

Renewing the Centre: The Bible in the (Post) Modern Church ¹

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In 1994, the Centre for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau in Northfield, Minnesota, co-sponsored a conference on the theme 'Reclaiming the Bible for the Church'. The perceptive reader would immediately notice the oddity of the theme of the conference. The Bible belongs to the church and exists only within the context of this community of faith. Why, then, is there cause for the church to reclaim the Bible, and from whom? The main focus of the conference, as organisers Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson put it, is 'to address the gap between the historical-critical method of biblical studies and the church's dogmatic interpretation of the biblical faith'.²

The metaphor of 'reclaiming' the Bible suggests that it has been entirely forsaken or lost. This, however, is not the case. The Bible is still used in the church and its images and themes continue to shape the church's life and worship. But the organisers were concerned about the *authority* of the Bible in the church. 'What is to be reclaimed for the church', they wrote, 'is the Bible as authoritative Scripture'. This is also my fundamental concern in this lecture, which is entitled, 'Renewing the Centre: The Bible in the (Post) Modern Church'. The papers of the Minnesota conference were concerned with the Babylonian captivity of the Bible by the Western academy. In this lecture, I am concerned with the Babylonian captivity of the Bible of a different, and perhaps more subtle, kind, and one which is

¹ This article is the revised version of a lecture delivered at the seminar *Discerning God Today* organised by the Centre for the Development of Christian Ministry on 28 August 2004.

² Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, 'Introduction: Gospel, Church and Culture', in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. x.

certainly more prevalent as it impacts the masses, namely, our secular culture.

Church and Culture

Let me begin, then, with a brief examination of the way in which secularism has influenced evangelical Christianity. In the past two or three decades, there is a swell of literature by evangelical theologians that critique certain developments in the evangelical churches, especially those in the United States. Some among the audience would, I'm sure, recognise names like Alister McGrath, David Wells, Os Guinness, and Mark Noll (to name just a few), theologians and historians who have contributed much to this analysis. These theologians have described and evaluated the alarming trends that pervade evangelical Christianity with penetrating theological insight, and they have issued a clarion call for pastors and lay Christians alike to recapture the essence of evangelicalism. This state of affairs in American evangelicalism is carefully documented and rigorously criticised by David Wells, professor of historical and systematic theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. In his highly acclaimed book, *No Place for Truth*, Wells writes of the isolation of evangelicalism from the larger culture in the early decades of the twentieth century:

In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, Fundamentalists were clearly cognitive aliens within culture and often used doctrine to define their own cultural boundaries. Doctrine served to seal in believers and seal out unbelievers ... They held to an inspired, authoritative Bible and to the centrality and indispensability of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. These beliefs were then hedged about by supporting doctrines the role of which, it would seem, was quite as much to alienate an unbelieving culture as it was to preserve Christian orthodoxy.³

From the 1950s, however, things began to change. There emerged what some have called the "new evangelicalism" that sought to break away

³ David Wells, *No Place for Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 128.

from its psychological isolation by adopting a more world-affirming attitude. While the merits of such an approach are obvious, there are also grave dangers, the most serious and damaging of which is the loss of theological integrity, and with it, a sense of identity. This is exactly what happened in the ensuing decades in the twentieth century. In the 1970s, when evangelicalism moved from the periphery into the centre, from the hinterland of American life into the mainstream, and began to think like the status quo, “their theological and moral distinctives began to evaporate like the morning mist”. The acids of secularism created such a sharp hiatus between the public and the private that evangelicals are compelled to privatise their religious experience.

The shift from emphasis on “doctrine” to emphasis on “life”, from theology to spirituality, also became evident, putting evangelicals uncomfortably close to the liberals whom they berated. Furthermore the “spirituality” which evangelicals embrace is separated from the cognitive framework provided by the church’s dogmas. As a result, doctrinal rigour is replaced by a theological fuzziness. As Wells puts it,

Evangelicals today only have to believe that God can work dramatically within the narrow fissure of internal experience; they have lost interest (or perhaps they can no longer sustain interest) in what the doctrines of creation, common grace, and providence once meant for Christian believers, and even in those doctrines that articulate Christ’s death such as justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. It is enough for them simply to know that Christ somehow died for people.⁴

Those who think that this problem is specific only to evangelicalism in the West and that it has nothing to do with Christianity in Singapore need only to be reminded of just how quickly trends and developments in the churches in America reach our shores. They must also note just how much emphasis our churches place on experience, and how little on doctrine or theology. In the modern church, tangible results, numerical growth and pragmatically oriented bottom-lines have taken centre-stage while doctrinal integrity is relegated to the periphery. This is evident in the silent

⁴ Wells, *No Place for Truth*, p. 131.

influence of sociological and management theories in almost every aspect of church life and in the pervasive consumerist mentality. The Church Growth Movement, which was at one time very popular, and the cell-church movement that swiftly followed, are different manifestations of the same ethos. They betray the secularism that has crept in to occupy the vacuum that is left when serious theological thinking is diminished. As Ola Tullman puts it:

The cry for modernisation in mission shows how deep-rooted this movement is in modernity. The new ground that [Peter] Wagner is talking about means using such modern means of growing churches as management, marketing, and megachurches. Books like George Barna's *The Frog in the Kettle, Marketing the Church* and *User Friendly Churches* stand in the same tradition. Simply put, it is not correct to say that the church growth movement is a purely spiritual movement, brought about by the Holy Spirit. There is hardly a movement today – of similar significance to world mission – that is so engulfed in modernity's mindset.⁵

The face of the ministry and the role of the minister are also changing. The pastor-theologian is fast becoming an extinct species. In his place stands the pastor-CEO, whose emphasis is not theological and doctrinal orthodoxy but managerial and entrepreneurial competence. The end result of all this is that the church loses her theological discernment and her ability to critique the socio-historical context and culture to which she is called to proclaim the Gospel. Devoid of theological depth and astuteness, the church can only remain silent in face of the challenges posed by the fast-changing culture. And with its prophetic edge dulled, the church slowly disappears into the background and become an indistinguishable element of the secular culture.

⁵ Ola Tullman, 'The Impact of Modernity: On the Mission of the Church' in Chuck Lowe and Wong Chan Kok (eds.) *Ministry in Modern Singapore: The Effects of Modernity on the Church* (Singapore: Singapore Bible College, 1997), p. 144.

The Threat of Post-modern Relativism

The demand for theological integrity and rigour becomes even more acute in this age that we inhabit which some thinkers and social theorists have termed “postmodern”. Our task here is not to offer a detailed analysis of all the claims of postmodern philosophy, but to examine how some of them can and have influenced the way we think and behave in society and in the church. To be sure, some have maintained that postmodernism is a vague notion which defies precise definition. Others have pointed out that it is impossible to pinpoint exactly when postmodernity as a cultural sensibility, and postmodernism as its cognitive articulation, emerged. These difficulties notwithstanding, it is possible to describe some of the main characteristics of the postmodern outlook. For starters, if the prefix “post” suggests supercession, post-modernism is the outlook which supersedes the modern. This is characterised in different ways by different authors. If modernity is about purpose, then postmodernity has to do with play. If modernity is characterised by design, postmodernity is characterised by chance.⁶

But the most important characteristic of postmodernity, which will occupy us in this lecture, is its attitude towards truth. Postmodern philosophers reject the possibility of an objective knowledge of reality and the correspondence theory of truth. Postmodernism maintains that there is no correspondence whatsoever between our perception of reality and the reality itself. In short, postmodernism totally rejects the notion of absolute truth. In his insightful work, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, the cultural analyst and philosopher Os Guinness offers a clear and penetrating explanation of postmodernism’s relationship with truth:

Where modernism was a manifesto of human self-confidence and self-congratulation, postmodernism is a confession of modesty, if not despair. There is no truth; only truths. There is no grand reason; only reasons. There

⁶ Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 267-8.

is no privileged civilisation (or culture, belief, norm and style); only a multiplicity of cultures, beliefs, norms and styles. There is no universal justice; only interests and competition of interest groups. There is no grand narrative of human progress; only countless stories of where people and their cultures are now. There is no simple reality or any grand objectivity of universal, detached knowledge; only a ceaseless representation of everything in terms of everything else.⁷

This simply means that no one has sole monopoly of the truth, and that all claims of truth are equally valid, regardless how much they contradict one another. It signals a crisis of authority: no one can tell us what is true or untrue, and what is right or wrong. Each person has the right to decide for himself what is true and what is proper conduct. Postmodernism claims that there is really no universal or privileged vantage-point which enables one to decide what is true and what is not. To use the expression of Os Guinness, 'there is no truth, only truths'. Postmodernism does not only assert that truth is illusory, it also insists that it is oppressive. I well remember a discussion I had in 1994 with a progressive Catholic theologian at Hethrop College, London, on the truth-claims found in the apostle and Nicene creeds. At my comments on the uniqueness of Christian theism and the uniqueness of Christ – both of which are clearly emphasised in the Creed's statements regarding the Trinity and the incarnation – he responded angrily with a lengthy diatribe that such truth-claims have been the source of wars and bloodshed. For him such truth-claims are not just absurd; they are fascist and oppressive.

The postmodern temperament therefore favours tolerance. 'Tolerance', not right or wrong, truth or falsehood, is what matters. Tolerance is the preferred virtue, as Allan Bloom has described it so well in *The Closing of the American Mind*:

The danger ... is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness – and

⁷ Os Guinness, *Fir Bodies, Fat Minds* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), p. 105.

the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and the various ways of life and kinds of human beings – is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was made in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think that you are right at all.⁸

This sentiment is exploited to the fullest in the debate on homosexuality in the church, a debate which is not exclusive to the West. In the past decade or so, a number of scholars who are sympathetic to homosexuality have forwarded alternative interpretations of key passages in the Bible in the hope to refute what they consider to be heterosexual pontifications on human sexuality. These scholars have employed the tools which postmodernism has invented, especially deconstructionism, to provide alternative readings of the Bible. Some have gone so far as to argue that the Bible condones communal sex, and that God can and does sanctify such sexual activities. The point is that since there is no objective truth, and since there is no authoritative interpretation of the Bible, the conflicting approaches must be allowed to co-exist with each other. Postmodern pluralism is established on a dogmatic egalitarianism. This egalitarianism champions tolerance and frowns on discrimination.

Such an approach, however, is naïve simply because not everything should be tolerated, and we must discriminate between the different forms of discrimination. Both the Bible and our collective wisdom tell us that discrimination, when exercised on the basis of certain sound principles, not only makes human life possible but also causes it to flourish. It is by discriminating what is right and wrong behaviour that the integrity of human society is preserved. And, as far as tolerance is concerned, we must emphatically assert that to allow tolerance to have greater weight than truth is to reveal an intellectual shallowness and a moral irresponsibility.

⁸ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 25-6.

The Authority of Scripture

There is an urgent need for the church today, not least the evangelical church, to recover the authority of the Bible. But in order to do so, we must be clear about what biblical authority entails and how it is significant to the church and individual Christians alike. Following the Reformers, Protestant Christianity has always seen the Bible as its sole authority for Faith and Conduct. The emphasis of the Reformers, *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) is formalised in all the confessions and the statements of the Protestant churches. The Westminster Confession has made a declaration on the matter that is representative of the Protestant Churches:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; to which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men (I, 6).

We shall say something about the role of traditions later in this lecture. But the main thrust of this statement is to emphasise the sufficiency of Scripture as the counsel of God and thus its authority over God’s people, the church. The same emphasis is found in Anglican formularies such as the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*:

Article 6: Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

In another Article, the authority of the church is juxtaposed with that of Scripture. Scripture delimits the authority of the church in that the church does not have the right to teach anything contrary to it. The teaching of the church is subservient to the revelation of God through his written Word.

Article 20: Of the Authority of the Church.

The Church hath power to decree Rites and Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.

Why is Scripture given such primacy and authority? To answer this question we need to reflect on the relationship between Scripture and Jesus Christ. The Reformers made an important distinction between the revelation of God in Christ and in Scripture. Jesus Christ, as the incarnate Word of God, is the supreme revelation of God. Jesus is therefore the Word of God absolutely. On the other hand, the Bible was written by human beings, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Bible witnesses to the supreme revelation of God in Christ, and as such is revelatory. To put this in another way, Jesus Christ is the Word of God in the *primary* sense, and the Bible is the Word of God in the *secondary* and *derivative* sense. Jesus Christ is the Word of God *absolutely*, and the Bible is God's Word *relatively*. Even the Reformers who wished to stress the importance of Scripture were careful to make this distinction. Yet, the only vehicle by which the church can come to know the incarnate Word is the Bible. It is through the Bible that the church understands God's dealings with his people, Israel. It is through the Bible that the church understands the significance of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The incarnate Word of God is known through the medium of the written Word of God, the Bible. *Sola scriptura* ('by scripture alone') must therefore be understood in the light of *sola Christi* ('by Christ alone'). Christ alone is the supreme revelation of God, and he is known by Scripture alone.

Once we understand this, we will be able to see the normative nature of Scripture for the Christian community. What is the nature of scriptural authority? Earlier I argued that Jesus Christ alone is the absolute and primary revelation of God, and that the Bible is relative and secondary revelation. The same must be said about the authority of the Bible in relation to that of God. For the Christian community, God in Christ alone has supreme authority. The authority of Scripture is relative to the authority of God. Scripture has authority because it witnesses to God. It has authority because it brings us into 'communion with the life-

enhancing, saving power of God'.⁹ Scripture has the power to mediate the reality of God because the Holy Spirit inspired its writers. The canon of Scripture therefore comprises a collection of books that the church considers as normative for her.

The Bible as authoritative Scripture impacts the community of believers in a number of ways. The primary context in which the Bible is placed in that community is its worship. The Bible is read when the community gathers to worship God. The teaching of the church as well as the church's liturgy are profoundly based on the themes of the Bible. For the Christian community, the Bible is also the basis upon which the doctrines of the Faith are formulated. The Bible is of course not a textbook on doctrines. But the Bible provides important data concerning God and the world, and is therefore the basis for the Christian understanding of reality. For example, it is on the basis of the scriptural witness of God that the doctrine of the Trinity is constructed and deemed to be indispensable to Christian theism. Finally, the church sees scripture as a guide to ethical behaviour. Just as the Bible is not a textbook on doctrine, it is also not a textbook on ethics. But in the Bible is found the revelation of the love of God in Christ. Christians believe that this revelation points to the ethic of love which should govern human relationships. The Bible therefore is central in every aspect of the life of the Christian community: its worship, doctrine and conduct. And it is only by renewing its centre that the modern church will distinguish herself as the people of God.

The Importance of Tradition

It is, however, insufficient for us to merely restore the Bible to its rightful place of authority in the church. It is also important, and to my mind, equally urgent and pressing for the church to understand and appreciate her own tradition. This has been my burden for a number of years. Evangelical churches are generally ignorant of the great tradition of the church. The churches in Singapore not only share this weakness, but they

⁹ Charles Price, 'Holy Book, Holy People: A Study of the Authority and Use of the Bible' in *The Bible's Authority in Today's Church*, edited by Frederick Houk Borsch (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 78.

are also severely impoverished by it. Apart from the names John and Charles Wesley, many Methodists in Singapore do not know much else about the Methodist Tradition. This problem is not exclusive to Methodists. It is true of Anglicans, Presbyterians and Lutherans as well. In my experience, I find Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians generally more knowledgeable of their own traditions than Protestants.

A number of evangelical theologians have voiced their concern about this situation. In his important book, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, D. N. Williams sums up the current theological situation in conservative Protestant circles in one word: amnesia.¹⁰ This is an appropriate description, which brings out alarmingly just how dangerous it is for the church to marginalise the tradition. The real problem with amnesia is not that the patient does not remember his family and friends, but that he no longer remembers who he is. The evangelical church suffering from amnesia not only risks forgetting the rich history and familial ties she has with the universal church, she also forgets who she is. She experiences an identity crisis and becomes easy prey to the secular culture which surrounds her. But the problem with evangelicalism is not just that it has the tendency to forget the past. Evangelicalism is also generally suspicious of that which is usually called ‘tradition’ because it has been understood as having to do with the artificial product of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Evangelicals appropriate the Reformation dictum *sola scriptura* and fear that this important foundation will somehow be compromised when some extracanonical authority is recognised.

Evangelicals champion the right to read the Bible for themselves and to discern its meaning without the tutelage of tradition. As Alister McGrath has rightly observed, ‘Evangelicals have always been prone to read Scripture as if they were the first to do so’.¹¹ This approach, however, has the unhappy result of allowing individualism and subjectivism to distort biblical interpretation. This has resulted in more harm than good to the church. Furthermore, without a deep appreciation of the tradition, evangelicalism will increasingly proliferate a sectarian approach to the Christian Faith and become susceptible to the prevailing culture. This

¹⁰ D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 9.

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), p. 95.

situation is made more acute because we live in an era of rapid change. The church, like all else in society, is subjected to what Loren Mead has aptly called the ‘Tyranny of the New’. He writes, ‘When the new way is considered the only way, there is no continuity, fads become the new Gospel and in Paul’s words, the church is “blown to and fro by every wind of doctrine”’.¹² Amnesia and the fleetingness of the postmodern culture make a most poisonous cocktail!

How are we to think of the tradition of the church? Does acknowledging the legitimate role of tradition tantamount to compromising the priority and primacy of Scripture? I have said earlier that scripture belongs to the Christian community. The process of hearing, interpreting, understanding and obeying the Word of God in scripture is essentially a communal and not exclusively an individual activity. There is a dialectical relationship between the Scripture, the individual Christian and the community. The individual, to be sure, has the right to read scripture for himself. But his interpretation of scripture must be subjected to that of the Christian community. And the interpretation of any local Christian community must always be in conversation, not just with other contemporary Christian communities but also with those in the past. This is the dynamics of reading and interpreting Scripture. Scripture cannot be read as if it has never been read before. The reading and interpretation of scripture is never the sole right of an individual because the believer always belongs to a local Christian community. And this local Christian community is part of the universal or catholic church, past and present.

The Holy Spirit of God, who is the church’s Teacher who will bring the church to all truth, has been at work in the church throughout her history, even as he is at work today. J. I. Packer has made this point succinctly:

The Spirit has been active in the Church from the first, doing the work he was sent to do – guiding God’s people into an understanding of revealed truth. The history of the Church’s labour to understand the Bible forms a commentary on the Bible which we cannot despise or ignore without dishonouring the Holy Spirit. To treat the principle of biblical authority as a prohibition against

¹² Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1991), p. 77.

reading and learning from the book of church history is not an evangelical, but an anabaptist mistake.¹³

The Church in the World

Only when the church recovers and renews the centre will she be true to her own identity and calling. Only such a church is truly salt of the earth and light the world. How is the church to fulfil this awesome responsibility given to her? She can only do so by being what she is meant to be – the holy people of God. Only when the church is true to her identity can she impact the world as salt of the earth and light of the world. But for the church to do this she must constantly renew her centre, that is, she must constantly acknowledge the authority of the Word of God over her, and she must allow the Word to shape her existence and motivate her conduct in the world. This, essentially, is what it means to be a church. As the Reformers put it, the church is *creatura verbi*, the creature of the Word. The church is where man hears God because he has spoken. And the church is a community of sinners, now justified by the work of Christ, who in faith obeys that Word against all the odds and even in the midst of untold danger. This is the true nature of Christian courage. Christian courage is not born out of self-confidence and bravado. Christian courage is born out of faith – that open trust and surrender to the will of God, that resolve to obey God rather than man. In 1934, Karl Barth delivered an address in Switzerland in which he spoke thus of the source of the courage and significance of the church:

The Church will gain true courage and genuine significance whenever and wherever it is firmly resolved to resign the false courage and counterfeit significance – the courage of large numbers, moral qualities, of activistic programs, of effect on and appreciation of those without – with the intent of putting its sole confidence in what founds and

¹³ James I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958; reissued, Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), p.48.

preserves it as it unites in lending an open ear to what God has spoken.¹⁴

Notice just how many of those things that Barth identified as pseudo-courage and false significance are precisely those which are being sought after by the modern church – large numbers, activism, political influence. The faithfulness and significance of the church are achieved when the church expresses her loyalty to God as he has revealed himself in his written Word, the Bible. Such loyalties are antithetical to the loyalties of the world. But the church must be committed to them if she is to be what she is meant to be – the holy people of God.

It is out of her life of worship and obedience that the church is able to address the issues of the day. This she must do because of her peculiar mission to the world as Christ's ambassador. The church realises that the Gospel that she proclaims has social implications because of its inalienable nature. Society of course would prefer that religion be kept private. As Os Guinness has pointed out, even in America religion is 'viewed as a non-issue, which inevitably becomes messy and controversial when it does not stay so, and which should therefore revert to being private as quickly as possible'.¹⁵ This is also true for Singapore. But because Christians believe that the Gospel is public truth, the church must be involved in the public square. Christianity is not just a private pursuit but has profound implications to society.

In this regard I am appreciative of the work of the National Council of Churches in Singapore under the able leadership of Bishop Robert Solomon of the Methodist Church and Bishop John Chew of the Anglican Church. In recent years, the NCCS has responded directly to the Singapore government on issues like stem cell research, tissue and organ donation, inter-faith relations, the Prime Minister's code on religions, homosexuality and the establishment of a casino. The NCCS has also published a book on the Christian response to the life sciences and another on homosexuality. Next year, it will publish a book on the Christian and the Arts. I must also speak appreciatively of the work of

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *God in Action* (New York: Round Table Press, 1936), p.23.

¹⁵ Os Guinness, 'Tribespeople, Idiots or Citizens? Evangelicals, Religious Liberty and a Public Philosophy for the Public Square', in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. K. S. Kantzer and C. F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), p.468.

Trinity Theological College. In 2001 TTC organised an international conference on genetic science and the person in response to the New Biology. TTC has also organised numerous seminars on the media, homosexuality, stem cell research, and cloning for the Christian public. The TTC periodical *Church & Society*, of which I am proud to be the editor, addresses numerous important issues that confront the churches in Singapore.

The church must not only respond to societal issues, she must also do so with wisdom. Here again our theme of renewing the centre is profoundly important. The church's response cannot be characterised by a creativity which knows no bounds. If she attempts such a response, she will soon cease to be the church and become another civil rights organisation and the like. The church must respond from out of her unique life and perspective that is informed and shaped by the Word of God. The primary calling of the church is faithfulness, not creativity as such. This is profoundly related to an earlier emphasis that only when the church acts in a way that is true to who she is will she be able to impact society. To put it differently, the church's participation in the public square will be significant only when she presents the profound challenge of the cross of Christ to the world. It is from the standpoint of the foolishness of the cross, not worldly wisdom that the church speaks to the world in love. The modern church therefore must ask herself whether she is in danger of 'being overwhelmed by the world, precisely because [she has] chosen to imitate its methods and norms as [she attempts] to confront it'.¹⁶ It is only by renewing the centre, by acknowledging the authority of the Word of God, that the church can have a voice in the public square.

Conclusion

The theme of this seminar is 'Hearing God Today'. This task is more difficult than is sometimes envisaged. It requires discipline, a habit of mind, and a way of life. Also, hearing God is often less 'mystical' than what some pietists and some charismatics understand it to be. It is not just the privilege or prerogative of some individuals, but the collective task of the whole church of God. Hearing God is possible only when there is

¹⁶ McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, p. 170.

obedience. And obedience involves not just our actions; it involves our thoughts as well. We must therefore speak also of the discipleship of the mind. It was Os Guinness who emphatically asserted that ‘we evangelicals need to confess individually and collectively that we have betrayed the Great Commandment to love God with our minds’.¹⁷

Hearing the voice of God is consistent with and dependent upon the church’s ability to think Christianly, that is, to develop a habit of mind that conforms her thoughts to the revelation of God in his Word. Only when the church concerns herself with the discipleship of the mind will she be able to discern the voice of God and distinguish it from the enticing and confusing voices of the world. Only when the church concerns herself with the discipleship of the mind will she be able to resist the temptations of worldliness, secularism and activism. And the discipleship of the mind begins with the discipline of the mind made possible by grace. Discipleship of the mind is inimical to independent or autonomous thinking. It is a form of obedience. It is thinking from the centre, from the revelation of God in his written Word, the Bible.

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¹⁷ Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, p. 133.