The battle for public truth

Where do we find prevailing public truth today? And what is involved, in unfolding in this setting, the Bible as public truth. In addressing a Christian readership, I shall take it as agreed that we are called by God to commend the Bible as public truth. Any attempt to obey this calling, in the setting of our culture, will present us with a range of challenges.

"Should we see public argument as the price of admission into the arena of public truth?"

I would suggest that in our culture today, we find public truth pulling in three different directions. In each there is something to run with and something to resist, as we commend the Bible as public truth.

Modernism: The first front for engagement with prevailing public truth

Last Christmas the *Listener* ran a two-page article on the gospel • infancy narratives. It drew heavily on a book by historian Robin Lane Fox called, *The Unauthorised Version.*[1] The article was titled 'Christmas puzzles', and the subtitle ran 'The Nativity is a charming tale of the miracle of new life, yet a close look at its details reveals an absorbing jumble of inconsistencies.' The article explored these seeming inconsistencies.

Interestingly, the article was written in a reasonably sober, respectful manner. While a Christian might take exception to some of what was written, he or she could hardly take exception to how it was written – an important distinction we dare not lose sight of these days. This article did not belong to that genre of patronising, mildly contemptuous or downright abusive writing on Christianity of which

there are far too many examples in our secular press. On the contrary, in its own terms it implicitly acknowledged the Bible as worthy of public consideration and examination.

Now this raises some questions relating to the Bible as public truth. Are public truth and public debate incompatible? Or is public truth, at its most lively, actually sustained by a process of testing and questioning at its boundaries? Should we see public argument as the price of admission into the arena of public truth? If so, what apologetic insights do we need today? Where do we need to take initiative, where respond, where let lie? How much store should we lay by what can be achieved through public debate on biblical faith?

What mix of perversity and concern for truth do we picture among the many who have been reading Barbara Thiering's book *Jesus - the Man*?

Could we urge bookshops and public libraries to set alongside Thiering, Tom Wright's splendid little book, *Who was Jesus?*[2] Do people have any idea of the wealth of scholarship and subtlety associated with orthodox Christianity?

Remember that C.S. Lewis wrote 'spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served. Deny it food, and it will gobble poison.'

The title of Fox's book, *The Unauthorised Version* mischievously claims a real

Harold Turner and Mike Irwin at the Bible in Post-Christian New Zealand Conference. Photo: Julia Stuart

world lying behind, but quite different from, the Christian myths to which the church summons devotion. This real world is accessible to the scientist and the historian.

Are we doing enough as Christians to dispel this perception? To show that our faith draws constantly on the real world of biblical history and culture? To reveal as one, the Bible and the real world? How interested should we be in commending the reasonableness of our faith and what are the necessary limits to this?

When Christians disagree on the interpretation of the Bible, are they seen to reason and persuade each other, or do they write each other off? What does this say to the world, about the nature of Christian truth?

"How interested should we be in commending the reasonableness of our faith..."

Remember that in a survey reported in the book *New Vision New Zealand*[3], when those who had been converted to Christian faith were asked

"Which phrase best describes why you decided to trust Christ as your Saviour?" the most common answer was not "I needed forgiveness, or peace, or help in crisis", but "I became convinced about the truth of Christ".

Here, then, is the first front on which we must engage with public truth: with modernism as public truth – with a tradition of rational enquiry that looks back to the Enlightenment. We have both to recognise the true impulse in this tradition, to honour and enlarge this in a biblical context; and also to recognise the false, secularist elements in it, and resist these. Most important of all, we have to be able to do both of these things, and not get stuck in one rather than the other.

Postmodernism: The second front for engagement with prevailing public truth

A decade ago, the new editor of a Christian journal challenged his readers to take theology into the market place. He was not thinking of the 'market-place' inhabited by modern business. Rather he was asking that theology enter the arena where public truth is forged – where people come together, each bringing their own concerns and experience, and argue, listen, bargain and inform, and public perceptions come into being.

When that editor retired, he recalled this opening challenge. He said he had since come to the conclusion that today there is no market-place! Had he been Maori, he might have said that today, there is no marae. I would add, in many homes there is no longer even the 'market-place' of the family meal at which family perceptions and values can be nurtured.

Now again this raises questions. Where, if anywhere, in our society

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today do people participate personally together in the forging of moral and spiritual truth? Do our schools and universities offer such a place? Do our mass media? What about talkback radio? If the contexts are there, can we feed faith into them? If not, can the Bible forge itself as public truth while there is no social context for this process?

The loss of the market-place, the place of public community, undermines the formation of public discernment. But it also lends credence to a radical claim: the claim that there is no truth to be hammered out in community. What we call 'truth' is merely an act of self-expression. By what I hold to be true, I simply declare who I am, where I stand. The only truth is that there is no truth. There is only 'my truth' – truth seen from where I'm standing – and 'your truth' – truth seen from where you're standing. Absolute truth would entail a 'view from nowhere'. It does not exist.

According to this viewpoint (!), 'public truth', while it stands over against some individuals' 'private truth', is ultimately itself private. It is the private truth shared by all who live in a particular culture, and through it that culture simply expresses its identity.

Now let's find the good in this argument. Firstly, it is true that who we are and what we hold as true are sometimes closely linked. And we can build on this. We can affirm that Christian faith itself is more than just a set of ideas and moral rules. It is a leaven which works to shape the very people we are.

But it is this way round. It's not that we are who we are, and then give expression to this in Christian

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truth. Rather, it's God who is who he is; who we are is first a matter of God's truth expressing itself in us. We must reject any suggestion that our personal identity is a genetic, social and environmental construction, out of which rise acts of self-expression. Our identity lies with the truth of God. The genetic context in which this truth is mediated in us is secondary, even if in a most immediate way.

Secondly, in one way postmodernism isn't against truth, but only against too simple an idea of truth. It urges us, rightly, to watch out lest we unwittingly impose on others out own personal or cultural assumptions. We must make the effort of imagination of putting ourselves in the place of other people. Again, is this not something on which we can build?

Firstly, perhaps we can persuade people to respect the fact that biblical cultures differ greatly from their own, that it requires effort not to impose their own cultural assumptions on the Bible but rather to let the Bible speak with its own voice?

Secondly, perhaps we can persuade people to show more interest in the Bible and in Christian faith as part of their own cultural heritage? Could the vision of "Bible in Schools' be developed in this direction?

At the same time we must of course challenge any pluralistic, relativistic view of truth. God exists, and is one. Truth exists, and is one. God does not go in for niche-marketing of truth. Can we celebrate diversity in our churches today in a way which never for one moment betrays our primary calling to wrestle as one with the demands of truth?

If we say truth is plural, when it is not, we simply bring about its disintegration and dissolution. This brings me to another aspect of postmodernism and its context. It feeds

and is fed by despair of reality.

Firstly, it feeds despair *of* reality. Yes, in one way postmodernism encourages us to put ourselves better in the place of other people. Yet at root, the effort of doing this is surely inspired by a desire to hammer out truth together. Our effort is towards both common insight and mutual understanding. Deny the existence of truth, and you rob of impetus, the search for communion between different people.

Secondly, postmodernism is fed by a despair *about* reality. Many people today are anxious, aimless, rootless. There are many reasons for this. The world in which we live, as presented by the news media, is a harrowing place. It is a world in which we are personally redundant, except as spectators and consumers. The hope of unlimited progress sponsored by science and technology gives way increasingly to apprehension about the future. For many, the affirmation which comes with stable family and community life has been eroded.

American critics of their own culture shed light on what has been happening. Richard Sennett, in his book *The Fall of Public Man*[4], found man and woman today to be a "player without a stage". We no longer invest meaning in a public culture. Instead the boundaries of meaning have shrunk for us to the personal and intimate.

Christopher Lasch explored this theme further in this book *The Culture of Narcissism*[5]. Disillusionment, apprehension and a sense of redundancy have turned people into themselves for comfort.

Back in 1950 David Riesman, in his book *The Lonely Crowd*[6], had identified a shift from an 'inner-directed' population – one in which people internalise public moral values to form a backbone of personal identity – to an 'other-directed' population, in which people are parasitic for their sense of identity upon being admired by others. Advertisers, of course, have found this very useful – it delivers them consumers who are malleable, receptive to manufactured changes in fashion, image-conscious, and ever-ready to pursue salvation through purchase of the latest new product.

Other-directedness and narcissism are two sides of the same coin. They add up to our living on the surface of the world – restless, promiscuous, escapist, fearful and un trusting of the depths of reality and of ourselves.

The gospel is about reality, trust, hope. What biblical images and stories do we need to draw on that people may recover trust and hope in the possibility and the reality of a truth which is there summoning us?

Meanwhile is there danger of our breeding mere religious versions of modern escapism, which leaves unhealed an underlying despair?

As with modernism, so with postmodernism, we need both to recognise and affirm any true impulse within it, and recognise and resist anything false. And it is important that we stay able to do both.

Political correctness: the third front for engagement with prevailing public truth

At first sight, you might think postmodernism represents the rejection of dogmatism in any form whatsoever. You would be wrong.

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> *"Such strictures can give birth to a kind of 'public truth'. The popular term for it is 'political correctness'."*

For iro nically it can itself turn into a new, idolatrous 'fundamentalism'.

This fundamentalism has its roots in a true impulse: the concern to liberate one or other oppressed group of people from their oppression. The most familiar of such groups today are victims of racism and of sexism. The underlying concern interpets itself as a concern for 'equity'. Pursuit of this may extend to an 'option for the poor'.

The trouble starts once you invest your identity too much in the cause of equity but without a corresponding concern for truth. Self-righteous moralism conceals an avoidance strategy bringing temporary relief from the anxiety and aimlessness of modern life.

Modernity already paves the way for this development by cutting values adrift from truth. Once you have cut adrift values in this way, they are no longer accessible to rational debate; they merely invite assertion. Postmodernism takes things a step further by removing the remaining fences around truth. There now remain only private values and private 'truths'. Everything has been privatised.

These 'private truths' now get defended as absolute property rights. Trespass notices proliferate. Only a member of a victim group may speak for that group's 'truth'; and it becomes the first responsibility of every member, to speak for that 'truth'. Anyone who violates these rules is attacked and thrown into a pit of dead white males. Such strictures can give birth to a kind of 'public truth'. The popular term for it is 'political correctness'.

America has gone further down this road than has New Zealand so far. The risk of fundamentalism arises in relation not only to sexism and racism but also sexual orientation, ageism, children's rights, and animal welfare. Visiting seaworld recently in America, I found the

general public reprimanded for having habitually born false witness against well-intentioned sharks and wolves.

A main effect of this enclosure of private truth is to polarise society between those who are 'on board' with this development, and those who are not. Ironically, new patterns of oppression take shape, as affirmative action brings public legislation. Discrimination in the sense of discernment gets tarred as discrimination in the sense of prejudice, and consciences are constrained. Such patterns of oppression may be observed in various social contexts.

In Islamic societies, a type of fundamentalism arises in connection with an understandable resistance to some of the inroads being made by western ways. Brian Keenan, in his recent book *An Evil Cradling*[7], writes of his four years held hostage in Beirut. He writes of the many young men roaming the streets of that city, emulating Rambo even down to the bandana tied over one ear. Of his captors he writes that "their obsession with God and sex were not about religion and morality. They were ciphers for their own powerlessness: an impotence that they experienced unconsciously at a deeply personal level and also in the world of politics". We might note that in both western and Islamic countries, the attraction of fanaticism appears strongest among those who, having received some education, then find themselves cut adrift with no role and no community.

Finally, before the present collapse of communism, in Soviet bloc countries we saw the cause of the 'people' and the 'worker' elevated to an all-dominating political correctness. Vaclac Havel[8] has described those who followed the party line as 'living a lie', and those who acted defiantly on their own conscience as 'living in truth'. While Havel does not write from an explicitly Christian viewpoint, he has important things to say to us in the face of the growing strictures of 'political correctness'.

There is a warning too for Christians that we do not seek for the Bible, the status of political correctness. We should not seek a new and perverted form of post-totalitarian Christendom and need to recognise and discourage any tendency of this sort. With what resources does the Bible provide us for this?

Looked at from another perspective, however, it could be argued that we ourselves as Christians are an abused, marginalised group in western society. Even in America this occurs. Michael Medved has recently documented thoroughly, the anti-religious bias in Hollywood material.[9] How should we react when Christianity is abused? Should we cry offence: If not, what should we say – if anything? Can we use abuse as an opportunity to acknowledge the offensive claim of Christianity as nothing less than public truth?

Perhaps where political correctness reigns, as in the communist Czechoslovakia described by Havel, real public truth takes the form of subversive truth. Perhaps then we should help people to embrace the Bible as subversive public truth? What style of witness would this require? What biblical resources nourish this?

Another consideration: many 'rights' issues are too important to be spoilt by fanaticism and its resultant backlash and polarisation. Should we be doing more as Christians to offer biblical perspectives on these issues? Should we 'jump on every bandwagon' to seize the

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reins for God?

Finally, we dare not pursue justice only by pursuing equity for specifiable victim-groups. We need to resist those vested interests and ideologies which bring to birth victims in the first place.

As with the first two fronts for engagement with prevailing public truth, so with this third front. We must be able to recognise and affirm what is good, and resist what is bad. Importantly, we must be able to do both.

Endnotes

1. Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorised Version*, London 1991.
2. N.T. Wright, *Who was Jesus?* London 1992.
3. Bruce Patrick (ed.), *New Vision New Zealand*, Auckland 1993.
4. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Cambridge 1974.
5. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 1979.
6. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 1950.
7. Vaclac Havel, *Living in Truth*, London 1987.
8. Brian Keenan, *An Evil Cradling*, 1993.
9. Michael Medved, *Hollywood versus America*, New York 1992.

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