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Renewing our vision for the future of Protestant Christianity in Northern Ireland

A lecture given in Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, Belfast, on 4 December 2003 to mark the 150th anniversary of Union Theological College, Belfast.

Alister McGrath

The article explores the current challenges faced by Northern Irish Protestantism in the light of the rise of postmodern culture, and the changing political situation within the Province. It then offers an analysis of three major ways in which the churches might rise to this challenge through retrieving aspects of their heritage, and applying it to the contemporary situation.

It is a great pleasure to be able to return to Belfast and celebrate the founding of Union College, one of Presbyterianism's most distinguished schools of learning, one hundred and fifty years ago. While I was a schoolboy at the Methodist College, Belfast, back in the 1960s, both that college and this church in which we gather tonight were important landmarks as I walked around this city, and it is a great privilege to be able to speak to you here tonight. I may add that it is exceptionally generous of a Presbyterian foundation to invite an Anglican to speak to them! I have chosen a large and difficult theme for my lecture tonight – one that cannot possibly be addressed in the time at my disposal. Yet I felt it was the right question to ask at this time in the history of this province, at a time of rapid change and uncertainty about the future. What place does that future hold for Protestant Christianity?

In thinking about the future, it is helpful to be reminded of the past. Since the reign of Elizabeth I, Protestantism has been a living presence in this region. During the 1850s and 1860s, many visionary figures realized the importance of consolidating the Protestant heritage, and began to lay the foundations of many institutions which have flourished to this day. Union College was founded in 1853; the Methodist College in 1868, originally founded – remember! – both as a school and a seminary. We often think of

the Victorian era as a time of great stability for the Christian faith in general, and Protestantism in particular. Yet the clouds were gathering. What historians like to call “the Victorian crisis of faith” was beginning to gain momentum, and cast its long and lingering shadows over church life throughout the United Kingdom – including here, in this city.

I do not wish to spend much time talking about this development, but we must note at least some of its features. Many writers of the period believed that they were standing at the threshold of a new age, uncertain of what it might bring, yet suspecting that the old ways of thinking were on their way out. In his Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse, written around this time, Matthew Arnold (1822-88) spoke of being caught . . .

Between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere to lay my head.

Arnold’s journey through the Alps is the backdrop against which he explores his sense of displacement, focusing especially on the erosion of faith in his culture – and perhaps even in himself. His once robust faith, he comments, more than a little wistfully, now seems “but a dead time’s exploded dream.” Arnold expresses a sense of melancholy and sadness over his nation’s loss of faith, which he saw pathetically mirrored in the ebbing of the tide on Dover beach:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

That tide was now ebbing, and Arnold never expected to see it return. The sea of faith that once was at its full is now in retreat. All that he can hear is its “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar”.

This process was well under way when Union College was founded. Those who founded that college knew that nothing was to be gained

merely by lamenting what they saw happening in culture at large. And burying their heads in the sand. Something needed to be done. The important thing, in their view, was to produce leadership for their churches that was deeply rooted in the Christian faith, yet capable of engaging with the new challenges that were emerging, with more presumed to be over the horizon. And we, in our time, also face cultural changes – changes that we do not fully understand, that we do not seem able to resist, and which we sense are laden with significance for the future of Protestantism.

This is no idle question. While we must never overstate the changes we see happening around us, something is unquestionably happening which is changing the face of this province. We might use words such as “globalization” or “postmodernity” to try and catch something of the new mood that seems to be gaining ground, especially among younger members of the community. But whatever is going on, and however we are to account for it – tasks which I gladly leave to others – we are seeing the emergence of a new cultural mood, which impatient with many of the things that we have taken for granted.

All of us in the west – whether in England, the United States, or in Northern Ireland – can identify with these cultural changes which are often described using words such as “secularisation” and others like it. Yet Protestants in Northern Ireland face an additional challenge, which has, in my view, no exact parallel elsewhere in Great Britain. In this province, Protestantism has played a substantial – often decisive – social and political role, giving a sense of identity to a large section of the population of Northern Ireland. The nearest equivalent to this is probably in the United States of America, especially in the southern states, where religious identity – both Protestant and Roman Catholic – continues to be a major factor in shaping society. Yet in Northern Ireland, there are signs everywhere that a rising younger generation has certain misgivings about such traditional roles. If Protestant Christianity defines itself in terms of being the custodian of certain social and cultural values, what happens if rapid social and cultural change erodes those values?

I can remember very clearly, as a boarder at Methody, seeing flickering black and white television news coverage of the events in Londonderry of Saturday 5 October 1968, and wondering where this was going to take us. Thirty-five years later, I think that it is fair to say that it is still not clear. Yet what is clear is that a growing number of people – not all of them younger – are finding settled understandings of the role of Protestant Christianity problematic. While I have many difficulties with the writings of postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault, I must admit that I cannot help but notice the importance of one aspect of their thinking that seems intensely relevant to our topic tonight – namely, the idea of “binary” identification, in which a group is identified by contrast with another. In the Northern Ireland context, there is no doubt as to the nature of this binary system: Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. On this view, Protestantism is what is not Roman Catholic; it maintains its identity by stressing its divergence from Roman Catholicism and by emphasising the events and ideas that harden that distinctiveness.

This traditional emphasis has a number of unfortunate outcomes, and I want to focus on one of those – namely, the tendency to define ourselves in a negative and reactive manner. In other words, Protestant self-definition has often been framed negatively in terms of what it is not rather than positively, in terms of what it is. Has this, I wonder, sometimes led us to lose sight of a vision of the gospel which can redeem and transform humanity, and in its place simply to present a cultural alternative to Roman Catholicism? It is a worrying possibility.

So we face some challenges. But identifying those challenges is simply the necessary prelude to preparing to meet them. And I believe that this can be done – though it will involve giving careful thought to what Protestant Christianity is all about. Perhaps I could anchor what I want to say to a slogan that has long been associated with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland – ardens sed virens – “burning yet flourishing”, if I might offer a rough translation. It is one of a group of slogans that has long been associated with the story of the Burning Bush in the Book of Exodus, and inspired many sermons and works of literature – for example, the poem of that name by the German dramatist Bertold Brecht (1898-1956).

The motto speaks to us of regeneration and renewal, even in difficult times. I speak to you as one who believes that there is indeed a future for Protestantism in Northern Ireland. Yet this must involve refocusing our thinking about our identity, and renewing our vision.

Now to talk about change of any kind is profoundly unsettling. But as you will see, the process of refocussing and renewal of vision that I am going to propose to you tonight is not about abandoning the past, and drifting off, like a rudderless ship, into an uncertain future. Nor is it about redefining ourselves to meet a cultural shift, as a chameleon changes its colour to blend in with its background. It is about rediscovering an older vision – a vision which inspired the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, and which, I believe, we can recover here. Let me stress immediately that I am not proposing that we pretend that we are living in the sixteenth century, trying to turn the clock back to another era in history which is now long behind us. We cannot do that, nor should we. Rather, what I will be proposing is that we recapture the vision that fired those who brought Protestantism into being, and ask how we might apply that vision to our own situation today. And although some of what I shall be saying tonight may be specific to Presbyterianism – I wish to honour my hosts! – I think it will be clear that it has much wider application than this.

So where shall we begin? Perhaps the best place to begin is also the simplest – the reasons why the Reformation of the sixteenth century came into being in the first place. Although historians rightly point out the complex political, social and economic background against which the Reformation took place, it is clear that it was a fundamentally religious movement, with an agenda which could be summarised in two words: reform and renewal. The fundamental conviction of Martin Luther was that the church of his day was an institution without a vision.

Let me repeat that phrase: an institution without a vision. For Luther, the medieval church had become so preoccupied with issues of political power and social influence that it had lost sight of its fundamental reason for being there in the first place – namely, that it was entrusted with the gospel of grace. It needed to be reformed,

because it had developed a series of questionable practices and beliefs, all of which needed to be judged and challenged in the light of the Bible. And it needed to be renewed, because without the transforming power of the gospel of Christ, an institution simply will not survive. It becomes like those dead bones seen by the prophet Ezekiel – dead bones waiting for someone to breathe life into them. It is like a tree cut off from the living water it needs to sustain and invigorate it, unable to flourish and bear fruit. We must never allow our churches to become like that – institutions which plod on, mechanically and woodenly, from year to year, without a clear sense of why we are here, and what we have to offer.

Much of what our forebears sought to recover in the sixteenth century has a new relevance in this postmodern age. The anxiety, social fragmentation and political uncertainty of the early sixteenth century mirrors our own situation to a remarkable extent. As many of you will know, Calvin was convinced that he and his contemporaries stood on the edge of a precipice. Christianity was about to go into terminal decline. Calvin argued that there was a collapse of the social order throughout Europe. Children no longer regarded their parents with any respect. Religious knowledge had reached an all-time-low, with far too many people having only the most rudimentary notion of the gospel. Atheism was growing in importance, especially among the educated and professional classes. And Islam seemed to be on the point of conquering western Europe. Martin Luther, for example, believed it was only a matter of decades before the Turks would overwhelm all of Europe, and convert it to Islam.

Yet Protestantism survived. In fact, it did rather more than that; it overcame the immense challenges of that age, and went on to prosper. Now, we face new challenges. In what follows, I want to explore three issues which I believe can help us recover vision, confidence and faithfulness in these challenging times. I want to begin by addressing a real danger – that we develop institutions without a vision.

A reason to exist – the Gospel

Protestantism came into being partly as a protest against what it saw as versions of Christianity that were inadequate, deficient or just

plain wrong. In its place, they offered a positive and compelling vision of the Christian faith that they believed was true and authentic – and for those reasons, attractive and powerful. Part of our task is to refocus on the gospel, and ensure that social, political and institutional issues are never allowed to obscure or overshadow its wonder. So let us begin by reflecting a little on this gospel, and why it is so important.

Let me cite from a classic Reformed catechism, which sets modern evangelicalism an exciting and challenging agenda. “What”, asked the Shorter Westminster Catechism, “is the chief end of man?” The answer given is a jewel: “to glorify God and enjoy him for ever”. This brief statement sets us on a journey of theological exploration – to gain a fresh apprehension of the glory of God, so that we might return that glory to God and have our spiritual lives enriched by the knowledge of such a God. To catch such a glimpse of the full splendour of God is also a powerful stimulus to evangelism. Was it not by catching a glimpse of the glory of God in the temple that Isaiah responded to the divine call to go forth in service?

Perhaps the most moving statement of the wonder of knowing God can be seen in Paul’s letter to the Christians in the Roman colony of Philippi. After listing all his achievements, Paul comments on how they are all trivial compared with the unsurpassable richness of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:7-8): “Whatever was to my profit, I now count as loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” These words resonate with the excitement of discovery and fulfilment. Paul had found something that ended his long quest for truth and meaning.

Jesus made a similar point in one of his parables. He compared the kingdom of heaven to a pearl of great price. “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-6). The merchant finds a priceless pearl for sale, and decides that he will sell everything in order to possess it. Why? Because here is something of supreme value. Here is something which is worth possessing. Everything else he possesses seems of little value in comparison.

The merchant searching for that pearl is himself a parable of the long human search for meaning and significance. It is clear from the parable that he already possesses many small pearls. Perhaps he bought them in the hope that they would provide him with the satisfaction that he longed for. Yet he is still looking for something really special – and when that comes along, he gladly sells them all in order to take hold of it.

Many of the beliefs and values that we and our culture take hold of are like those lesser pearls. They seemed worthwhile, and for a time offered fulfilment. Yet, deep down, we knew that there had to be something better. The accumulation of possessions does not bring happiness. Neither does the acquisition of status and power. These are like drugs with the power to soothe and console for a while, before their power begins to wane. We begin to look around again, seeking something which will achieve permanently what we thought these goals promised. They turn out to be like one of Gerald Ratner's prawn sandwiches, for those of you who remember that public relations debacle of 1991.

When the merchant found that pearl of great price, he gladly abandoned all that he had accumulated. Here, at last, was something that was worth possessing! What he had obtained previously was a preparation for this final purchase. He had come to know the true value of what he possessed, and was looking for the final culmination of his search for a precious pearl. When he saw it, he knew that everything already in his possession seemed dull and lacklustre in comparison. Just as the brilliance of the sun drowns that of the stars, so that they can only be seen at night, so this great pearl allowed the merchant to see what he already owned in a different perspective. What he had thought would satisfy him proved only to disclose his dissatisfaction, and make him long for something which was, for the moment, beyond his grasp. And then he saw that special pearl. He knew he had to have it.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to our imaginations is to think of something which exceeds in beauty anything that we have ever experienced. Part of the challenge lies in identifying the most wonderful thing that we have ever encountered. We are then asked to imagine something that would surpass even this. And God is like

that. God is like the best thing we know and love in this world – only better.

All of us need something reliable, unshakeable and secure on which to build our lives. There is little point in building our lives on a set of values or beliefs which will go out of date in five years. The “pearl of great price”, which is supremely worth possessing, has been purchased for us through the death of Jesus. The “bread of life” which alone has the power to satisfy our longings for meaning and immortality has been made known to us – and made available as a gift which is offered to us. The salve which will heal our wounds is ready and available. God is precisely such an unshakeable and immovable foundation for our lives. As the Psalmist pointed out, God is like a rock, a fortress and a strong tower – someone in whom we find security, stability and peace. For the Psalmist, God is a consoling and caring presence and strength, even in the darkest moments of life as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). For the writers of the New Testament, loving God and being loved by God are things of supreme value and worth, which will remain for ever. As Paul put it (Romans 8:38-9):

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, not anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For Paul, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). His personal relationship with God in Jesus was something which he treasured above everything else, and which he knew would remain with him for ever. He had found something which alone was fulfilling, which alone satisfied – and which would and could never be taken away from him. We all need something like that. And the churches can offer precisely that – something which our culture needs to hear, and which we are meant to bring to it.

So do we see our identity as being linked with this unique calling – that we are stewards of the best news the world has ever known? Traditionally, Protestant understandings of the nature of the church have been grounded on the assumption that the church is grounded in

a largely settled Christian context, and is thus primarily concerned with issues of pastoral care and teaching. But all the evidence points to the growing importance of evangelism – to helping a new generation discover the wonder of the gospel. In his book The Provocative Church, my Oxford colleague Graham Tomlin argues that we cannot simply add sharing the gospel to a list of things that the church does. It determines what the church is. We need to refocus our understanding of Protestant identity in the light of this calling and commission – that we are to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:17-20), including our own.

The New Importance of Community

A leading feature of postmodernity is the importance it attaches to a sense of community. We need to belong somewhere. We need to feel that we are accepted and wanted. The success of the American television series Cheers illustrates this point perfectly. The series, which was based on a bar in Boston, began in 1982 and ran for 271 episodes. Its immense success centred on its strong sense of community. Here was somewhere that people felt was special. It was somewhere in which everybody knew your name. Outside was a uniform crowd of indistinct, unidentified people. But inside, you were special. You mattered. You belonged. The creation of community has become an increasingly important political issue in many western nations, especially when set against the backdrop of a breakdown of social cohesion in recent decades. How can a sense of community, if once lost, be recreated?

You will all know how important the church community is to Protestant life and thought. The church is to be seen as a body, an institution within which faith may be nourished and sustained. As John Calvin stated this point:

[The church] is the bosom into which God is pleased to gather his children, not only so that they may be nourished by her assistance and ministry while they are infants and children, but also so that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and reach the goal of faith. . . . For those to whom God is Father, the church shall also be their mother. . . . Let us learn from this simple word ‘mother’ how useful (indeed, how

necessary) it is to know her. There is no other way to life, unless this mother conceives us in her womb, nourishes us at her breast, and keeps us under her care and guidance.

The visible institution of the church is thus treated as a fundamental resource for the life of faith. It is here that believers may encounter and support one another, and find mutual encouragement through praising God and hearing his word. The institution of the church is a necessary, helpful, God-given and God-ordained means of spiritual growth and development. It is meant to be there – and it is meant to be used. The Christian is not meant to be, nor called to be, a radical and solitary romantic, wandering in isolated loneliness through the world; rather, the Christian is called to be a member of a community.

Christian churches have long been the centres of community life in the west. The more entrepreneurial of American churches have recently begun to develop this role further, seeing the church as an oasis of communal stability in a rapidly changing culture, initially attracting those who seek community – but then enabling them to discover the ultimate basis of that community in Christ himself. Those who long to belong somewhere thus come to believe. Traditional approaches to evangelism often hold that the decision to believe precedes the decision to belong. In other words, a person comes to faith (perhaps through attending a Billy Graham rally), and then begins to attend church. Yet this is only one possibility, and we impoverish our ministries if we believe it is the only biblical model. Our postmodern longing for belonging, if we take Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of human nature seriously, is ultimately – if covertly – a longing for God.

The importance of community is obvious from some of the images that Paul uses in his letters to help us understand what Christ has done for us through his cross and resurrection. One of these images is that of adoption. Paul assures us that, through Christ, we have been adopted as the children of God (Romans 8:23; Galatians 4:5). This image, drawn from Roman family law, is seen by Paul as casting light on the privileges and place of Christians in their relationship with God. It is an image that demands to be understood in our minds, and appreciated in our hearts.

Adoption is a biblical image that we find relatively easy to understand, and which resonates deeply with our cultural mood. A family decides to grant a child who was not born within its bounds the same legal privileges as those children born within its bounds. The adopted children will thus have the same inheritance rights as the natural children. Christians may therefore think of themselves as having been brought within the family of God, and granted the same legal privileges as any natural children. And who is the natural child of God? None other than Christ himself. Paul thus makes the powerful point that all that God bestowed upon Christ as his son will eventually be granted to us, as the children of God:

We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him (Romans 8:16-17).

The family marks of the children of God are thus suffering in this life, and the promise of glory in the life to come. Glory lies beyond suffering, and we must learn to see suffering as a privilege to be borne gladly as a consequence of our new status.

Yet the image of adoption appeals to our imaginations and hearts, not just to our minds. It cries out to be imaginatively rendered, not just understood. For adoption is about being wanted. It is about belonging. These are deeply emotive themes, which resonate with the cares and concerns of many in our increasingly fractured society. To be adopted is to be invited into a loving and caring environment. It is to be welcomed, wanted and valued. Adoption celebrates the privilege of invitation, in which the outsider is welcomed into the fold of faith and love.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most significant reflection on such issues has emerged from the United States. The August 1996 number of the Atlantic Monthly ran a major article entitled “Welcome to the Next Church”, which featured some of the more radical and innovative approaches now being adopted to Christian worship and life. A good example of these new approaches is found in the Mariners Church, close to Newport Beach, California, which merged some years ago with a neighbouring megachurch to become “Mariners Southcoast Church”. The success of this church, and

countless others like it, can be related to their recognition of the importance of creating a sense of community identity. People want to belong, not just believe. Such churches see themselves as “islands in the stream”, like the monasteries of the Middle Ages, offering safety and community to travellers on the journey of life. Identity is about belonging somewhere. And the community churches see themselves as providing a community for its members.

A community church is like smalltown America of bygone days, with a population numbered in the low thousands. There is a sense of belonging to a common group, of shared common values, and of knowing each other. People don't just go to community churches; they see themselves as belonging there. As Atlantic Monthly journalist Charles Trueheart discovered, “belonging to Mariners or any other large church conveys membership in a community, with its benefits of friends and solace and purpose, and the deep satisfaction of service to others.” At a time when American society appears to be fragmenting, the community churches offer cohesion.

Thus Mariners offers its members a whole range of social activities, all designed to meet needs, offer service and forge community. On the morning that Trueheart visited the church, he discovered seminars on single parenting, recovery meetings from alcohol and drugs abuse, women's Bible studies, a session on divorce dynamics, and a mens' retreat – to mention just a few. As Trueheart notes, these churches “are proving themselves to be breeding grounds for personal renewal and human interconnectedness”.

It is important to make this connection with the changing face of America. In a much-cited article published in the November 1994 number of the same Atlantic Monthly, management guru Peter Drucker made the following point concerning the “Age of Social Transformation”:

The old communities – family, village, parish, and so on – have all but disappeared in the knowledge society. Their place has largely been taken by the new unit of social integration, the organization. Where community was fate, organization is voluntary membership.

In the old days, community was defined by where you lived. It was part of the inherited order of things, something that you were born into. Now, it has to be created – and the agency that creates this community is increasingly the voluntary organization. Christian churches are strategically placed to create and foster community, where more negative social forces are destroying it in American society as a whole. The community churches have proved especially effective in this role, and have grown immensely in consequence. The ability of faith to create communities is immense, and must never be underestimated.

Why is this so important to our thinking about Protestant Christianity in a postmodern culture here in Northern Ireland? Because it reminds us that our churches and congregations are communities – communities that must welcome people in. A recent survey in England showed that most people come to faith simply by coming to church, often being brought by family or friends, and gradually absorbing the ideas and values of the Christian community. The Alpha course, one of the most successful evangelistic tools available to today's Christian churches, brings people together to form a community of learning, as they explore the Christian faith together in a supportive journey of exploration and discovery. The church must a place where people who are lost can feel welcomed, and move on to find themselves through finding Christ.

Perhaps we can recover this vision of the church, which is firmly embedded in the New Testament. For Paul, the church was like an outpost or colony of heaven. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul declares that “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Paul's imagery is immensely evocative, and would have been readily understood and appreciated by his readers in Philippi. Why? Because at the time of Paul's letter, Philippi was a Roman colony. Its strategic location in Macedonia made in an important military centre, and large numbers of Roman soldiers passed through the city. In addition, there was a large Roman civilian population. Philippi was proud of its ties with Rome, including its language (Latin seems to have been more widely spoken than Greek) and laws. Roman institutions served as the model in many areas of its communal life.

Paul uses the image of the church as a “colony of heaven” to bring out several leading aspects of Christian existence. By speaking of the Christian community in this way, he naturally encourages his readers to think of Christian church as an outpost of heaven in a foreign land. It speaks the language of that homeland, and is governed by its laws – despite the fact that the world around it speaks a different language, and obeys a different set of laws. Its institutions are based on those of its homeland. And, one day, its citizens will return to that homeland, to take up all the privileges and rights which that citizenship confers. The Christian’s citizenship is in heaven, and it is to this homeland that we will one day return.

This image thus lends dignity and new depths of meaning to the Christian life, especially the tension between the “now” and “not yet”, and being outsiders in a culture – in the world and yet not of the world. The Romans at Philippi could be said to be “in” Macedonia and yet not “of” Macedonia, in that they knew that they were Romans who would one day go back to their homeland. They may have lived in Philippi; their hearts were firmly attached to Rome.

We can therefore think of ourselves as exiles in this world. As Paul reminded the Christians at Philippi, our citizenship is in heaven – and we eagerly await the Saviour who will bring us home, so that we may rejoice to be where we belong. Our journey will lead us to our homeland, when we shall finally have rest. And most importantly: the church is a community, in which we anticipate the worship of heaven, and support each other as we journey to the New Jerusalem.

Now this offers us a powerful energization of our mission as Protestant churches. To be places where people are drawn by the love of God, and are supported and encouraged as they grow and discover faith. One of the church’s best theologians, Augustine of Hippo, liked to compare the church to a hospital – a place where sick people came, in order to be made whole. Is this a model for us, as we think of our role? A place which can offer a sense of belonging, a sense of place, a sense of being welcomed – and where they come to know and grow through the transforming love of God in Christ? Your congregation is a “colony of heaven” right here in Northern Ireland. It is a family – a word that we often use hurriedly and lightly, forgetting how powerful a concept it expresses. To be a

member of a family is to belong. Think about those two images – the colony and the family – and ask yourself how it might transform your thinking about the identity and mission of your congregation.

Your church can be the nucleus of God’s kingdom where you are.

You can plant seeds that will make a difference to people’s lives.

Your congregation can be like a Trojan Horse – the place from which what Augustine called “the secular city” can be transformed.

So think strategically!

But some of you will rightly say: “this is too great a challenge. What difference can I make? How can my congregation make any impact on our culture as a whole?” And these are fair concerns – concerns that I will address in my final point.

A reason to hope – God

Protestantism needs to recover its confidence. Not in the church or denomination as an institution, nor in our leaders. For the Reformation, one of the great failings of Christianity during the Middle Ages was to allow devotion to an institution to displace devotion to Jesus Christ, and to commitment to his gospel. For Luther, the church existed wherever the gospel was preached and proclaimed. It did not require buildings or personnel, however useful these might be. We are often told that the church today must concern itself with “mission not maintenance”, and there is much truth in that slogan. If we cannot reach out beyond our present limits, we shall slowly die. But if we fail to do that, the failing lies in us, not in what has been entrusted to us.

In this final section of my address, I want to ask you to trust God for the future. We have our part to play, and we must do all that we can to ensure that we are faithfully yet effectively relating the gospel to our culture and our people. But we need to remind ourselves that this is no human message that we are dealing with. In the end, it is God’s, and we must learn to trust him as we plan for the future. And God takes individuals, and makes a difference through using them.

It is now who or what we are that really matters; it is what we allow God to do in and through us.

“I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Having commissioned his disciples to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth, Christ adds his personal promise to this most powerful of charges. He will be with us to the end of time. He will be there for us, no matter what that uncertain future may hold. Abraham left everything and set off from his home town to the distant and unknown land of Canaan. He knew that the Lord who had called him would be with him as he journeyed, and that this most gracious and caring God had a purpose in mind in calling him to do this (Genesis 12:1-5).

So it is with us. Christ has called us to leave the cares of the world behind, and seek the hidden riches of the kingdom of God. Yet perhaps the greatest of all those riches is the promise of his glorious presence, to illuminate our lives and warm our cold hearts. He is there always, whether we know that in our experience or not. And in contemplating Christ, we find our heart's desire. This point was made powerfully by Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92): “There is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound.” Spurgeon here rightly located the source of all spiritual nourishment, comfort and stimulus in the contemplation of Christ. Indeed, Spurgeon's preaching ministry may be said to represent an extended exploration of exactly such a contemplation of Christ.

Yet we live in changing and challenging times. Sometimes it seems to us that we are in the midst of a cultural and political storm, and it is not clear what way we should turn. We are all familiar with the gospel story of the disciples being terrified by a strong wind which engulfed them as they crossed the Sea of Galilee on their way to Capernaum (John 6:16-21). They seemed to be at the mercy of the elements, and were deeply afraid. Then, at the height of the storm, Jesus appears and speaks these words to them: “It is I. Do not be afraid.”

The words spoken by Jesus are both consoling and challenging. Yet the traditional translation of those words is not quite accurate, or adequate to convey the full import of Christ's meaning. A better

translation would read like this: “I am. Do not be afraid”. The very presence of Christ is itself enough to calm our storms and assuage our fears. Christ is here. This is a promise nestling within a statement. We should not be afraid, for Christ is with us. This incident illustrates the importance of Christ as a consoling presence. Others stress his importance as a solid foundation, a rock upon which we may build and in which we may trust in times of difficulty, danger or uncertainty.

We must indeed face the uncertainties of the future head on, and not try to evade them, either by ignoring them or hoping that they will go away. The ostrich has never been a particularly good role model for church leaders, although I suspect some are at times tempted to follow its example, and bury their heads in the sand. The history of Christianity has been about the church facing up to challenges, developing ways of dealing with them, and passing those ways on to following generations. We have benefitted from both the wisdom and resources of the past; others have faced the difficulties of their age, and passed on to us what they found helpful and useful. We must now do the same.

There is both a challenge and an opportunity here. The challenge is, I think, obvious. But there is also a real opportunity here. The opportunity is to forge a vision for the future which is rooted in the past, grounded in the gospel, and looking to the future. We cannot use hand-me-downs from the past, applying to our own situation what worked for Calvin in sixteenth-century Geneva, or for Jonathan Edwards in eighteenth-century New England. Our task is to take the gospel, and apply it to our own situation right now – a situation which none know better than you. We can be guided, informed and encouraged by the wisdom of the past – but our situation is no longer theirs, and we must follow their example by interacting with what is living and present. That is what Christian stewardship is all about.

As we contemplate the future, we must remind ourselves that we have not been entrusted with some words of human wisdom, which will be out of date in next to no time. We believe that we have been entrusted with something that rests on the wisdom of God. Here is something that transcends anything that human wisdom can dream

up. As Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth, the gospel rested on the power and wisdom of God. And that means that we must see our situation in its true perspective. We are not like the marketer of some shampoo, which people are no longer buying, who has to dream up new ways of making a tired product attractive – or even replacing it altogether with something new. Our task is rather to make sure that the full power and wonder of the “pearl of great price” is displayed, proclaimed and appreciated. We do not need to make it relevant, for it is so already. Our task is to ensure that we faithfully yet effectively proclaim its power in terms that our culture can understand. The Reformation, remember, insisted on preaching in the vernacular – in a “language understood by the people”. We must make sure that we proclaim the gospel using imagery and language that relates to and can be understood within our culture – or, better, to the complex networks of “cultures” that now extends across the Province.

Postmodernity poses many challenges. But there is a new interest in spirituality, which we must ensure is addressed, and allowed to lead to a new interest in Christianity and the churches. In the past, we were often very good at addressing the mind, proclaiming Christianity in terms that could be understood. Yet writers such as our favourite Ulsterman, C. S. Lewis, remind us that we must never limit the gospel to human reason, but must ensure it connects up with the world, of the imagination and emotions. We must ensure that the gospel is connected up with every aspect of our lives. The new interest in Harry Potter and the Lord of the Rings is a telling indicator of the appeal of the human imagination, and we must make sure that the power of the gospel to connect up with that imagination is appreciated and addressed. The problem is that we too often limit the gospel, placing its light under a bushel of our own making.

My point is that we must never leave God out of this discussion. The gospel is God’s gift to us, not a human invention. We proclaim it in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, not in our own strength or wisdom. Sometimes the old wineskins just cannot contain the new wine, and we may need to rethink some of our traditional ways of being church. New ideas are pouring in from Asia and North America – the cell church, the community church,

the seeker-sensitive church, and the purpose-driven church, just to give you some examples. Maybe they won't work here. Maybe they're not as good as some think. But my point is that behind each of these ideas there are people who have thought and prayed about things, and taken risks for the sake of the kingdom. Faithfulness isn't about the uncritical repetition of the past; it's about due respect for the past, certainly, but above all it is about stepping out in faith to trailblaze. And I'm sure that there are some trailblazers here tonight – entrepreneurs who have caught a vision of what they believe God wants them to do, and believe that this might well make a big difference. They must be encouraged.

But we must all draw encouragement from the fact that we are not on our own here. We are like the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, trusting that God would lead them safely into the future. We are dealing with a God who may be trusted. Let me remind you of an incident at that time. You will recall that, after the death of Moses, Joshua was asked to lead Israel into Canaan. Imagine how he must have felt! The old leadership was gone. He was on his own. He must have felt the weight of responsibility. Perhaps we feel the same way. The leadership of Protestantism has passed into new hands. The old cultural certainties seem rather less secure today. But let Joshua be an example to us. For he heard God speak these words to him – and I suggest they are words that are also spoken to us tonight.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1.9).

That same God – that same presence, power and promise – is with us as we seek and struggle to serve him today. The tasks and responsibilities are great; but greater still is God's goodness, loving-kindness and faithfulness, on which we may draw at all times.

Conclusion

But I have spoken for long enough. In this lecture, I have tried to offer encouragement, both to trust in God and to renew your vision of the gospel and the mission of the church. I have only had time to

scratch the surface of some vast topics, and have had to leave out many things.

The question I asked, right at the beginning, was this: What place does the future hold for Protestant Christianity in Northern Ireland? If we are foolish about this, and think that nineteenth-century ways of being Protestant will serve us well in the twenty-first century, the answer might not be very encouraging. But the Reformation bequeathed to us a dynamic vision of the Christian faith, which encourages us always to reexamine things, and step out in faith as we try to serve the Lord. The gospel offers us a vision – a vision which drives our personal ministries and our institutions. It is a vision which must always be renewed. My plea is that, as we the 150th anniversary of Union College, we do all that we humanly can to ensure that another celebration of this kind will happen in 2153 – while trusting in God to guide and resource us in the meantime.

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