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**CREATIVE TENSIONS: PERSONAL
REFLECTIONS OF AN EVANGELICAL
CHRISTIAN AND GAELIC POET**
FEARGHAS MACFHIONNLAIGH
INVERNESS

‘Creative Tensions’ is the title I have been given. I am a Calvinist and I write mainstream poetry in Scottish Gaelic. I think that may make me a minority of a minority of a minority! However, rather than take you on a self-indulgent anecdotal meander I would much prefer to point you past me to the Bible and to any principles about language (one of my main preoccupations) that we can discover in it. Of course the idiosyncrasies of my biblical exegesis will probably tell you all you need to know about me!

Let There be Light

‘In the beginning was the Word’, says John. ‘All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made.’ What are the first recorded words of the Word – the *Logos* – in Scripture, the first quoted direct speech? ‘Let there be Light’. Would it be straining matters to take from this the principle that all language, all speech, every word, should illumine? Let us hold the connection between light and language in our minds. The divine Word names the light ‘day’ and the darkness ‘night’. He names the air ‘sky’ and the land ‘earth’. But he does not name the animals. This job he gives to man. We are told in Genesis 2:19 that God formed all the animals and birds. Then he brought them to man to see what he would call them. We can see in this perhaps the doting parent holding up a cuddly toy before an infant and enquiring, ‘What’s this? Who’s this that’s come to see you?’ And the delight when the child responds with its attempt to identify the object with a word. Again, we can see in it God stimulating scientific and artistic curiosity in man – the impulse to analyse and categorize reality. Man broods on the unknown, and the lightning of insight is followed by the thunder of utterance. The sound of its name envelops the animal, enclosing it in a concept-cage. Man now makes sense of the beast. He formally recognizes its meaning. Conceptually, he ‘controls’ it. Henceforth it will inhabit this sound. Like a TV signal its image will be transmitted from human to human whenever this sound is uttered.

Tower of Babel

The transmission of the modern TV signal requires a broadcasting tower. The first tower mentioned in Scripture is the Tower of Babel, which of course is central to the biblical teaching on language. Before we scan the

passage in Genesis 11, though, let us consider a brief extract from George Orwell's *1984*:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and very subtle expression to every meaning that a party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give a single example. The word *free* still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in its old sense of 'politically free' or 'intellectually free', since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless. Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.¹

Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, 'Come let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they might not understand one another's speech.' So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth,

¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 241-2.

and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth (Gen. 11:1-9, RSV).

In passing we might note that in the original an interesting literary device is used. Each human quote in the first half of the passage is mirrored by a divine quote in the latter half. In this 'hourglass' structure verses 1-2 are matched by 8-9, and 3-4 by 6-7. Verse 5 is the pivot, the pinch, the constraining intervention by God. Early concrete poetry, maybe?

Curse and Blessing

It seems to me that Christians make a fundamental mistake when they understand the confusion of language at Babel as a curse. The 'Orwellian' totalitarian tyranny of the single language is surely the curse. As already suggested, there is a connection between language and control, between language and *being* controlled. In one of the essays in his book, *Language and Silence*, George Steiner discusses the effects of Nazi manipulation of the German language. He suggests they ruined it for poetry. My burden is that God has delivered humanity from the thralldom of Babel by giving us many languages. The single language was the curse – the multiplicity of languages is the blessing.

God's commission to mankind through Adam was of course 'Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1:28). The impulse of Babel was directly counter to that. It was a centripetal rather than a centrifugal force. It promised unity, but it was an impacted *absolute* unity. Freedom is only possible where there is choice.

If we travel from the City of Babel (note that it was not just a tower) to the City of Athens of Acts 17, I think we can get further insight. Paul is preaching on the Areopagus.

And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring' (Acts 17: 26-8, RSV).

Here then in the New Testament we have a clear reiteration of God's Old Testament directive that mankind should inhabit the whole earth. And it is not an aimless wandering which is in view. Both OT and NT make a spiritual commission of this outward odyssey. We are to 'seek God and perhaps reach out for him and find him' (NIV). Basically our responsibility is to spread out and look for God. We have to leave no stone unturned until we find him. Science is one way we are to search for him, politics another, art another, music another, language another. We are to 'subdue' each of these realms of life and bring it under the lordship

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of Christ. It is also nicely relevant here that the saying 'In him we live and move and have our being' is actually a quote from a Cretan poet of 600 BC – Epimenides – and the phrase 'We are his offspring' is from two Greek poets of 300 BC called Aratus and Cleanthes. Can we appreciate what has happened here? These men's words have become Holy Writ! The Holy Spirit has quoted pagan poets with approval! What a precedent for preachers! What an endorsement of interest in world(ly?) literature!

Parenthesis: Calvinism

So let us in parenthesis ask the obvious questions here. How many Gaelic-speaking Calvinists could name three mainstream contemporary poets, let alone quote a line or two of their work? Why is it the received wisdom of the Scottish artistic community that the coming of Calvinism to Scotland was some sort of cultural Black Death? How is it that the Gaelic churches – ostensibly the last bastions of Calvinism – can be so fundamentally antipathetic to culture, to the extent of failing to provide the Gaelic-speaking believer with a shred of argument as to why his language is worth preserving from extinction? I heard one Lewis minister on the TV intoning that, since vacant pulpits of Gaelic-speaking charges were not being filled, he could only conclude that God was passing the language by. So is Calvinism just a Christian form of fatalism?

Rookmaaker and Dutch Calvinism

The late Hans Rookmaaker used to say that if the Christian neglects social, cultural and political responsibilities then we should not be surprised if our children or grand-children end up in concentration camps. Because we have capitulated and ceded crucial areas of life to godless systems of thought. Rookmaaker was a Dutch Calvinist thinker whose main interest was the visual arts. In *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, he writes that the high point of Calvinist art in Holland was the seventeenth century. (In Scotland the phrase 'Calvinist Art' is unthinkable. The two words repel each other like the negative poles of two magnets.) This seventeenth century Dutch flowering was short-lived, and Rookmaaker suggests that this was because Calvinist culture became quickly infected with a world-denying mysticism, traceable back through Anabaptists to the Gnostics. The Puritans were not unscathed, in his opinion. Magnificent as they were at best, they had their own quietist, mystical wing. It is perhaps pertinent therefore that, until very recently, practically the only prose literature available in Gaelic was translated from the English Puritans. There are others better qualified than me to judge, but perhaps we have a clue here to what has ailed Highland Christianity.

Rookmaaker was a friend of Francis Schaeffer, who of course had a lot to say on the importance of thinking through contemporary cultural and philosophical issues. It has been these men, and other Calvinist thinkers in the Dutch tradition – Gresham Machen, the early Rushdoony, Abraham

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Kuyper, and supremely Cornelius Van Til and Herman Dooyeweerd – who have provided me with the rationale and the impetus to get involved as a Christian in contemporary culture. A couple of short quotes from Van Til, for example:

The argument between Christians and non-Christians involves every fact in the universe. If it does not involve every fact it does not involve any fact. If one fact can be interpreted correctly on the assumption of human anatomy then all facts can. If the Christian is to be able to show objectively that Christianity is true and that those who reject it do so because they hold to that which is false, this must be done everywhere or else it is not really done anywhere.²

The God of the deposit of faith must be presupposed and the understanding of the relation of God to the world must be to the effect that unless one presupposes this God there is no possibility of reason understanding anything.³

Dooyeweerd is not quite so suited to ‘sound-bite’ extraction, but try this:

The inner restlessness of meaning, as the mode of being of created reality, reveals itself in the whole temporal world. To seek a fixed point in the latter is to seek it in a *fata morgana*, a mirage, a supposed thing-reality, lacking meaning as the mode of being which ever points beyond and above itself. There is indeed nothing in temporal reality in which our heart can rest, because this reality does not rest in itself.⁴

I find in these men, and this tradition, the glorious vision of Christ as Lord of existence, physical and metaphysical. I respond to this. I am persuaded that this brand of Calvinism is the most biblical form of our faith. The *absolute* sovereignty of God is the plank under my feet. What of God’s sovereignty and human suffering, you ask? Innocent suffering is the deepest mystery in human life. All I can say is that to ascribe any ultimacy to chance or to evil is no answer. That is to make what we endure blankly meaningless. Either God is in ultimate charge of every atom and sees every sparrow fall, or there is no God. To say that is not of course to come any closer to squaring belief in a God who is good and almighty with the horrors of life. And anyway, theoretical or theological ‘answers’ to general human suffering run the risk of being offensive, if not obscene; as if the agony of multitudes on TV newscasts is in the least alleviated by what I think. It is only what I *do* that can (sometimes) make a difference. (We are really asking for ‘the new heavens and the new

² Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia, 1967), p. 171.

³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 86.

⁴ Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia, 1969), vol. 3, p. 108.

earth in which righteousness dwells' to appear right here and now – but preferably skipping the Judgement Day, of course!) On the other hand, if I am the individual who suffers, that suffering gains meaning (or potential meaning) in measure as I can cling to faith in the benign sovereignty of God (Acts 2:23, 24, Eph. 1:11). Because this God is infinite, the meaning (or perhaps better, the *perceived* meaning) of my suffering is limited only by my trust in him. Nobody is saying it is easy. For many of us it is the final frontier of our faith. My position is that the *good* things in life have no meaning without Christ, never mind the *bad* things. And the bad things bite to the bone of our personal credos, so that we can speak only for ourselves. For others we do not offer theories (that was the error of Job's comforters), but solidarity, that is, affection and, where possible, action.

The burden of this talk then is that all truth, and consequently all meaning, comes from Christ. And as I have indicated, I have found almost all my fortification in this matter from Dutch Calvinist thinkers (though I must say that the longstanding friendship of William Storrar has been an added kindness from God). We should be the messengers of meaning. But so often we stay safe in our fox-holes, or lose our way somewhere out there in no-man's land, pinned down by enemy fire. The message does not get through. We really ought to be whooping courageously, laughingly even, into the thickest of the fighting. Because we in point of fact are *not* following a mirage or a dream. The key of reality, the *bayonet* of reality, is in our grasp. Christ *is* true. Christ *only* is true (would that I believed that more consistently myself!). Without him the human enterprise is indeed a catastrophic planetary delusion. 'For from him, and through him, and to him are all things' (Rom. 11:36). All things. All meaning belongs to Christ. All truth. Whether or not it is discovered by Christians! Calvin strongly supports this view:

Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears. In despising the gifts, we insult the giver. How then can we deny that truth must have beamed on those ancient lawgivers who arranged civil order and discipline with so much equity? Shall we say that the philosophers, in their exquisite researches and skilful description of nature, were blind? Shall we deny the possession of intellect to those who drew up rules of discourse, and taught us to speak in accordance with reason? Shall we say that those who, by the cultivation of the medical art, expended their industry on our behalf were only raving? What shall we say of the mathematical sciences? Shall we deem them to be the dreams of madmen? Nay, we cannot read

the writings of the ancients on these subjects without the highest admiration; an admiration which their excellence will not allow us to withhold. But shall we deem anything to be noble and praiseworthy, without tracing it to the hand of God? Far from us be such ingratitude; an ingratitude not chargeable even on heathen poets, who acknowledged that philosophy and laws, and all useful arts were the inventions of the gods. Therefore, since it is manifest that men whom the Scriptures term 'carnal' are so acute and clear-sighted in the investigation of inferior things, their example should teach us how many gifts the Lord has left in possession of human nature, notwithstanding its having been despoiled of the true good....

Nor is there any ground for asking what concourse the Spirit can have with the ungodly, who are altogether alienated from God. For what is said as to the Spirit dwelling in believers only, is to be understood of the Spirit of holiness, by which we are consecrated to God as temples. Notwithstanding this, he fills, moves and invigorates all things by virtue of the Spirit, and that according to the peculiar nature which each class of beings has received by the Law of Creation. But if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it, lest, by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth (*Institutes* 2:2:15-16).

I imagine that when Calvin refers to 'heathen poets', he is thinking in the first instance of Paul's approving quotes in our Acts 17 passage. Anyway, here ends the parenthesis. We had dropped in on Athens. Let us now get back to Babel.

Implosion

We could say that Babel was a demographic, cultural and spiritual implosion. It was not so much that mankind had stalled in its commission – rather it had slammed all engines into reverse. This was an apostate human enterprise. Now here is another interesting connection. According to my NIV Study Bible, Babel would have been a ziggurat, *i.e.* a stepped pyramid with a shrine at the top. These ziggurats were intended to be staircases to heaven and were given names like 'the House of the Link between Heaven and Earth' or 'The House of the Foundation-platform of Heaven and Earth'.

In Genesis 28:10-18 we have the story of one man who, as it were, turns over a stone and finds God – Jacob. Jacob uses a stone for a pillow and dreams of a ladder up to heaven with angels ascending and descending and the Lord at the top. It seems, however, that what is envisaged here is not a runged ladder but the staircase of a ziggurat. 'How awesome is this place', says Jacob. 'This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.' And what does the Lord say to Jacob in this dream?

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'Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.' This stone-centred Bethel – 'the House of God' – is centrifugal. A multiplicity of peoples will be blessed.

Now Jacob was a cheat – a man of guile. In John 1, Jesus tells an Israelite in whom was *no* guile – Nathanael – that he would see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Had Nathanael been asleep under the fig tree? We are not told. But we are told that Jesus – the Son of Man – is the reality behind Jacob's dream. He is the True Ziggurat, the true gateway of heaven. He is Jacob's offspring through whom the diverse nations of the earth will be blessed.

Pentecost and Babel

Now getting back to language, I want to connect Pentecost and Babel. In Acts 2 the ascended Christ sends down the Spirit. This blessing manifests itself in the apostolic ability to speak Gentile languages. Can we make the link here with Babel? God comes down on the upper room in Jerusalem, our third biblical city. If, as is thought, they were in the Temple precincts, we have another stone 'gate of heaven' here. The utterance of many languages results. And the commission is outwards – to go to the ends of the earth. The Spirit speaks in our Gentile languages and his holiness is not compromised. The truth is not compromised. On the contrary it is by these languages that the truth of the moment is best expressed. The medium is integral to the message. Our Gentile languages are legitimized, validated. Their worth and status is proclaimed. Henceforth the Word will be inscripturated in Greek rather than Hebrew. It is symbolic, but not *just* symbolic. It is practical and tactical. Greek could say things that Hebrew could not, and vice versa. They are complementary. The historical suitability of Greek to convey the truth was as much a mercy of Christ as was that of Hebrew.

We read the passage from *1984* and we highlighted the word 'city' in Genesis 11 to emphasize that Babel is not just an edifice symbolizing humanistic religion – glory to man in the highest – it is also about isolationist culture and even totalitarian politics.

New Jerusalem

We have moved from the City of Babel to Athens to Jerusalem and to the place called Bethel. There is yet another 'city-link'. In biblical symmetry this City of Man (Babel) is mirrored by the City of God at the end of the Bible. This fourth and final City does not rise impudently upwards from the earth. Rather it descends graciously to earth from heaven. We are told that the New Jerusalem will be as clear as crystal, that each unique gemstone foundation will be inscribed with the name of one of the twelve apostles (plurality of identities not just allowed by, but underwritten by,

Christ). The glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. Its gates will never be shut (Rev. 21:23-5). It is an open, pluralistic culture, focused on Christ.

And if I may be allowed some poetic licence here, Babel, far from being a sun radiating light (remember our initial connection between language and light), is rather a collapsed star – a black hole – its gravitational pull sucking in everything, even light itself. In terms of our quote from Dooyeweerd, Babel seeks a ‘fixed point’ in ‘temporal reality’. It prefers man-made brick to God-given stone. Language ceases to look for meaning ‘beyond and above itself’ in the Eternal Word, and so becomes babble. God comes down at Babel. Ironically, it really turns out to be the ‘gate of heaven’ (with God as gate-crasher). Remember the hourglass. Time runs out for man. The linguistic Alcatraz is liberated. The gate of the archetypal Gulag yields.

Search-lights

The light of God floods the black windowless skyscraper of Babel. It becomes a crystal – a prism of colours exploding in all directions. (Remember the transparent be-jewelled New Jerusalem.) Each refracted colour (each language!) is a search-light. Not like the search-lights of a prison-camp spotlighting escapees in order that they may be shot down, but tunnels of coloured light acting as corridors of escape. And the fugitives are not escaping *from* God – they are escaping *unto* God. For Christ is the True Ziggurat, the True Staircase, the True Door, the True Route of Escape, the True Light, the True Word. Only in him do our words have meaning. To him who overcomes Christ will give a ‘white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it’ (Rev. 2:17). To each a personal name (word? language? identity?) of God-given, God-filled meaning, rock-solid meaning. The Second Adam is the true name-giver.

The single language of Babel is refracted into the many. Why? To deliver us from the tyranny of pagan thought-control which a monopolistic world language threatens. To deliver us from the silence which totalitarianism always seeks to impose on the populace in its grip. God leads the jailbreak. For freedom Christ has set us free, free to seek God while he may be found and where he may be found (though he is not far from any of us). And each language is a searchlight with which to seek him. A fissure, a hole punched in the wall of silence.

Silence and Modern Literature

Vladimir. Écoute!

Estragon. Je n’entends rien.

Vladimir. Hsst!

Estragon. Tu m’as fait peur.

Vladimir. *J'ai cru que c'était lui.*

Estragon. *Qui?*

Vladimir. *Godot.*

Estragon. *Pah! Le vent dans les roseaux.*

Each language is a critique of silence. Much modern literature senses an encroaching silence. A gathering G-force of cosmic emptiness. According to Colin Duckworth in the introduction to his edition of *En Attendant Godot*, one of the convictions of Beckett is that 'words give thoughts their existence and are therefore the only defence against being plunged into Nothingness (le néant), the Void (le vide) of silence and timelessness'. Duckworth quotes Pascal's very modern angst: 'Le silence éternel des espaces infinis m'effraie' (The silence of the eternal spaces terrifies me), and points out that Pascal's remedy – 'tendre les bras au Libérateur' (to reach out to the Deliverer) – was not open to Beckett. For Beckett, 'such a reaction would be a sterile, facile, cowardly, and undignified failure to come to terms with the universe in which we live and to accept it fearlessly. The choice lies with each one of us.'⁵ Well, I am with Pascal on this one! And if I am accused of needing a crutch, I will readily admit it. Though actually what *I* need is more like a life-support system! But the cowardice bit (and the rest) is of course gratuitous. Neither my cowardice nor Beckett's bravery can dethrone Christ if in reality Christ is Lord of all. Christ's Lordship – that is the issue. In rejecting the stone which will become the chief cornerstone Beckett senses the silence closing in. His tower of words is not so much a rampart of defence as a vantage point above the hubbub of the street, the better to hear the silence approach. For Beckett and other modernists (like Sartre) Godot never was, and if the universe is filled with anything it is the dying echo of hollow laughter: 'Maintenant, je savais: les choses sont entières ce qu'elles paraissent – et derrière elles... il n'y a rien.' (Now I knew: things are precisely what they appear to be – and behind them... there is nothing.)⁶

If ultimate reality consists of void, and if we are determined that as writers we shall bear witness to what reality is, eschewing the escapist romantic fantasy that out there somewhere lies the Big Smiling Meaning, how shall we defend our very words from ultimate emptiness? Can we create words which have meaning 'in themselves'? Can we happily dispense with the need to underwrite, to validate their meaning with reference to absolutes 'above and beyond' them? What if only escapist 'let's-pretend-there's-meaning' words are possible? What if realism reveals that the void is not just 'out there', but down here where we are also? That it is in the void that we 'live and move and have our being'? That our words are hollow – that they have always been hollow – and that only

⁵ Beckett, *En Attendant Godot* (London, 1966), pp. xxxiii-iv, cxxxi.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (transl. as *The Diary of Antoine Roquentin*).

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the legacy of past faith-systems and current pretence save us from babble and silence? How will we build out great tower if our bricks are hollow and frangible? How shall we build without those white stones inscribed with meaning?⁷

In Beckett we find an increasing dislocation between words and meaning, between brain and voice. Syntax breaks down. Phrases are forlornly repeated as if in the hope (there is no hope, of course – he just wants rigorously to impress that fact upon us) that some coherent reality might yet be conjured up. But the incantation does not work. The man-made bricks will not transmute into white stones of meaning. The walls of silence close in further. In this context, we have also the stark, memorable imagery of T.S. Eliot's 'Hollow Men' (though I believe Eliot is alerting us to a danger that he believes can be escaped):

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar.

...Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

...For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper. (T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems*, London, 1970).

⁷ Cf. Deut 27:1-8, especially in the en français courant version: 'Vous dresserez de grandes pierres que vous peindrez en blanc; sur ces pierres vous écrirez tous les commandements de la loi.'

Nature and Wisdom

Christ the last Adam is the true name-giver. It is interesting to me that at the outset of his ministry Christ, like Adam, was alone with the animals (Mark 1:12, 13). Let us bring animals and language and poetry and wisdom together by turning to one passage of Scripture –

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.... He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish (I Kings 4:29-34, NIV).

So what did this wisest man in all the earth talk about? – Plants and animals! (And maybe this brings to mind a passage in the NT – ‘Consider the lilies how they grow – Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.... The Queen of the South came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom. And behold a greater than Solomon is here.’ Luke 12:27.) Each plant, tree, creature is an irreplaceable book of wisdom – library of wisdom. The extinction of a species is an incalculable loss to mankind – not just spiritually and philosophically but in inestimable practical ways, for example in medicine. Part of us dies with every species. With every extinction another door slams shut in our heads. What if every bird species dies out but one? What if every animal species disappears but one? What if every flower species perishes but one? Will we be all the wiser for that? We must be as interventionist when it comes to conservation of nature as we would be if we could salvage irreplaceable books from a burning library. And what of the demise of languages? Can it be that in this regard the Highland Calvinist suddenly becomes a doctrinaire, laissez-faire, survival-of-the-fittest Darwinist? Is it ‘only natural’ that a language which has ‘failed to adapt’ should become extinct? Is the world inexorably evolving upwards towards a single world language? The last time one language had a monopoly God intervened. Has he changed his mind? Can intervention on Gaelic's behalf *not* be the will of God? Do we think God is as Darwinian as we are? And if all languages fail but one will we think that progress? Progress that one tongue should consume all others? Is each language not a unique articulation of reality, a treasure-house of wisdom? And as each language dies does a light not go out for ever? Does a door not close forever in the human mind? Is one more route of escape not denied the human soul? Is a monolithic monolingual Babel not being rebuilt block by block as successive languages fall finally silent? Are we so naive as to imagine that if mankind speaks only one language – be that language even English (!) – then civilization will expand apace? If the grand piano swallows all the other instruments in the orchestra what will become of

symphonies? Will not even pianists in time wince and wonder if there might be more to music than this?

And where are the messengers of meaning? It is surely a tragedy and an outrage that we who claim to follow Christ are so often diffident, dumb or downright deadly when it comes to natural or cultural rescue efforts? Who else on the earth but believers in the Creator should be arguing the case for the conservation of the creation? Who else but those who believe that the Word was with God, and that the Word was God, and that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, should be defending words from meaninglessness, speech from debasement and languages from oblivion? I am not just talking about lying and swearing and morality and piety! I am talking about the raw stuff of existence – the fabric, the warp and woof of life, the elements of daily human experience. I am talking about the lilies and about the hyssop that grows out of the wall and about the sparrows that fall! I am talking about words as an expression of the divine image in humanity, words, for every careless one of which men will have to give an account on the day of judgement (Matt. 12:36).

To our shame we so often stand 'like coos lookin ower a dyke' at unbelievers as they frequently struggle heroically to safeguard or salvage the meaningful in life. Thank God for common grace! Let me spit this out – a Calvinism, a Christianity which has no interest in the earth and the human lot on the earth is in my opinion infected with a hideous heresy, having more to do with Gnostic mysticism and Plato than the Bible. Cursed is the ground because of our disobedience. Can we not see? Can we not glimpse the glory that 'from him and through him and to him are all things'? And so therefore all things are ours 'whether the world or life or death or the present or the future' (I Cor. 3:21)? Have we never read that the body is meant for the Lord and 'the Lord for the body' (1 Cor. 6:13)? That it was in hope of the redemption of our *bodies* that we were saved, and that the whole physical creation will share in that deliverance (Rom. 8:19-24)? That the consummation of history is not when the earth is abolished and we become ghosts in an aethereal heaven, but rather when heaven comes down to *earth* (Rev. 21:1-4, 22-27; 22:1-5)? Did the second Person of the Trinity become flesh in order to annihilate flesh? Did he become a man in order to dematerialize mankind? Has the second Man and the last Adam not the slightest interest in speaking meaning to the animals? Has he changed his mind about the lilies and the sparrows? Have we to abandon any notion of discovering wisdom in the creation? Has God not the least interest in scientific truth, political truth, historical truth, linguistic truth, and dare I even whisper it – aesthetic truth? (Lilies being more glorious than the bedecked Solomon is of course an aesthetic judgement.) Has God not the least interest in whether or not humanity invents the wheel, or flies to the moon, or whether our suspension bridges fall down? Is the earth no more than a seedy waiting room for an incorporeal eternity? What if we are wrong?

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

What if there is work to be done? Has the cultural commission of Genesis 1:28 been rescinded? Does it not rather remain an integral part of the great evangelical commission of Matthew 28:18-22?

Stewards

Cursed is the ground because of our disobedience. Did not God make Adam steward of the earth? Are we not stewards still? Are we not stewards also of the languages we speak – how shall we preach Christ in Newspeak? What if our only newspaper is called *Pravda*? Are we not stewards in particular of the languages unique to our own nations? And if the saying ‘It is not the healthy but the sick who need the doctor’ holds good culturally also, then where should the attentions of the linguistically-called Scot be? Before the light fails. Before the wisdom dies. And what if God chooses to speak Gaelic to our generation? Is that ridiculous?

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him (1 Cor. 1:27-9, NIV).

One of those beams of light from Babel is called Scottish Gaelic. It is flickering and fading. It was in our stewardship but we have neglected it. If it goes out there will be one less route of escape for mankind. One less window through which to look for and find God. Let us act. Before the light fails. Before the wisdom dies. Before the silence steps closer.

Christ is Lord of all. And should we the messengers fall mute, the very stones will cry out! As to what language they will speak, well...!