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Episcopacy and Authority¹

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

The last chapter of the Gospel according to St. John gives us the story of the re-commissioning of Peter for his rôle in the leadership of the Church. It may be taken, I think, as an authoritative picture of what oversight (*episcopo*) in the Church must be according to the intention of our Lord. In the first scene Peter is a fisherman—an evangelist. By his own skill he catches nothing. When he simply obeys the voice of his Lord, there is a mighty catch. At the command of the Lord he brings the whole catch, with no 'schism' (v. 11) to the feet of the Lord. It belongs wholly to Him. Then the scene changes and Peter is a shepherd—a pastor. He is unworthy of trust, but the one question to be asked and answered is about his love for the Lord. He is not asked about his love for the sheep. The devotion of a forgiven sinner to the One against whom he sinned and by whom he is forgiven, is the qualification to take care of the flock. And finally and decisively Peter is a disciple. He is warned that following means the way of the cross, and then comes the punch-line of the whole chapter: 'Follow me'.

This, surely, is where we have to start in any thinking about the ministry of a bishop. He is to be both an evangelist and a shepherd, but first he must be a disciple. His effective authority as evangelist or as a pastor will be in proportion to the closeness with which he follows his Lord. The word 'leadership' has often had bad overtones, but the words 'follow me' are so deeply embedded in the Gospels that we cannot dispense with the word. One might define the ministry of a bishop as 'so following Jesus in the way of the cross that others find it possible to follow too'. As I see it, that is fundamental. One must not define episcopacy simply in functional terms. It is true, of course, that bishops have functions, but these are secondary. If I may put it in pictorial terms, he is not so much facing towards the Church as facing towards the Lord and his ministry is to encourage them to go the way he is going.

In St. John's picture, Peter is first an evangelist. In the Church of South India's Constitution where the duties of bishops are defined, the first duty is to be a leader in evangelism. I guess it was Bishop Azariah who did that bit of drafting. He remains in the memory of the South Indian Church as a man who evangelized a vast area of the Deccan and taught those whom he brought to faith that they were to be evangelists too. At every confirmation service he required the new communicants to lay their hands on their heads and say 'Woe is me if

I do not tell the good news'. I am sure bishops in the Church of England must be thinking much about their rôle in the coming Decade of Evangelism. We have to recognize that the very word evangelism had negative overtones in the minds of many Christians—let alone the unbelievers. It is not just that a certain kind of electronic evangelism in the U.S.A. has been rightly criticized. It is, more seriously, a symptom of loss of confidence in the uniqueness and importance of the news we have to tell. We are very often admonished for having talked too much and advised that we need rather to listen. We do indeed need to listen, not only to learn how to communicate, but also to learn things which God has to teach us however far on we may be in the Christian journey. But we have also something to say and we are responsible for saying it. The Gospel is not a message discovered by taking soundings in society; it is a message about the mighty acts of God, a message which we have been commissioned to deliver.

Our problem of course is that it is not perceived as news. It is the old story about what are called spiritual values. We have to deal with this very unique form of human culture, developed in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which there is a sharp dichotomy between a world of what are called 'facts', which is the world of public life, politics, business, educational; and a world of values which are matters of personal choice. In this situation evangelism can only be seen as my attempt to foist my personally chosen values on you, which is arrogant. The matter is made doubly difficult because all of us who have been formed intellectually by our schooling and university training, and even by our theological training, have been largely domesticated into this way of seeing things. It is extremely hard to stand outside our own culture and look at it critically. During the two centuries which have seen the rise to dominance of this post-Enlightenment culture, the main effort of Christian theologians, at least in the Protestant world, has been to show how (with some extensive modifications) the Christian message can be adjusted to fit the new framework. I refer to the many hundreds of volumes which have been written to demonstrate the 'reasonableness of Christianity'—and 'reasonableness' here meant compatibility with the new framework of thought. Reversing the title of one of the famous books of the eighteenth century, Wolterstorff has written an excellent book entitled 'Reason within the Bounds of Religion' which shows how human reason always operates within a traditional framework which—in most societies—has been furnished by religion. But in general the power of the new framework has been so strong that the churches have rather tried to adjust the message to it than to challenge it.

In his recent book *The Logic of Evangelism*, Dr. William Abraham defines evangelism as initiation into the Kingdom of God. Whether

or not one accepts his main thesis, it at least directs attention to the original announcement of the Gospel as we have it in St. Mark: 'The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news'. This is a factual statement, not the promotion of a new teaching or a new set of values. It is strictly news. To say that God reigns is not news—at least not to a devout Israelite. The news is that God's reign now confronts the world directly and immediately in the person of Jesus. The call to repent is *not* (as in the unfortunate paraphrase of T.E.V.) a call to 'turn away from your sins'. If that was the meaning, Jesus would merely have been a preacher of revival. And we have to acknowledge that for many people a call to evangelism is simply a call for revival. This is something much more radical. It is a call for *metanoia*, a total U-turn of the mind. Without this it will be impossible to recognize that the reign of God is present in this man Jesus, that the wisdom of God and the power of God are present not where people look for them, but are set forth finally and crucially in the event of Good Friday.

A call to evangelism must therefore mean a call to a radically different way of understanding the whole of human and creaturely reality from the way which controls our public life. It cannot be merely a call to return to 'traditional values'. Values are merely expressions of personal wishes if they are not rooted in facts. The whole language of values has been brought into use, *via* its use in economics, from the work of Max Weber which in turn rests upon the realization that the reigning scientific world view destroys any factual basis for these values. They can only be a matter of personal choice. As Nietzsche saw, they are a matter of the will to power. Values are what some people want. The gospel is about what is in the case. The announcement of the good news must involve the call to a radical conversion not merely of the heart and will but of the mind. It must be a call to recognize that the reigning plausibility structure is false. It must be a call to *metanoia* in the proper sense, to a radically new way of seeing how things really are, what the human situation really is.

To put the matter that way implies that a call to evangelism is a call to an engagement with the public world of science, education, politics, economics, medicine, the media—the whole of what constitutes public life. Clearly bishops cannot be sufficiently expert in all these fields to enter into the kind of gladiatorial exercise that Bishop Wilberforce unsuccessfully tried with Thomas Huxley. What, then, is the rôle of bishops in this kind of evangelism? At this point I think we have to move to Peter's second rôle as shepherd. We remember, of course, that in the biblical vision the shepherd not only tends and feeds the flock but also leads them. It is the Christian community as a whole, including in its membership the scientists and politicians and many others, which must engage the public world in debate about its fundamental assumptions. It is very hard to do this without support.

There are many distinguished scientists, economists, politicians and others in public life who are devout Christians. They often help the rest of us to think about these areas of public life as Christians. But it is very hard indeed for them to speak as Christians in these areas—to state, for example, in a paper for a journal of economics that the writer draws certain conclusions in economics from his beliefs as a Christian. Although bishops cannot be experts, and should not even aspire to be experts, in the different areas of public practice and teaching, it is part of their task to nourish in the Church the work of those who are, and to provide in the life of the Church the spaces where rigorous intellectual effort may be engaged in the task of bringing the light of the Gospel to bear upon the several sectors of public doctrine. The last two centuries have seen great efforts to restate the Gospel in terms of modern thought. Like all efforts at contextualization, this has run the risk of letting the context control the text. There is urgent need now for the reciprocal operation, to re-think the assumptions of modernity in the light of the Gospel. That is a task calling for the very best intellectual resources we have.

I want to stress the rôle of the bishop in this respect for a particular reason. We have departments of theology in many of our universities. Two hundred years ago the universities had as their explicit conceptual framework the Christian creed. Admission to the university was conditional upon acceptance of that framework, because rational discussion cannot take place unless there is some agreed framework. Today, as we know, another framework has replaced the Christian creed. The condition for admission to the University is a successful initiation into the world-view which has shaped European thought since the eighteenth century and which shapes the curriculum in all our schools. Theological faculties also operate within that framework. It is hard (though not impossible) to gain academic acceptance for doctrines which threaten to disrupt that framework. There is a limit to the amount of subversion that any institution can tolerate.

At this point it may be pertinent to insert one particular concern which is relevant to the plans for a decade of evangelism. As far as I know, University faculties of theology do not include evangelism as part of the curriculum. (This is one of the points made by William Abraham.) It would be interesting to see what reaction would be produced if the Church of England addressed a letter to the University faculties of theology asking them what place evangelism has in the structure of their curriculum, and what are the standard treatments of this subject which are used in the course of teaching.

The proper place for theological teaching is in the context of worship. The bishop's *cathedra* is fundamental; the University lecturer's platform is auxiliary. The Church needs the University if it is to be in effective dialogue with the world. But the theological faculty must not take over the proper rôle of the pastors. This obviously has

especial importance in respect of the training of ministry for the church. Bishops corporately, having paid due attention to all that can be learned from the enterprise of academic theology, need to have the confidence to lead the flock in matters of faith. Leadership of course always involves taking the risk that others—or some others—will not follow (cf. John 21: 20ff.).

If, as I have said, the rôle of the bishop is to lead and encourage the Church as a whole in its engagement with the world, an engagement which includes the putting of radical questions to the world's assumptions about what is the case, it is in the life of local congregations that most of this engagement must take place. The gospel is so strange that no kind of arguments can bring a person to accept its truth. The only real hermeneutic of the Gospel is a community of people who believe it, celebrate it and live by it. All the statistics about how people are brought to faith confirm this. And it corresponds to the nature of the Gospel itself. The words 'repent and believe' are followed by the summons: 'Come with me'. It was only by being in the company of Jesus that the disciples could begin to learn what it means that the Kingdom of God is at hand, that God reigns. As the so called 'little apocalypse' of the Synoptic Gospels warns, the centuries since the Incarnation have been filled with offers of total welfare on other terms and in other names. Our own 'modernity' with its various utopias ever since the eighteenth century is only the latest of them. What makes it possible to be initiated into the reign of God and to live within that reign, is the presence of living communities of men and women and children which already embody (however imperfectly) the signs of the reign of God. Among these signs are praising and rejoicing, bearing one another's burdens, caring for the world around and looking forward with confident and patient hope to a glorious future. The heart of a bishop's pastoral work must be to encourage, nourish and sustain such local communities in their engagement with the world. This is the heart of the pastoral responsibility of the bishop, but obviously it is not to be seen as separate from his evangelistic rôle. He will be able to lead and encourage the local congregations and their pastors in the measure in which he himself is seen to be taking all opportunities to engage the principalities and powers that operate in public life, bringing every thought into captivity to Christ. And of course, to return to the starting point, he will be able to do that with authority in proportion to the closeness of his own personal discipleship with his Lord.

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