

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<sup>7</sup> D. M. MacKinnon, *The Church of God* (London, 1940) p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 35.

fallenness; but it does so only because it is the unsurpassably good news of the grace of God in Jesus, the one in whom all God's promises find their Yes (cf. 2 Cor. 1:19f.).

Third, the gospel is good news because it is comprehensively true. All human reality is what it is in the light of the gospel. The gospel is not a partial truth or message enclosed by a larger reality such as history or culture or morals or religion. On the contrary: by the gospel all history and culture and morals and religion are to be evaluated. The gospel is thus both particular and catholic. It is *particular* because it is stubbornly tied to the career and name of Jesus: as there is only one Jesus, so there is only one 'grace of Christ' (Gal. 1:6). But in all its particularity, the gospel is *catholic*. The events of Jesus and the new life which they generate and sustain furnish the overarching context in which all human life and relation to God take place. The gospel concerns a 'power that determines life and destiny',<sup>9</sup> and its scope cannot be in any way restricted. In its very particularity, therefore, the good news is universal in reach, since it is the good news of the one in whom God gathers up all things (cf. Eph. 1:10).

If all this is true, then the gospel is a great deal less serene than we may be tempted to believe: because it is good news of salvation, setting before us the drama of our deliverance by God from darkness and death, it is more than anything else a matter of disorientation. There is an immediate consequence to be drawn here for the church's social and cultural witness: that witness must not proceed by transmuting the gospel into a stable, measurable, quantifiable social or cultural value. We can no more do that than we can channel a volcano into a domestic heating system. The gospel is no mere 'principle' which can then be 'applied' to issues about forms of common life or political economy. The gospel is about death and resurrection, new creation; and it is that new order of reality, rather than any immediate social applicability, which is the burden of the church's testimony.

### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

What does this mean for how we think of the church? Most fundamentally, it means that the church is what it is because of the gospel, and so we begin talking of the church indirectly, by talking of the gospel which calls

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<sup>9</sup> E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London, 1980), p. 9. On the universality of the gospel in Paul, see J. Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles* (Louisville, 1993), p. 402.



it into being and which remains its essential theme and source of vitality.<sup>10</sup> This does not simply mean that the gospel provides a rather remote background or context for our understanding of the church. Talk of the gospel here must be direct and operative. We can, that is, speak properly of the church only if we are very strict to allow the gospel to exercise in an immediate way a controlling and critical influence. The gospel constitutes the environment of the church, the field within which it has its being, the space within which it undertakes its mission. And so the gospel acts as the ultimate critical point of reference for the church's life and proclamation: here at one and the same time the church is exposed to judgement and blessed beyond measure.

At its most basic level, therefore, the church is to be defined as assembly around the gospel. 'Church' is the event of gathering around the magnetic centre of the good news of Jesus Christ. Its dynamic is derived not primarily from human projects, decisions or undertakings, but from the presence of the breathtakingly new and different reality which is brought about by Jesus himself, the good news of God. The church exists because of a decision which has already taken place and which the good news declares: the divine decision to reconcile and glorify all things in Christ. 'Church' is not a struggle to make something happen, but a lived attempt to make sense of, celebrate and bear witness to what has already been established by God's grace. What is fundamental about the church, therefore, is not human congregation, assembly, responsibility or vocation, but election: God's decision, God's sovereign determination in which God says with relentlessly loving and creative force: You shall be my people. Whatever else we may go on to say about the witness of the church must be rooted in a deep sense that the church must allow the divine decision to stand, must as it were stand back and let that divine decision manifest itself and work its own work. There is, therefore, a proper 'emptiness' about the gospel community, in its refusal to derive its impulse from anything other than the sheer self-gift of God in the good news.

We might sum matters up by saying that if the church is what it is because of the gospel, then it is primarily a spiritual event and only secondarily a visible natural history and structured form of human common life. Put in negative terms, this means that the church cannot rely on its history or its external forms (doctrinal, sacramental, ministerial, political) as somehow guaranteeing its existence as church. In this sense, it is

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Fitzmyer, 'The Gospel in the Theology of Paul', in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies* (New York, 1981), p. 155.

'invisible', that is, not simply identical with its tangible shape and a human society. Put positively, this means that the church has true form and visibility in so far as it receives the grace of God through the life-giving presence of the Spirit of Jesus. Like the gospel, the church has a 'mysterious' character: the conditions under which it exists lie within the miracle of its occurrence, and not in any prior forms through which its existence might be secured.

If the church is what it is because of the gospel, it will be most basically characterised by astonishment at the good news of Jesus. What will lie at the heart of all its undertakings will be the primitive response to Jesus' presence and proclamation: 'they were all amazed' (Mark 1:27). What is this amazement? It is being held by a reality – the reality of Jesus – which presents itself as pure gift, without desert or expectation; it is letting ourselves be taken up by that reality and its inherent authority, worth and persuasiveness; it is having settled ideas and routines ruptured and transcended; it is being disconcerted by what is at once a matter of bewilderment and delight. The life and proclamation of the church are 'evangelical' in so far as they are captivated in these ways by the good news. And this captivation is to be permanent; it cannot be left behind us as we move on to our own preoccupations or interests. '[O]nly as there is this astonishment... can there be serious, fruitful and edifying Christian thought and utterance in the Church.'<sup>11</sup>

If the church is what it is because of the gospel, then its life and activities will betray an 'ecstatic' character. That is to say, the definitive activities of the church are those that most clearly betray the fact that the origin, maintenance and perfection of its life lie beyond itself, in the work and word of God which the gospel proclaims. The church's true being is located outside itself. It exists by virtue of God's decision and calling; it is nourished and sustained by the ever-fresh gift of the Holy Spirit; its goal lies in the definitive self-manifestation of the Lord Jesus at his appearing.

What activities testify to this? We may conveniently distinguish these activities into acts of the *church in gathering* and acts of the *church in dispersal*, that is, the acts of the church in its internal and its external orientations. The acts of the church in gathering are those acts by which the church is drawn towards the source of its life, and reinvested in the truth and goodness of the gospel. The acts of the church in dispersal are those acts in which the church follows the external impulse of its source of life, and is pushed beyond itself in testimony and service. It is crucial that neither the acts of gathering nor the acts of dispersal are somehow to be

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<sup>11</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (Edinburgh, 1961), p. 287.

considered as independent, free-standing operations which we may talk about without reference to the action of God. The gospel is not inert; it does not merely furnish the occasion for the church to get busy. Whatever the church does about the gospel is always response to the fact that God has already taken matters into his own hands. With this in mind, we turn, finally, to consider the church as witnessing community.

#### WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S WITNESS?

The church, we read in the First Letter of Peter, is 'a chosen race... a holy nation, God's own people'; but it is those things for an end, namely 'that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Pet. 2:9). The church's election, that is, is teleological; 'church' is not the mere static existence of a social entity; rather, it is assembled for the end of testimony. The church is not a 'chosen race' as a form of spiritual existence which transcends the material and historical world; nor is the church a 'holy people' as a pure social region, a self-enclosed sphere of achieved sanctity into which we may withdraw. Both those modes of church life fail to grasp the real dynamic of the church's election, which is not to sheer difference or indifference but to a specific calling. Election is election to vocation, not to removal. The election of the church is not an end in itself; it is the ground and presupposition of a larger movement in which God catches the church up into his own self-declaration and fashions it into an instrument which can testify to his self-testimony. To be the church is therefore to be set apart, 'possessed' by God, for a particular end, the task of witness.

This witness is definitive of the church. The church is authentically the church in so far as it engages in witness; it is apostolic by being sent, prophetic by indicating the presence and action and word of God. Transcending the world or withdrawing from the world are not options for the church because they are a refusal of the divine commission and therefore a resistance to the dynamic of God's choice. Indeed, those ways of trying to be the church are corrupt, above all because they are forms of self-preservation, and therefore forms of sin, ways of trying to survive without the resurrection and apart from faith. But the church is the church as it does not resist the real direction of God's separating activity, which is towards the world in witness.

All that is probably well known and understood. What is less well known is the reverse side of what has just been said, namely that there is no vocation without election. The church's existence and conduct as a witnessing community is not simply a human undertaking. Rather, its

origin and dynamic derive wholly from God. The church's witness is not, as it were, a first move; the church is not of itself in its own creaturely capacity the bearer of responsibility for witness to the gospel. God himself is his own first witness. In the power of his resurrection and in the energy of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ goes ahead of the church and testifies of himself in the world. He is risen, ascended, enthroned and glorified as Lord of all creaturely reality, including the realities of social and cultural existence. He – not the church – is the true witness. He – not the church – is the light of the world.

This point is of critical significance for any understanding of the public life of the Christian community, for it is precisely here that a great deal of talk of the activity of the church becomes disoriented. Much church life is predicated on the assumption that God is only real, present and active in so far as the church's moral action or spirituality or proclamation make him so. Not only is this a (covert or explicit) denial of the resurrection; it is a miserable burdening of the church with a load which it cannot hope to support. The dynamic of the church's witness does not derive from its own capacity but from God's appointment. Human capacity, skill and wisdom are very far from the centre – indeed, for Paul in 1 Corinthians, eloquent wisdom, power and prestige are a positive hindrance to testimony to the gospel and depotentiate it of its spiritual charge.

Whatever ministry of witness the church may have, then, is dependent, subordinate, a rather frail accompaniment of God's self-testimony. Because the primary agent of the church's witness is God himself in the risen Christ through the Spirit's power, the church's own acts are only a sub-ministry. God's own witness does not dissolve into that of the church; the church does not replace him, but simply witnesses to his witness. God is self-communicating; God speaks for God, and God speaks of God. 'God is his own witness. I am not an apt instrument in His hands. If God makes use of men, nevertheless, a miracle is happening. If I speak, I speak because God Himself speaks and my speaking can therefore become always and only reference to God's own Word.'<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, God does not will to be alone in this work of witness, but elects the church to act as the herald of his own speech. God has no need of this human service; his election of a community for this service is always a matter of divine grace, not divine incapacity. But the direction of God's grace is that there should be a human witness, an apostolic church set apart for the gospel of God

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<sup>12</sup> K. Barth, 'The Christian As a Witness', *God in Action* (Edinburgh, 1936), p. 99.

(cf. Rom. 1:1), accompanying, assisting and indicating the self-communicative presence of God.

## CONTENT

Such is the origin and the dynamic of the church's witness to the gospel. What of its content? Christian cultural and social witness is an attempt to indicate that the world and human society are a certain kind of place; they are the new creation, the place where the creative and redemptive purposes of the triune God have been established and are now moving to their final perfection. Christian witness is the joyful and critical testimony that, if humankind is to act humanly, it must act in conformity to the way the world is.

This means, first, that Christian witness will be concerned to explain that the world has a given nature. It is not an indefinite space, an open area for free play, spontaneity or inventiveness. The world cannot be made up, any more than it can be made. In rejecting this idea, Christian witness is rejecting the grand modern myth that there *is* no nature, that there's nothing that the world *is*. And it is rejecting the corollary of that myth, namely the assertion that all that there is is the will, and a world which is there, not as an order of reality with a kind of resilient otherness and purposive objectivity, but as raw material for the will's projects. Christian social and cultural witness, because it bears witness to the given character of the new creation in Jesus Christ, will therefore refuse the fundamentally *poetic* character of much late modern or postmodern culture in which making, intervening, are humanly basic, in which we don't read reality but write it.

This means, second, that Christian witness will be concerned to explain that the world as new creation has given ends. Its trajectory is not wholly indeterminate, a matter merely for human deliberation; its end is, rather, in accord with its nature. Without an account of ends, there is little barrier against the secularised eschatology of modernity, whose sheer human vulgarity is once again to be unfurled before us as we prepare to elect our government taskmasters.

And this means, third, that Christian witness will be concerned to explain that human social and cultural activity are truthful insofar as they are in accordance with the nature and end as determined by the purposes of God. Christian witness will have a particular interest in urging that good action is truthful action. The captains of modern culture, the men and women of affairs both temporal and spiritual, shake their heads at the naiveté of such witness – how can we know the truth? And how can we

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convert a theological truth into a pattern of action, a policy, a profitable culture? But may it not be that such protest is a symptom, not of the uselessness of truth but the spiritual and moral malaise of those who raise the objection?

I am very conscious that none of what I have said constitutes a set of directives about the content of Christian social and cultural witness. But before we work on directives, we need to learn how to read reality. And to do that we need to learn how to listen: how to be a hearing church, and therefore – and *only* therefore – a witnessing church. Why should the church of Jesus Christ be interested in fostering forms of neighbourliness, in resisting addictive consumption, in rejecting the reduction of education to acquisition of transferable skills, in promoting genuine public argument about social goods? Because neighbourliness, economic chastity, imagination and rational civic speech are truthful ways of being human, truthful ways of casting down Babylon and pointing to the heavenly city whose builder and maker is God. But if we are to see that, we need to begin once again at the beginning; and that is the point at which I must stop.