

# The end of Protestantism?

Alister McGrath

We live in challenging and demanding times. I do not think that this is a controversial statement. Nor do I believe that this need be seen as a threatening or demoralizing statement. Every generation believes that it stands at a critical point in history. Behind us, there is the past; ahead of us, there is the future. And we very often feel that the future is going to be so different from the past that we will not be able to cope with it. Things are going to be very different, and nothing that we have experienced thus far can prepare us for what lies ahead. This anxiety can be seen in many Christian writings. We fear that Christianity is heading into uncharted waters; that we do not know whether we can cope with what lies ahead; that our past experience may be a liability rather than a resource for the future.

These views have always been encountered, throughout Christian history. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the early fifth century, remarked on how many people of his time longed for the good old days, when Christianity was given support and security by the Roman Empire. Bernard of Clairvaux, writing seven hundred years later, wrote of the sense of nostalgia many felt for the time of Augustine. Wouldn't it have been wonderful to live at that time, rather than face the challenges of the present. And many sixteenth-century writers told their readers how much better it would have been to live at the time of Bernard of Clairvaux! It seems that we find it very easy to believe that things were better in the past.

The future of Protestantism, in its classic forms, is unclear. While Pentecostalism has made huge advances in recent years, both in terms of its numerical strength and its theological sophistication, many are expressing concern about the future of the forms of Protestantism that emerged in western Europe in the sixteenth century. I am one of those to be concerned about the future of Protestantism, for reasons that I set out in a number of books, particularly *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford, 2001). One of my anxieties is that western European forms of Protestantism have been significantly conditioned and shaped by their origins in early modern Europe, and as a result are experiencing significant difficulty in relating to non-European contexts and postmodern culture. And in Europe itself, rapid cultural change in the last forty years has raised some very serious difficulties, especially through the rise of postmodernism.

Protestantism faces some especially important challenges. If they are not met, the movement will be in serious difficulty. But I have every confidence that they will be met, and that your generation will play a very important role in doing this. So let me begin by making it clear that some of the matters I shall be talking about are very serious, and demand our full attention. But I must make it equally clear that I believe that they can be met. There is no doubt that we are experiencing a period of significant cultural change in western Europe. We may use the word "postmodernism" to describe it – but this does not mean that we really understand it! And this new cultural mood is unsettling for many of us.

When faced with radical cultural change, Christians tend to respond in three ways. One is to retreat to the past. It was safer then. The best way of reacting against these changes is to go back to the old ways – to forms of Christian life and thought from the sixteenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, when things were more settled. I can understand this move, but as you will see, I believe it to be misguided. A second approach, which I also believe to be misguided, is to accept the way our culture is moving, and adjust our life and thought accordingly. We accommodate our beliefs to the changing cultural mood. In English, we speak of "going with the flow".

I wish to commend a third option – that of trying to understand the changes in our culture, and ensure that the gospel proclamation is firmly related to these changes. It means constantly examining our

understanding and expression of the gospel, to ensure that we really have understood it fully, and expressed it as best we can. This does not mean changing the gospel; it means making sure that the gospel is proclaimed faithfully and effectively, in language and imagery that our culture can understand and appreciate. We must realize that Luther, Calvin and other Protestant writers all saw themselves as proclaiming and communicating the Christian gospel in terms that their cultures could understand and appreciate. The perennial task of Protestantism is to continue this process of communication and application today.

Here, I want to remind you of a Latin slogan that is of such importance to Protestantism: *ecclesia reformata, ecclesia semper reformanda*. This slogan reminds us that Protestantism sees reformation not as a once for all event, that happened in the sixteenth century, and is now behind us. Rather, it is an ongoing process, in which we constantly examine every aspect of our faith in the light of its biblical foundations – for example, the way we live, the way we worship, and the way we think. The history of Protestantism suggests that the success of the movement rests upon its willingness to correlate Scripture with the context in which it finds itself, rather than simply reaching backwards into its own history and reproducing past correlations, such as the way in which a text was applied by Calvin in his sixteenth-century Genevan context. I am sure that I do not need to remind this distinguished audience that sixteenth century Geneva bears little resemblance to what we expect Europe to look like in this century!

The classic Reformed slogan *ecclesia semper reformanda* reminds us that the essence of Protestantism does not lie in fidelity to the religious practices of the sixteenth century, but to constant re-examination of every aspect of our faith in the light of Scripture. The issue is that of applying Scripture to our own contexts, rather than slavishly repeating past applications of Scripture. David F. Wells, one of evangelicalism's most significant and respected contemporary exponents, comments as follows on the task of evangelical theology:<sup>1</sup>

It is the task of theology, then, to discover what God has said in and through Scripture and to clothe that in a conceptuality which is native to our own age. Scripture, at its *terminus a quo*, needs to be de-contextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be re-contextualized in order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time.

Well's words point to the need to see Scripture and our own context as two horizons – horizons that need to be related to each other.<sup>2</sup> For Calvin, the task was to relate Scripture to sixteenth-century Geneva; for you, it will be to relate that same Scripture to your own situation. Calvin's approach and the results which it yields may be helpful to you as you seek to undertake this task; his answers cannot be identical to yours. Calvin's ideas about worship are shaped by his own cultural context. Ours, however, is very different.

I stress this point, because I need to make one thing absolutely clear to you: to be faithful to the founders of Protestantism – such as Luther or Calvin – we do not need to worship as they worshipped, or share the same political views as they did (to mention two issues; others could easily be added). Protestantism is about the faithful application of Scripture to life and thought, not about the

---

<sup>1</sup> David F. Wells, 'The Nature and Function of Theology', in R. K. Johnston (ed.), *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> This issue is explored in greater detail in Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

mechanical repetition of what Protestants thought and did in the past. Protestantism, in other words, is dynamic, not static. Being faithful to the Protestant vision does not mean that we are trapped in a sixteenth-century cultural, linguistic and social world. It means that we must bring the same resources and methods to bear on our own situation. What the founders of Protestantism have passed on to us is a way of engaging with the world, not a predetermined outcome of that engagement.

You will see the point I am making. Some insist that, to be faithful Protestants, we must replicate the precise lifestyles, worship patterns and social conventions of earlier Protestants.

Why is this point so important? Let me give you an example. I am an ordained member of the Church of England. We have a traditional form of worship, which was first published in 1549, and revised in 1662. For some people, this is the form of worship and the precise form of words that we should still be using. I want to make two points. First, this seems to rest on the assumption that the year 1662 defined for all time the form that proper Anglican worship should take. It is as if we can freeze a moment from the past, and preserve this for eternity as a model for true worship.

The second concern is apologetic and evangelistic. This form of worship attracts few from secular culture, and alienates far more. It creates the impression that Christianity is unintelligible, outdated and unattractive. The churches that are attracting people in from our secular culture are those that are able to relate their worship and preaching to its language, concerns and aspirations. If we are trapped in the past like this, the end of Protestantism will be in sight. The future of our churches depends on reaching out into our culture, as well as sustaining those who are already church members.

As some of you will know, I have recently had a friendly disagreement with Dr van de Beek over this point. Dr van de Beek makes the important point that the church is the bride of Christ, and must therefore be attractive to him. Of course she must. I cannot think of anyone who would disagree with this. We must ensure that the church is faithful and obedient to Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Yet van de Beek seems to set up an absolute dichotomy between what is beautiful to Christ, and what is beautiful to the world. The implication is that, if something is attractive to the world, it is ugly to Christ – and vice versa. If we were to press van de Beek's argument to its limits, we would find ourselves in the uncomfortable (and theologically improper) position of advocating styles of worship which were deliberately designed to be unattractive to the world, since this would ensure that they were attractive to Christ. I see no warrant for this. Obviously, there are many things that the world admires that cannot please Christ. But not everything is like this. Why cannot something be beautiful to Christ *and* to the world? Why should not the human quest for beauty lead them to God as the source of all beauty – an argument we find developed to great effect in writers such as Jonathan Edwards and C. S. Lewis?

The importance of this point is emphasized through a trend noted in a recent English report, which studied how people came to faith. By far the most important route to faith was attending church services – often in response to a friend's invitation. Worship plays a major evangelistic role. It proclaims to the world that the church has found something that is worth worshipping, and which demands and deserves the best that human minds and hearts can offer.

A careful study of the development of Christian worship shows that each generation wanted to offer what it believed to be the best to God. But this does not mean that God needs to be worshipped using the old language of sixteenth-century liturgies. Faithfulness to Christ does not mean that we must worship him using sixteenth-century language, which is neither the language of the New Testament nor of the twenty-first century. Obedience to Christ does not mean that we must sing eighteenth-century hymns to nineteenth-century tunes. Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever. But human tastes

in matters of music change. There is no theological reason why we should not express our love of Christ in twenty-first century language accompanied by twenty-first century music.

The judgement that older styles of worship and music are superior to those of today is a cultural judgement, not one rooted in the eternal truths of the gospel. We must remember that every style of worship was once new; with the passage of time, it has become traditional, and its original novelty has become obscured. What one generation found beautiful was found old-fashioned and outdated by another. Yet we cannot allow the gospel to be rejected as old-fashioned and out-dated because of a past generation's cultural judgements! Here, as always, the question is simply this: how may the eternal gospel be most faithfully, beautifully and effectively communicated and embodied? The answer given to that question by the people of Geneva in 1560 will not be the same as that given by the people of Utrecht in 2000.

So let me move on, and address some of the challenges that Protestantism must face in the west. I propose to deal with two broad categories of challenges: those emerging from the rise of postmodernism, and those which arise from the traditional Protestant attitudes which may need re-examination in the light of our new situation. I begin by exploring some issues concerning postmodernism.

Now some of you may be wondering why I am going to spend so much time talking about postmodernism. Why is it so relevant? Well, there are two parts to my answer to that question. The first is simple: postmodernism has had a major impact on younger people, and we need to have a good understanding of the challenges that postmodernity brings if we are going to be able to relate to our culture. This is an issue for every kind of Christianity, including Protestantism. But there is a second reason, which is much more serious.

If you are a sociologist, then you will point out that Protestantism is linked with the emergence of modernity. The relationship is complex: it is not that modernity caused Protestantism, or that Protestantism caused modernity. The two are much more closely intertwined and interconnected than such simple statements allow. So here is the problem. Postmodernity inverts most of the fundamental judgements and values of modernity. To put it more pointedly: to many sociologists, postmodernity is antithetical to Protestantism. In other words, while postmodernity raises challenges for all forms of Christianity, these are especially acute in the case of Protestantism. Protestantism, it is argued was born in the early modern period, and shaped by the forces of modernity. It is therefore especially vulnerable to the erosion of the values of modernity in our postmodern culture. So we need to take this challenge seriously. However, as I shall argue, we can meet this challenge.

The most obvious point at which to begin is by trying to give some kind of definition of what postmodernity actually is. It is not easy to do so, as it is a complex idea. Different people place differing emphases on different aspects of it. Its most distinctive feature is its rejection of what I shall call uniformitarianism – that is, the insistence that there is only one right way of thinking, and only one right way of behaving. Postmodern writers see these attitudes as underlying Nazism and Stalinism, which they regard as the unacceptable public face of uniformitarianism. A demand for uniformity leads to repression, in that people are forced to fit into one, single preconceived mould. To use the language of some leading postmodern philosophers: 'the other' is relentlessly reduced to 'the same.'

Postmodernity can be seen as a reaction against these ways of thinking, which it regards as oppressive. Postmodernism is a cultural mood, which celebrates diversity and seeks to undermine those who offer rigid, restrictive and oppressive views of the world. It reacts against modernism, which tried to reduce everything to a uniform set of ideas, critiquing this as intellectual Stalinism, a refusal to permit diversity

in our readings of the world. Postmodernity celebrates diversity of belief, seeing any attempt to coerce individuals to accept the viewpoints of another as being oppressive.

A second feature of postmodernity which is of particular interest to our thinking tonight is its emphasis on the story. No longer is truth to be established by argument; it is established by telling a story. Postmodernity emphasises the local, rather than the universal. Now the use of the word 'story' might lead us to think that this means that we are being asked to prefer something 'imaginary' or 'fictitious' over something that is real. But this is not what is meant. The story is one individual's account of what they have found to be real and important. It is based on actual human existence, not abstract ideas. Postmodernity reacts against abstract ideas, believing that these are often created by people who want to oppress us. Instead, it values individual stories. As I shall show presently, this is of considerable importance to Christianity.

A third feature of especial importance is the postmodern emphasis upon the image. For postmodern writers, pictures, not words, are the supreme form of communication. Advertising corporations spend fortunes determining what is the best image for a company. They develop television commercials presenting us images which make us want to buy certain products, and not others. Many Christians – such as myself – prefer to use words (in my case, especially the written word) to communicate and commend my faith. But in our postmodern context, images are seen as having special authority and power. So how can we respond to this development?

A fourth feature of postmodernity is its emphasis on the local 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.

So how has Christianity been affected by these cultural developments of the last forty years? In what follows, I would like to look at some of the questions raised for us, and offer possible solutions. Postmodernity certainly offers us some challenges – but I believe that these are challenges to which churches can rise, and from which they may benefit.

### *The New Importance of Images*

The Bible is replete with images, designed to stimulate our God-given faculties to long to know more about our saviour and the benefits which he brings. Christ may be known more fully by reflecting on these images, and the insights which they bring us. It is therefore important to spend some considerable time meditating on such images, refusing to rush onwards to the next passage, but lingering in anticipation of the nourishment and wisdom which they will impart.

Appreciating a biblical image takes time. It requires us to create space for reflection and inner absorption. Both the imagination and mind are called into play, as we try to ascertain what we are meant to gain through the images of Christ so skilfully and compellingly deployed throughout the gospels, and especially in the gospel of John. Images should arrest us, and detain us precisely because they compel us to pause and reflect on what they convey. It is not simply what is conveyed, but the means by which this takes place, which engages our attention. We brood over its substance as much as its form, and emerge from that rumination with a fresh vision of the truth which lies behind it, as much as it lies in it.

But thinking about images does more than help us appreciate the richness of our own faith. It helps us to communicate it more effectively and powerfully to those outside the churches. Let me illustrate this by examining a very familiar image from the gospels – the image of Christ’s death as a ransom. This image is of especial importance to Christians, as it is used on the lips of Jesus himself, who declared that he came ‘to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45). The image is also found elsewhere in the New Testament. 1 Timothy 2:5–6 speaks of Jesus Christ being a ‘mediator between God and humanity ... who gave his life as a ransom for all’.

To appreciate the richness of this image, let us carry out a thought experiment. Imagine that you come from a rich family, and have cherished a lifelong ambition to visit the island of Sicily. On your arrival, you happily begin to explore its many Roman archeological sites and its beautiful yet rugged landscape. You become impatient with the regular tourist guides, and decide that you will explore the island by yourself. On the second day of this adventure, you are confronted by two men, one of whom is carrying a shotgun. They invite you to share their humble hospitality, while arrangements are made to transfer a suitably large sum of money to secure your release.

You realize that you have been kidnapped, and that there is nothing that you can do about it. Your emotions are a complex mixture of anger, guilt and fear. How could you have allowed yourself to get into this situation? And will you ever get out? Try to think yourself into this situation, and appreciate the sense of helplessness and hopelessness that goes with it. Whether you get out of it depends totally on someone else being prepared to pay a ransom for you. Your life is in their hands. What happens if the folks back home would be glad to be rid of you? As day after day passes, you sink into despair.

Now try to imagine the sense of utter relief and delight you would experience if the news came through that your family had ransomed you. You would be free! And (perhaps just as important) you would have mattered enough to your family for them to pay the price that was demanded.

A ransom is a price that is paid to achieve someone’s freedom. In the Old Testament, the emphasis falls especially upon the idea of being freed, of liberation, rather than speculation about the nature of the price which was paid to achieve this liberation. Thus Israelites who were liberated from exile in Babylon are often referred to as the ‘ransomed of the Lord’ (Isaiah 35:10).

The picture of a ‘ransom’ suggests three fundamental ideas. First, it speaks of someone who is held in captivity, almost certainly against their will. One might think of a prominent Sicilian citizen who has been kidnapped by the Mafia. The fundamental theme is that someone is trapped in a situation in which they do not want to be – and from which they cannot extricate themselves. Left to their own devices, they have no hope of deliverance.

This leads on to the second idea prompted by the image of a ‘ransom’ – that of a price which is paid to bring about the freedom of the captive. The more important the person being held to ransom, the greater the price demanded. One of the most astonishing things about the love of God for us is that God was prepared to pay so dearly to set us free. The price of our freedom was the death of his one and only Son. ‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life’ (John 3:16). How much we must matter to this God if the price which is paid to redeem us is so great!

And thirdly, the image of ‘ransom’ points to the great theme of liberation – being set free from captivity. The New Testament is saturated with the good news of freedom from the power of sin and death. We

have been set free to enjoy the 'glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). Christ's death on the cross throws aside the barriers which prevent us from finding our fulfilment with God.

### *The New Importance of Community*

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?

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 relatively easy to understand. 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 has recently merged 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 travelers 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. '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 Christianity in a postmodern culture? 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 attending church, 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.

*The New Importance of Story*

Finally, I come to the new importance of the story. When I was younger, I used to believe that the best way to help other people to discover the truth and excitement of Christianity was to argue with them – in other words, to persuade them that Christianity was right and true. But I would now communicate the truth of the gospel in another way. I would tell my story. I would tell how I came to faith. Why? Because the story is much more interesting than any argument. And it shows that Christianity is real – in other words, that it has the capacity to change people's lives, to give them new reasons for living, and a firm hope for the future.

One of the childhood experiences which I recall most vividly was lying awake on my bed at night, looking out of a window towards the stars. I was about 14 years old at the time. Like so many people of that age, I was fairly sure that I knew everything that mattered, and had all the great issues of life sorted out. Back in the 1960s, most young people seemed to assume that religion was a waste of time. Marxism was much more attractive – and relevant! I was going to be a research scientist, and sort out the problems of the world through new cures for diseases.

Yet the certainties on which my life was grounded were slowly being eroded. One of the issues which troubled me was the question of mortality. What was the point of life? It seemed so brief and insignificant. Looking at the stars increased my sense of despondency. I knew that some of the stars I was observing were so far away that their light took hundreds of years to reach me. This meant that I would be dead before the light now being emitted by those stars would reach the earth. I found it a disturbing thought. The classic way of dealing with such thoughts, of course, is to ignore them, and hope that they will go away. Yet this particular thought refused to go away.

My own discovery of the Christian faith took place when I was eighteen, late in 1971. I had gone up to Oxford University to study natural sciences. Looking back on that time of my life, it is clear that my early rejection of Christianity was based on a misunderstanding. My outlook on life was shaped by my reactions to what I can now see was a caricature. Perhaps that caricature was ideally suited to the needs of a schoolboy, who wanted quick answers to complex questions. The doubts about the credibility of my Marxist outlook began to resurface, and – like Augustine in the cathedral at Milan – I would attend Christian meetings in my attempt to discover what it was all about. University was a place at which one had time to think about life more critically than before, and I came to the conclusion that I had misjudged and misunderstood Christianity. To cut a long story short, I accepted Christianity as my personal faith. It was perhaps the greatest discovery that I ever made.

Let me go back to those stars that I watched as a fourteen year old. The stars, of course, remained as they were. Yet the way I viewed them altered radically. No longer were they harbingers of transience. They were now symbols of a wisdom and care of a God who knew and loved me. The words of Psalm 8 expressed my new attitude rather well:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers  
The moon and stars that you have established;  
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
Mortals, that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
And crowned them with glory and honour.

The stars now became signs of the providence of God, who knows them and calls them by name (Psalm 147:4). No longer were the stars silent pointers to human transience; they were scintillating heralds of the love of God. I was not alone in the universe, but walked and lived in the presence of a God who knew me, and would never forget me.

So that is my story. Maybe it is not as logically compelling as an argument. But it is the true story of how I came to faith, and the difference it has made to my life. And I am sure that many of you here tonight could tell a story like that. You might not be able to argue people into accepting the gospel. But by your witness to what God has done for you, you can help others realize that God is real in your life – and that he could become a living reality in their lives as well.

But stories are important in other ways. We all know how important stories are in the Bible. The stories of Israel's exodus from Egypt and the entry into the promised land are of enormous importance to the Old Testament. Jesus told stories – parables – to make points. He did not use arguments; he used stories, drawing on the experience of those around him to help them realize the good news of the kingdom of God. And the gospels tell us the story of how Christ encountered people, and changed them. Those encounters are of great importance to us as we reflect on our faith; they are also of immense importance as we try to communicate the gospel to those outside. Let us look at one parable – one story – to see how it helps us do both of these things.

Many people are able to point to a moment in their lives which has supreme significance. Everything led up to that point, and then leads away from it. The experience in question is a defining moment. Someone might consider falling in love with a wonderfully attractive person to have been the most fulfilling and worthwhile experience of their lives. Another might consider it to be the moment she discovered a major new scientific fact, or noticed a pattern in her observations which enabled a new scientific discovery. A third person might consider his defining moment to be his experience of coming across a beautiful paradise island for the very first time, and being entranced by its unspoiled splendour.

Each of these experiences is real and important. Yet they are to be seen as pointers, indicating an analogy between the temporary joy and fulfilment that we experience on earth and the more profound and permanent fulfilment that we can have by knowing God. This does not mean that our earthly joys and hopes are to be seen as foolish or things we should condemn. Good though they are, they pale into insignificance compared with a greater joy that is had through knowing God. This theme can be seen at many points in the New Testament. 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 13:45–46). 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 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.

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.

Now it will be clear from these comments that I believe that Protestantism can rise to the challenge of postmodernity. There is a new challenge here, which will involve us responding faithfully yet creatively to our situation. I believe that this can be done.

But now I turn to something more troubling. I want to begin by talking to you about a development which is taking place in the great urban sprawls of Latin America, Asia and Africa. This has gone largely unnoticed in the west, especially in western Europe. But it is important, both in its own right and also as a sign of a new challenge that we may need to face. The development is the remarkable rise of Pentecostalism in the last hundred years.

The origins of the movement are complex, but are usually traced back to the first day of the twentieth century – 1 January 1901. Charles Parham (1873-1929), had launched the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas a few months earlier. One of his particular interests was the phenomenon of ‘speaking in tongues’, which is described in Acts 2:1-4. Most Christians had taken this to be something that happened in the early church, but was no longer part of the Christian experience. On New Year’s Day, 1901, one of Parham’s students experienced this phenomenon. A few days later, Parham experienced it for himself.

Parham began to teach about this apparent recovery of the ‘gift of tongues’. One of those who heard him speak was the African-American preacher William J. Seymour (1870-1922), who opened the ‘Apostolic Faith Mission’ at 312 Azusa Street, Los Angeles in April 1906. Over the next two years, a major revival broke out, characterized by the phenomenon of ‘speaking in tongues.’ The term ‘Pentecostalism’ began to be applied to the movement, taking its name from the ‘Day of Pentecost’ – the occasion, according to the New Testament, when the phenomenon was first experienced by the early Christian disciples (Acts 2:1-4).

The movement spread rapidly in America, appealing especially to the marginalized. Unusually, it seemed to appeal to and be embraced by both white and African-American Christian groupings. Although Pentecostalism can be thought of as traditionalist in its Christian theology, it differs radically from other Christian groupings in the emphasis which it placed on speaking in tongues, and its highly experiential forms of worship, which involve prophesying, healings, and exorcisms. A direct, transforming, personal encounter with God is seen as a normal feature of the Christian life. The worship style and lack of intellectual sophistication of the movement led to its being ignored by mainline denominations and the academy – including theologians, church historians, and, above all, sociologists. Yet after the Second World War, a new phase of its expansion began, which paved the way for its massive growth in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Pentecostalist movement – which we shall here take to include charismatic groups within mainline churches – has changed considerably since World War II. The most obvious change is the massive surge in growth. It is now estimated that there are 500 million Pentecostals in the world, with a very wide geographical distribution. Although the movement may be argued to have its origins primarily within African-American culture, it has taken root in South America, Asia, Africa and Europe.

Why has this form of Christianity become so popular? Two factors are generally agreed to explain the growing global appeal of Pentecostalism. First, Pentecostalism stresses a direct, immediate experience of God, and avoids the rather dry and cerebral forms of Christianity which many find unattractive and unintelligible. It is thus significant that Pentecostalism has made significant inroads in working class areas of the developing world which have been resistant to traditional forms of Protestantism, especially in the traditionally Roman Catholic region of Latin America.

Second, the movement uses a language and form of communication which enables it to bridge cultural gaps highly effectively. Sociologist David Martin argues that the most important feature of Latin American Pentecostalism is its ‘indigenous character’, pointing to the movement’s remarkable ability to adjust itself and become ‘incarnate’ in any culture, particularly in Africa and Asia.

If ‘mainline’ is defined numerically, then Pentecostalism is already the most significant Christian alternative to Roman Catholicism. It has displaced to the sidelines those Protestant groupings that once saw themselves as mainline. Nobody likes to be shunted off into the sidings like this, and there has been lots of grumpy sniping at Pentecostals from anxious Protestant intellectuals as a result. Yet the more perceptive of their number have realized that a massive transformation in global Christianity is taking place, and urged their fellows to take the movement seriously. Harvey Cox’s *Fire from Heaven* (1996) blazes a trail that many will need to explore. One of the reasons that Pentecostalism has succeeded is that mainline Protestantism has failed to meet the needs and aspirations of the marginalized and disadvantaged. The development of the movement within the Roman Catholic church in Brazil and other Latin American nations has radically changed the appeal of Christianity to the region. And the movement is spreading.

So why should classical Protestantism study this movement closely? What challenge does it bring? I began to realize how important this development was when researching my book *The Twilight of Atheism*. Let me explain. Classical forms of Protestantism – such as those commended in the Heidelberg Catechism – proposed a God who was known through the preaching of the word of God. Slowly but surely, any sense of God as a living, engrossing reality began to slip from Protestantism. Protestantism has been chided by many cultural analysts for its failure to stimulate the arts. The great Welsh poet R. S. Thomas castigated the movement for this failure, dubbing it ‘the adroit castrator of art’ and ‘the bitter negation of song and dance and the heart’s innocent joy.’ My concern is, however, rather more

profound. Protestantism encouraged the notion that God was absent from human culture and experience.

A substantial part of my activity as a scholar focusses on the history and thought of the Protestant Reformation. As a result, I am a frequent visitor to some of the great centers of the movement, including Zurich. I have often sat within the Great Minster of that city, looking around its vast interior, unadulterated by imagery or decoration, and noting the tactile values it affirms – most notably, the absolute priority accorded to preaching, made clear by both the size and location of the pulpit. Its simplicity is admirable, and totally in conformity with the spirit of Zwingli's reforming program in the 1520s. But the building speaks subtly of a silent, absent, and distant God. The Protestant reluctance to picture God has all too often led to an envisioning of the world which is bleak and barren, where it ought to be saturated with the radiance of the glory of God. Once more, it is a small step from declaring that God cannot be pictured to suggesting that he cannot be conceived as a living reality in the rich imaginative life of humanity.

there are some who commend a purely 'text-centered' understanding of the Christian faith, seeing preaching as nothing more than teaching the contents of the Bible, and spirituality as a deepened understanding and internalization of its message. Yet, as the rise of Puritanism, Pietism and 'experiential religion' in England and elsewhere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries makes clear, it is entirely possible to develop an approach to Christianity which is rigorously grounded on theological principles, yet sees these as laying the foundation for an encounter with the living God.

Nevertheless, some sections of western Protestantism, often deeply influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment, continue to this day to place an emphasis upon 'theological correctness', stressing the overarching importance of having right ideas about God. These correct notions of God are to be determined by a reading of the Bible, which is understood primarily as a doctrinal handbook. Faith thus becomes an *indirect* knowledge of God, stated in terms of beliefs about God which, however correct they may be as far as they go, convey the impression that Christianity is little more than abstract theorizing about a God whose will is revealed in the Bible. The mind is engaged; the emotions and imagination remain untouched. Historically, it is precisely such a spiritually and imaginatively impoverished reading of Christianity which resulted in Hugo Grotius's argument that people of his day had come to live and think *etsi Deus non daretur*.

The contrast with Pentecostalism on this point could not be greater. Pentecostalism's emphasis on a direct, immediate experience of God avoids the rather dry and cerebral forms of Christianity which many find unattractive and unintelligible. It is thus significant that Pentecostalism has made huge inroads in working class areas of Latin America, Africa and Asia, in that it is able to communicate a sense of the divine and its implications without the need for prayer books and the other traditional paraphernalia of Protestant culture.

Pentecostalism declares that it is possible to encounter God directly and personally through the power of the Holy Spirit. God is to be known immediately and directly, not indirectly through study of a text. Whereas traditional Protestantism is wary of allowing any such direct experience of God, Pentecostalism celebrates it, and makes it a hallmark of Christian living. God impacts upon the totality of existence, and is not confined – as in some traditional Protestant traditions – to the world of the mind. Walter Hollenweger, the most distinguished historian of the movement to date, points to the importance of this aspect of the movement:

When you become a Pentecostal, you talk about how you've been healed, or how your very life has been changed. That's something that Pentecostals talk about over and over, partly because

people are interested in hearing that sort of thing. Pentecostalism today addresses the whole of life, including the thinking part. More mainline forms of Christianity address the thinking part first, and that often affects the rest of life – but not always.

This may be contrasted with what Harvey Cox describes as ‘text-orientated believers’ – that is, those Protestants who believe that God can only be accessed (and then to a limited extent, in the form of abstract religious ideas) through reading the Bible, or hearing an expository sermon. For Cox, Pentecostalism celebrates the resurgence of ‘primal spirituality’, and absolutely refuses to allow its experience of God to be limited to ideas. God is experienced and known as a personal, transformative, living reality.

Once more, I believe that we can rise to this challenge. Jonathan Edwards, the great American reformed theologian of the eighteenth century, has much to teach us about the importance of the aesthetical and experiential side of Christianity. But I do believe that this is a serious challenge, ultimately resting on a theological issue – namely, can God be known directly, or only through the intermediacy of the proclaimed word?

Let me end, however, by reflecting on our understanding of the nature of the church – an area of Christian theology usually designated as “ecclesiology”. Traditionally, western Protestant understandings of the nature of the church have been grounded on the presumption that the church is grounded in a largely settled Christian context, and is thus primarily concerned with pastoral care and teaching. The dominance of this model within the western tradition can be seen in the written form of the Japanese term for church, *kyokai*, where the two characters (*kanji*) used to represent the term have the natural meaning of ‘a teaching organization’, representing the dominant ecclesiology of the nineteenth-century western missionaries.

Yet that settled Christian situation is not typical of global Protestantism. As power and growth shift to African, Asian and Latin American churches, so the idea of proclamation and mission have come to assume increased prominence within Protestant conceptions of the church.

Yet we can hardly overlook the major implications of the rise of unbelief and scepticism within the west, which make the west a mission field in its own right. And where, in classical Protestant conceptions of the church, do we find an emphasis on evangelism? Neither Luther nor Calvin, for example, developed this matter, seeing their agenda as reform of what they regarded as degenerate forms of Christianity in their spheres of influence. But what of today?

One of the major developments in western culture within the last thirty years has been massive immigration into western cities, especially from Asia. Whether one looks at London, Toronto, Vancouver, Los Angeles, San Diego, Sydney or Melbourne, the same pattern emerges. There is a growing presence of non-Christian religions in regions which hitherto might have regarded themselves as nominally Christian. The result has been unequivocal: the same conditions faced by Protestants in Africa and Asia have now arisen in many areas of the west. Western Protestants, who up to this point could, with varying degrees of credibility, have regarded their societies as nominally Christian, requiring pastoral care and social justice, are now having to adjust to the emergence of a missionary situation directly paralleling those faced by Protestants elsewhere in the world.

It is no longer possible for western Protestantism to entrust its future to a pastoral understanding of the church which reflects the social conditions of the sixteenth-century. Let me illustrate this point with reference to Anglicanism, the form of Protestantism that I know best. The growing influence of African and Asian Anglicanism and the increased relevance of its agenda to Anglicanism in the west, was evident

at the 1988 Lambeth Conference. A direct result of this has been explicit statement on the part of that conference to the effect that the primary task of the church is now to be seen as *evangelism* – that is, ‘a dynamic missionary emphasis going beyond care and nurture to proclamation and service.’<sup>3</sup> The 1988 Lambeth Conference gave Anglicanism a new sense of direction and purpose through its firm long-term commitment to evangelism throughout the communion. In an increasingly secular age, evangelism is coming to be seen as of decisive importance in reaching out beyond the bounds of the church, and bringing men and women the good news of Jesus Christ. Once more, the 1988 Lambeth Conference recognized the urgency of this situation, and pointed to the important role models available for the western churches in their more vibrant sister churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Though there are notable exceptions, the dominant model of the church within the Anglican communion is a pastoral one. Emphasis in all aspects of the church’s life tends to be placed upon care and nurture, rather than proclamation and service. The pressing needs of today’s world demand that there be a massive shift to a ‘mission’ orientation throughout the communion. . . . This is beginning to happen in many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

There is a growing realization, even within the depths of a frequently rather complacent church establishment, that the future existence and wellbeing of the churches depends upon a determined and principled effort to proclaim the gospel. The Christian churches cannot rely upon a legacy of cultural religiosity to ensure their continuing presence in the world. They must proclaim the profound attractiveness of faith to the world, in the full and confident expectation that the gospel is inherently attractive and relevant. As the distinguished Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner put it, ‘the possibility of winning new Christians from a milieu that has become unchristian is the sole living and convincing evidence that Christianity still has a real chance for the future’.<sup>5</sup> The embargo placed by the mainline churches on evangelism is finally over. But have we given enough thought to how we rethink our vision of the church as a result?

I must conclude. I have ranged very widely, and inevitably have failed to engage with many questions that ought to have been considered. Equally, those issues that I have raised, have not been analysed in sufficient depth. But I have no hesitation in raising them. The essence of Protestantism is continual self-examination, that we may be faithful to Scripture. If any form of Protestantism will die out, it is a complacent Protestantism which refuses to consider criticisms, engage with concerns, and ignore what is happening in the world. We might view the rise of Pentecostalism as an historical accident, without relevance to our theme. But then again, it might be an act of God. Is the rise of Pentecostalism really a new Reformation? Are we being judged in and through this development? There is much for us to reflect on, and I trust that we will be able to do this.

---

<sup>3</sup>*The Truth Shall Make You Free The Lambeth Conference 1988* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1988), Resolution 44, p. 231.

<sup>4</sup>*The Truth Shall Make You Free*, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>Karl Rahner, cited *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11/1 (1987), p. 11.