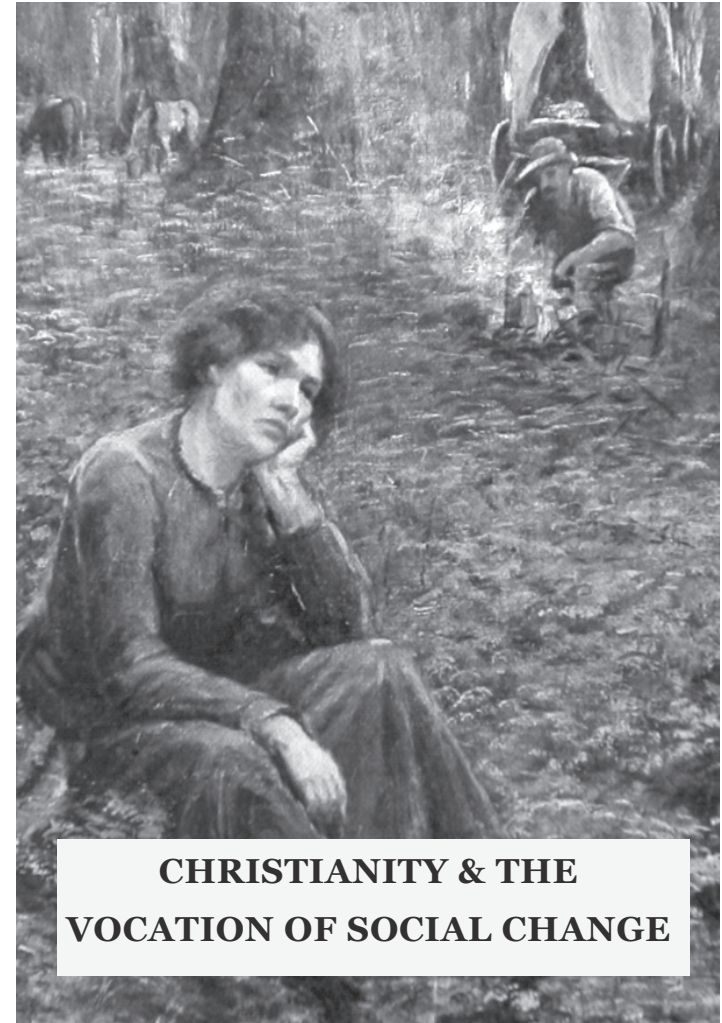


*'... longing for a
better country'*



**CHRISTIANITY & THE
VOCATION OF SOCIAL CHANGE**

Jonathan Cornford

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— Enough for all —




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Preface

‘There is nothing new under the sun’ we are told in Ecclesiastes, and certainly there is no new idea in this publication. If you are in search of a novel solution to the world’s problems you may as well stop reading here.

If you are comfortable with the idea that some people in the past may have actually understood one or two important things about life, read on. The problems of humanity have little to do with what we have not yet discovered and much to do with what we keep *forgetting*. This is no different within the Christian faith. It is for this reason that Peter Maurin, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, advised that we need to re-state the truth every twenty years. This essay is one modest building block towards such a task.

This is not a scholarly essay and it has not been heavily referenced, however it does owe a heavy debt of influence to a number of substantial thinkers, particularly to the writings of G.K. Chesterton, William Temple, RH Tawney, William Stringfellow, Stanley Hauerwas and Wendell Berry, and to the teaching and guidance of Peter Chapman. The ideas of these people have so joined the warp and weft of my own thought that it is sometimes impossible to distinguish them; therefore my prefatory homage will have to suffice. Of course, the shortcomings of this work must be retained to myself. More directly, I owe substantial thanks to Peter Chapman for his laborious work in editing this work; and to my wife, Kim, for her proof reading, comments, encouragement and endless grace.

*Jonathan Cornford
Pentecost 2006*

*'... longing for a
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*Although they had not received the things promised,
yet they had seen them far ahead and welcomed them,
and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens
without fixed abode on earth.*

*Those who speak in that way show
that they are looking for a country of their own.
If their thoughts had been with the country they had left,
they could have found opportunity to return.
Instead, we find them longing for a better country ...*

(Hebrews 11:13-16, REB)

This essay is an attempt to grapple with some of the peculiar difficulties of living as a Christian in these times. It takes as its starting point this question: 'What is the responsibility of Christians in relation to the world of society and politics around us?'. It is not a new question; indeed, we can trace its lineage back to the earliest years of the Christian Church. Yet I believe it is a question that has a new significance today. Obviously, it is a question that needs addressing in those quarters of the church that have long privatised the faith; where the only concern is the inner workings of the human soul, and where in most other matters the predominant attitude is one of social conformity and political quiescence. This is increasingly being recognised, and there are some signs that parts of the evangelical and pentecostal movements are beginning to wake from a long slumber of political unconsciousness.

However, this is also a pressing question in quarters we might not expect. The people on whose breath I have heard this question in recent times are politically literate Christians, who are experienced in social justice activism. Increasingly amongst some of these I detect a loss of confidence, a loss of direction and a loss of hope - a sense that positions and inclinations that have been held in the past have become quite hollow. And this has been my own journey too.

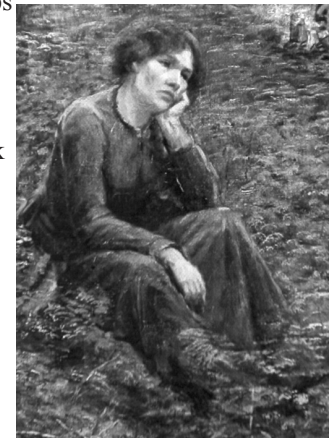
So what is the problem? I believe that there are two great factors pressing in on attempts to think through the Christian task in society and politics. These factors are simultaneously a cause of the urgency of this question, and a source of the confoundment that bedevils much thinking and action.

The first factor with which we must come to terms is that the times have changed - irrevocably and momentously. I am referring here to the predicament in which our nation (and even the whole world) finds itself at the turn of the third millennium, and in particular to the immensity of the economic and political forces that have been unleashed. The litany of woes which the world faces – social, economic, political, ecological, spiritual – are so well known now that I will refrain from listing them here.¹ Poverty, conflict, climate change and depression are all facets of the same picture. Perhaps we can summarise these woes by saying that all of our lives are now bound into a world system that seems intent on devouring itself. Although this world system is a product of our own creation, like the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we are unable to control it.

The times are also changing for the church, especially her position within society and culture. In two thousand years since the coming of Christ the church has in some ways come full circle, and we now find ourselves in a place much closer to that of the early church in the world of the Roman Empire – that is, one of marginality. This means that many of the habits and assumptions that have grown in the one thousand seven hundred years since the reign of Constantine will no longer serve us.

The second factor with which we must contend (if we are honest) is a profound loss of clarity within the church about what the Christian hope actually is, in this world or the next. The church has given up enormous intellectual ground to other worldviews – rationalism, modernism, relativism, call them what you will. Where the tenets of the Christian faith have been found to be incompatible with prevailing worldviews, they have too often been given up as untenable. Outside of the reactionary simplifications of fundamentalism, there is dwindling confidence and growing confusion about the most basic Christian doctrines. As a result, there is an insufficiently clear basis for Christian teaching on the affairs of this world. This in turn leaves us with troubling questions about that vital Christian idea of the Kingdom of God. How do we understand the incredible visions of peace and justice described in our scriptures? In times when the hopelessness of the world weighs down on us, the very beauty of these visions can be a source of bitterness. What should we hope for, and what should we work towards?

Many feel that reform which just tinkers with the edges of our political and economic system is pointless, and maybe even worse; and yet what else seems possible? In all of this, we are really being drawn to one of the most basic questions of the Christian faith: What does it mean to follow Christ in this world? Or to rephrase it in a corporate context: What is the task of the Church in the world? And if it seems that asking this question is returning to the beginning of the journey, this is perhaps not inappropriate. For when so much has changed around us, and when so much is called into question, we need to hear a voice calling us back to where we started. 'Go back to Galilee ...'.



The Basis Of The Christian Social Ethic

Returning to our original question, ‘What is the responsibility of Christians in relation to the world of society and politics around us?’, I should begin by giving a brief summary of what I understand to be the basis of the Christian social ethic – an ethic which is woven as a continuous and central thread throughout the Old and New Testaments. The fundamental Christian conviction is this: God is the God of all of life, and not just the ‘spiritual’ bits. This means that society, politics, economics and culture all matter to God. It will not do to acknowledge that there is a God who upholds the universe, who knows us, and who is benevolently disposed to our welfare, only to then confine the relevance of this God to the tiniest fraction of our waking hours - what we call our ‘spiritual lives’. The divorce of God from the world of work, family, recreation, production and consumption is one of the greatest heresies of our time. The central tenet of Christianity is that Jesus is the Word of God – that is, God’s message to humanity expressed in the form of a human life. This means that the gospel of Christ applies to every facet of our lives. Moreover, the Christian gospel is not just concerned with the lives of its adherents, it is fundamentally concerned with the predicament of the whole world. The action of God in Christ, and therefore the action of Christ in us, is one of *reaching out* to the world.

In other words, Christianity is concerned with everyone and everything. Thus William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, when posing the question, ‘Should the Church interfere in the social order?’, answers with this assertion: ‘It is bound to ‘interfere’ because it is by vocation the agent of God’s purpose, outside the scope of which no human interest or activity can fall.’² But how do we interfere? How do we work for social and political change?

Before proceeding with this question, it is worth adding an important clarification. Having said that Christianity is concerned with the social

order, we should not assume that it is the task of Christians to conceive of a perfect social order, or to attempt to institute a perfect social order. There is no such thing in Christianity as an ideal of the perfect social order, other than that which will be birthed at the end of the ages. As Lesslie Newbigin says:

Unless the radical otherworldliness of the gospel is acknowledged, the real role of the church in politics will be hopelessly compromised. Instead of a movement of radical protest, suffering, and hope, there will be merely a naïve and ineffectual utopianism. The reign of God which is the subject of the gospel message is not the end product of political development; and every attempt to confuse the two results in disappointment and disillusionment.³

This may seem a simple point, but it is a crucial one. The conception that Christian mission is about working towards the perfect society can only lead to despair; we are too far from Eden. A central understanding of Christianity is that we live in a fallen world, and the cracks from that fall go much deeper than we are often comfortable acknowledging. If we were somehow given a perfect social, political and economic structure, we would wreck it in a week.⁴ The wonder of the Christian gospel is that God engages us *as we are*, and not as we ought to be. Part of the meaning of ‘the Word became flesh’ is that God deals in the real circumstances of human history and not in abstractions.

The guiding principles of Christian social thinking are based on our understanding of the *character of God*. Therefore, at the pinnacle of Christian social thought are the concepts of love, justice and truth. From these first principles flow a range of derivative principles, such as freedom, community and responsibility.⁵ Yet our task is not to imagine a society which is perfectly loving, just, truthful, free, communal and responsible; our task is to ask what love, truth and justice require of us *now*, and in which direction the principles of freedom, community and responsibility guide us *now*. Moreover, our efforts towards these goals need to be undertaken with a thoroughgoing humility about the limitations of human work. No matter how pure our ideals may be, our work will always be compromised by our human frailties. Ultimately, Christian mission in the world is not concerned with final outcomes – that is in the hands of God

alone. And so we must recognise that the Christian social ethic is founded upon two intimidating and increasingly unpopular words: *faithfulness and obedience*.

Working For Change – Some Shortcomings & Failures

I have been involved in works of campaigning, lobbying, advocacy, research and social activism for the last twelve years of my life. The primary energy of my political life has been devoted, in varying ways, to the issues of Aboriginal reconciliation, international development, and drugs and homelessness.⁶ I have worked on these issues in a university context, in secular grass-roots community groups, in ordinary church groups and coalitions of ‘radical’ Christians, in a Christian community-based mission, and in a well-resourced secular ‘campaigning and advocacy’ NGO. The targets of my activism have included the Australian Government, international financial institutions (such as the World Bank), corporations, media and the general public. This experience hardly makes me a veteran in the world of working for change, but I believe it has allowed me to begin to see some things. What I believe I have seen is that the sum of all these forms of work is not enough. The standard modes of working for change, whether in secular or Christian circles (and in fact there is not as much difference as some would like to think) fall short, and are bound to leave us feeling hollow.

So what have I to show for all my work in social and political activism? Well ... these things are so hard to quantify. One thing I can show is a reasonable CV, which could serve me well in the burgeoning industry which has developed around working for change. And here immediately is one problem: working for change has become an *industry*; it is something in which people are *pursuing careers*. There is a real difference between receiving financial support to give time and energy to working for change (which is about valuing the work), and building a career (which is often

about valuing self). Even if the difference is only one of attitude, it has deep implications. The world of activism and advocacy has become colonised by attitudes of professional detachment that dominate much of the working world. There is a widespread expectation that working for change need not involve any personal cost; that you can have the materially comfortable and ego-rewarding life of an advancing career, as well as the personal satisfaction of knowing that you are making the world a better place. I fear that this attitude exists in both secular and Christian ‘change organisations’. Of course, from a biblical perspective this is an utter nonsense. The full Christian understanding is that nothing good is won in this world without sacrifice.

Of course, this is only a caricature of the ‘advocacy sector’; it should be stressed that it does not describe many of those working in the sector who really do give something of themselves to the work at hand. Nevertheless, such people are often operating in organisations that seem not to be as devoted to the cause as they are themselves; they are constantly in danger of having their idealism dashed against the cold rocks of institutionalism. Too many who signed up with passion to offer have either left (or stayed) as burnt-out cynics, or joined the irresistible crowd of managers and rationalisers.

Perhaps a fundamental concern is the way in which working for change has become professionalised into a sort of priesthood – a specialised corps, with its own language and special knowledge, set aside for the lofty task of political change. Until matters of change become the everyday concern of ordinary people, there will be little movement for the better.

Another great danger of such work is that we constantly seem to be losing. From time to time we have a bit of a victory, and something is changed for the better. But it is hard to escape the conclusion that wrong is outstripping right in the world many times over. Many who have been involved in this sort of work will be familiar with the sense of futility that sometimes seeps to the surface. Of course there is another perspective we ought to keep in mind. We always need to consider that great unanswerable question: what

worse things might have happened if people had done nothing? There really is something to be said for all of those short-term, improvisational concessions that have been won from governments and corporations, which have in some way *limited harm* even where they have not succeeded in overturning a bad system. In this sense it is worth reminding ourselves that our task is not only to work for change; it is also in great measure a task of restraining evil. And for the Christian, this is linked to the importance of those two words, faithfulness and obedience.

That said, one great limitation on the ability of modern advocates and activists either to restrain evil or bring about change, is the general



poverty of understanding about *root causes*. Essentially, this is a failing in our ability, or our readiness, to acknowledge just how bad ‘the system’ is; we all still want our little bit of the pie, even when we acknowledge the terrible impact that the making of this pie has had on the life of the world. I fear many people involved in advocacy and activism still hope that we can somehow achieve global equality and ecological sustainability without giving up too many of the material privileges which we now enjoy.⁷ This is a view that suggests our political and economic systems are not bad per se, they are only malfunctioning in some

areas. Accordingly, the work of advocacy is to fix the system, not to seek a different one.

This is where Christians have failed more than any others, for this is essentially a religious question. Modern Christianity, in all its cosmopolitan sophistication, has pushed away those uncomfortable apocalyptic and polarising texts of the Bible – most notably the Prophets and the Book of Revelation - which unveil just how deep the decay goes. The two great ‘isms’ which dominate our world – capitalism and technologism⁸

– are subjects which are widely neglected by the church. That the core principles of these two ‘isms’ – the primacy of self and the supremacy (or self-sufficiency) of human kind – are inimical to the gospel of Christ, seems to have escaped notice. To describe our political and economic system, the way of life we know so well, as a beast that devours souls (as it does in Revelation 13) or a seductress that intoxicates the rich and powerful (Revelation 17), seems completely out of proportion. There is an enormous, and understandable, reluctance to find out ‘how deep the rabbit hole goes’.⁹ The few times when people do catch a glimpse of the depth of darkness in our midst are usually accompanied by a theological crisis. We do not want to believe this, and so we don’t.

At the centre of this failure is the fact that the modern Church is losing its grasp of the significance of that other enormously unpopular work: sin. We, of all people, should be the best equipped to come to terms with the fact that humans can get things horribly, horribly wrong. From Genesis through to Revelation our scripture offers an unflinching and doggedly consistent view of the human condition. If the ultimate concern of scripture is to point us towards salvation, its prior task is to force us to face up to the reality of our predicament. There can be no healing for the addict who denies the addiction.

A further implication of an inadequate view of sin is the temptation to think that we are somehow different from the rulers and oppressors whom we condemn. The proper Christian view demands that we acknowledge the essential solidarity of the human race – a solidarity in sin. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges of the Christian faith is that we are called to have *compassion* for those whom we stand against.

The great impediment to acknowledging how fallen the system is, is that we are deeply implicated in its troubles. We have consented to being relegated to the status of consumers and become dependent upon the provision of the system to get goods into our homes and food onto our tables, no matter what crimes are inflicted upon nature or other humans. We largely accept this position because the system provides so well for us (not

necessarily for others). Even though I fall into the ‘low income bracket’ of Australian society, I enjoy a material standard of living which is far more comfortable than my parents knew at my age, which my grandparents only approached late in their lives, and which most of the world will never know. We are quite comfortable – *is it possible that we have been bought?*

Essentially, where we have identified problems in the world, we have generally failed to own them as our own problems. There is a great truth in the popular wisdom which notes that whenever you point the finger, there are three fingers pointing back at you. Hence the strength of Jesus’ language concerning logs and specks.

Conversely, because we have lost sight of what the problem is, it is not surprising that Christians working for change often lack a clear vision of what the Christian *hope* is for this world. It has been my observation that the political outlook of most ‘progressive Christian activists’ is basically the policy platform of the Australian Greens, or perhaps the Democrats. Is this because a secular political party has somehow arrived at the same view of society as Jesus of Nazareth? I don’t think so.¹⁰ The real reason is that for the last three hundred years most of the church has studiously avoided having an opinion on most matters of social and economic life.¹¹ What is a Christian perspective on the stock market? Or the real estate industry, or superannuation, or health insurance, or land use, or genetic modification, or ... whatever? In the absence of any solid teaching from the church on these matters, politically minded Christians have understandably turned to the nearest and most amenable secular ideology.

Christians – whether organisations, or high profile individuals, or just Joe Blow in the pew – have too easily become trapped in the same tired old debates between socialist and capitalist, between conservative and progressive, and between environmentalist and rural producer. None of these debates offers a clear view of the problem, and none offers hope of renewal and restoration. Even where Christians have felt moved to speak or act on an issue of injustice, they frequently lack anything distinctively Christian to say. In this way, Christian activism has largely been subsumed

within the broader current of progressive liberalism – another ‘ism’ with its own raft of problems.¹²

It is worth stressing what I am *not* saying about working for change. I am certainly *not* saying that the ongoing efforts of organisations and movements working for change are futile or irrelevant. I do wish there could be a substantial change of culture within this sector, but for the moment it is standing in the breach, and for that we should be thankful. I am *not* saying that God’s work in the world cannot be advanced by advocacy and campaigning, even through secular agencies. We should not be too presumptuous about our understanding of how or where God’s Spirit moves in this world. And I am *not* saying that Christians with a concern for mission in the world should not pursue employment in the advocacy sector.¹³ In so far as it can furnish a living, it is a worthy form of tent-making. In so far as the advocacy sector is really just part of the world, it too is in need of salt and leaven. But I *am* saying that Christians engaged in such work should be aware of its limitations – in itself it does not equate to the Christian mission in this world. It is not enough.

So what else is needed? What is needed is for the church to reclaim the calling it was given from the beginning.

Hearts & Minds

One difficulty faced by the church today is that there is no longer any common understanding in our society of what is good and right. In earlier times, it had been possible for the church to recall citizens and government back to a generally agreed moral standard. But for a few centuries now, the church has effectively vacated the public sphere.¹⁴ We are now reaping the harvest of several hundred years in which human notions of *good* have become increasingly relative and self-referential.

This void of any common sense of what a good society is like (which equates to a void of common sense) has deepened the corruption of our

political process by cynicism and opportunism. I am fairly convinced that in Australia today, most attempts to enlist the major political parties in seeking serious long term change for the sake of what is good and right, are futile. Our political system is dominated by a parliamentary economic orthodoxy which is stronger and more unifying than most of the divisions of party and faction. What evidence is there that our leaders have recognised the seriousness of the ecological crisis facing our nation and our planet? What is there to demonstrate that they really understand the emptiness and unhappiness of a nation addicted to work and consumerism, and facing a series of social crises which are the manifestations of our sickness – suicide, family breakdown, epidemics of addictive behaviour, and an ever growing underclass.

We have evolved a system that could be referred to as *consumer democracy*, where political parties appeal to our basest instincts to try and get us to buy their ‘product’. They frequently change their ‘products’ to match shifts in the market. It is a system beholden to wealth and focussed on obtaining power. If we are seeking deep and lasting change, there is currently little consolation for us in the political process of our nation.

Herein lies a great challenge. For the last 1700 years, since the ‘Constantinian Settlement’, the main current of Christianity in the West has attempted to leaven the social order through its moral influence over the state. The merit of this in various ages and places is a matter of historical debate; what is clear is that the time for this has passed. Firstly, this is because the church is simply no longer in a position to exercise this influence. But more importantly, in a nation which is ostensibly a democracy – and in a real way our government is representative of our society – we cannot really hope for things to change without a change in the hearts and minds of the citizens who make and shape this commonwealth.

For me, coming to this position a number of years ago required a serious revision of my political aspirations, and of my hopes of being an agent for change. So many hopes, goals and visions (and delusions of grandeur)

were stripped away from me, that I was forced to seriously examine what I was left with. What I found, to my surprise, was that I had been brought back to the essential mission of the church on earth, Christ’s great commission to his followers.

Over time a door was unlocked in my mind, and I was drawn back to a desert, a temple pinnacle and a mountaintop. There the one who was called Messiah, the one whose very vocation was to change everything, rejected the most basic forms of earthly power, even though they were offered as the means for the fulfilment of his mission on earth (Matthew 4:1-11).

Instead he chose to walk a path immersed in the throng of humanity and obscure to the powers and structures of the day.

His Kingdom came in the form of an invitation, overpowering no one, and was to be built only by those who freely and thankfully gave over heart and mind to the task. He taught, he demonstrated, he prayed, he forged together, and everything he spoke of he did himself. When his time came to depart, he left a commission framed in awesome words: ‘*As the Father sent me, so I send you.*’ (John 20:21, NRSV)



There is only one way in which Christian mission in the world can be undertaken, and that is to win hearts and minds over to the way of love – love of God, love of neighbour, and love of creation. There is no stick big enough, no system good enough, or clever enough, or even just enough, to bring in the Kingdom of God. The good way, the road to life, can only be walked by free wills. This is the whole meaning and purpose of the action of God in the person of Christ. For God so loved the world that he renounced the very power of being God to show that only love counts for anything.

Christians throughout history, the world over, have seen the pain of the world and been moved to work for change, and what awesome forces

this has set in motion! At the same time, though, in the midst of the struggle and toil, we have too often lost sight of this first condition which God places upon himself. Too often the church has taken on the Great Commission – which is in essence a great co-mission – without committing to heart the principles upon which Christ’s mission was founded, struggling with Satan in the wilderness all those years ago.

The central task for Christians looking for social, political and economic change, then, is to win hearts and minds over to a different standard. How do we do this? The task entrusted to us is three-fold. Firstly, it is to live a different way - to reject the lies, to embody what is right and good, to show that there is an alternative. We can seek no change in society that we do not first own for ourselves. Secondly, it is to build communities of difference that will restore connections between people, and between people and the land. Where governments and corporations fail to institute a more responsible social order, we must begin to do so ourselves. Thirdly, it is to take the message abroad - to question the spin, to ask what is really good, and to point to hope. We are called to give an account for our personal and communal lives to a public that will inevitably question our difference.

In other words, the three most political acts we can undertake today are to seek holiness, to build the church and to evangelise. I say this knowing full well that these are widely considered as impediments to Christian political consciousness. Of course, they frequently have been; but that is only when they have not been fully understood.

Seeking Holiness

It seems almost absurd that anyone could suggest seeking holiness as a matter of political consequence. Holiness is a word that has been debased by generations of self-righteous moralism and superficial piety. But it is a foundational word of the Christian faith, and it needs to be reclaimed.

To properly understand the idea of holiness we must look at the family of words to which it belongs. The root of the word ‘holy’ is related to such words as ‘health’, ‘heal’ and ‘hale’. But perhaps more than any other word, the meaning of ‘holy’ is related to the word ‘whole’.¹⁵ While we have tended to consider holiness as the opposite of worldliness – an idea of lofty spiritual concern (and by that we mean irrelevant) – it is really an idea which cannot be understood apart from the totality of our experience in this world. To seek *holiness* is to seek a *wholeness of living*: an integration and unity of our spiritual and material lives, a wellness of mind, body and spirit, a way of living in right relationship with other humans, with Creation, and with God. Holiness must therefore be concerned with how we use resources, with our economic relationship to others, and with our exercise of political power.

It is the vocation of all Christians to seek after holiness. This is most concisely stated by Paul at the beginning of Romans 12:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ...
(Romans 12:1-2, NSRV)

For Paul, there is an essential link between holiness and non-conformity. The writer of Hebrews talks of this same idea in different language. Here, the search for wholeness is described as a journey of faith akin to that of Abraham and other biblical heroes. Like Abraham, it requires forsaking the place that we know; as with Abraham, this journey is impelled by a yearning for something truer - *a homeland*.

Although they had not received the things promised, yet they had seen them far ahead and welcomed them, and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens without fixed abode on earth. Those who speak in that way show that they are looking for a country of their own. If their thoughts had been with the country they had left, they could have found opportunity to return. Instead, we find them longing for a better country ... (Hebrews 11:13-16, REB)

We should be troubled by this because it is effectively a call to dis-location; a call to to never feel at home in the present system. It is also a call for our



lives to anticipate something different, a ‘better country’. Nowhere is the imperative to depart from ‘the system’ more powerfully and urgently expressed than in Revelation 18. Here the system of the world (then the Roman Imperial system) is given a name, Babylon - the archetypal centre of power, oppression and exploitation:¹⁶

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!
It has become a dwelling place of demons,
a haunt of every foul spirit ...
Come out of her, my people,
so that you do not take part in her sins,
and so that you do not share in her plagues;
for her sins are heaped as high as heaven ...
(Revelation 18:1-5, NRSV)

The call to seek holiness - to flee Babylon, to conform no longer, or to live as strangers and aliens in the land - is not an arbitrary requirement of obedience on the part of God (although it certainly is a call to obedience). It is not intended as something we must suffer on earth, while awaiting our reward in heaven. The whole point of scripture is that this is where we will find

life, and find it in abundance. But more than this, the movement towards restoring the wholeness of our lives (or put the other way around, healing the brokenness of our lives) is also the vehicle for our mission in this world.

It should be clear to us, then, that holiness necessarily means *difference*. It is instructive that when Paul exhorts us to ‘conform no longer to the present pattern of the world’ (REB), what he sees as critical is what we do with our bodies, and not our piety or our spiritual observances. Indeed, for Paul, the re-ordering of our physical and material lives (our bodies) prefigures the radical overhaul of our mental frameworks, which he also sees as essential in the move towards holiness. In the political sense then, holiness is not so much concerned with the abstractions of political ideology, it is concerned with what we do each day with our lives.

What really matters – desperately, urgently – is the *everyday politics* of the people of God. This idea of everyday politics implies that the actions of our everyday lives – work, consumption, recreation – all express a view of life (whether it is consciously articulated or not), and that such a view is inherently political. This is well demonstrated by the root meanings of the words ‘economics’ and ‘politics’. Economics, a word that we usually associate with Treasurers and Gross Domestic Products, derives from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which simply means ‘the affairs of the house’ (oikos). It recognises that the household is society’s basic unit of decision-making about production, consumption and the distribution of resources. Likewise, politics derives from the Greek word *polis*, the city, and thus relates simply to the everyday affairs of city and neighbourhood.

We would do well to recapture these essential meanings of economics and politics. The more we remove them to increasing levels of abstraction, the more we can fool ourselves that they are not our problem. Globalisation thrives on mystification; it has too conveniently been identified as an issue to be addressed by International Monetary Funds and World Trade Organisations, when it is really an issue which we make choices about every day.

Moving towards holiness will always be political, in that it will always be a movement away from the social and economic norms of our times. Our lives, not only our words, must expose lies. It is a lie that we must always have growing material wealth. It is a lie that we have no choice but to

compete on the basis of self-interest. It is a lie that clever investments can bring us peace of mind, security or fulfilment. It is a lie that our money always has to be ‘working for us’. It is a lie that we do not have enough to share with the dispossessed, the displaced and the unfortunate. It is a lie that giving our children everything is good for them. It is a lie that we can despoil the resources of nature without paying a very high price. It is a lie that our personal choices about money, goods and employment do not affect others. Whether or not we begin to live in ways that challenge these lies is the surest test of what we really believe.

If there is no discernible difference between the everyday lives of Christians and those of most others, then we are not fulfilling our vocation. We are called to be different not only for our own benefit; in the words of Jesus we are meant to be like light and salt and leaven to the rest of the world. Our relationship to the rest of the world is to be part of the whole, yet somehow distinctive, producing benefit for the whole.

To live differently really means we must *live well* and *live responsibly*. This means we need to think about the consequences of all our actions as workers, as consumers, as citizens, as parents and as neighbours. We need to consider how our actions will affect other people, and how they will affect Creation. It means considering what things in life are really *good*, and what things are offered to us as imitations of good. It means thinking hard about the many and diverse implications of how we live, and this needs to be the work of the rest of our lives. Below is a broad set of questions which should be central to this process:

- (i) *Re-thinking work and money* – Does our work build or strengthen community? Does our work serve others or does it serve our career? Does it involve routine exploitation of people or nature? How much income do we need? Can we justify the market value of our labour compared to the different labour of others? Who do my financial investments serve – corporations and myself, or the community and those in need?

- (ii) *Re-thinking time* – How is our time divided between earning income, caring for our families, serving our communities, seeking God, and rest? Is there enough time and energy in our lives to provide hospitality to the forgotten and the excluded? How do we cope with time alone, without distraction or busyness?
- (iii) *Re-thinking consumption* – Do our unprecedented levels of consumption really bring us satisfaction? How much of what we consider to be ‘our needs’ are shaped by consumer culture? Do we know where the products we consume come from, or how humans were treated in their production, or what impact their production had on nature? Can we obtain essential products (especially food and energy) from more local, ethical and environmentally sustainable sources? Can we live with less?
- (iv) *Re-thinking recreation* – How much of our recreation and entertainment involves consumption of a product, or is dependent upon and shaped by technology producers and mass media? Does our recreation bring us joy and satisfaction (does it re-create us), or does it merely distract us from worry or boredom? Does our recreation strengthen bonds of family, friendship and community, or does it actually represent an assertion of self (‘my needs’)?
- (v) *Re-thinking family & community* – Do we share our spiritual life with others (praying, worshipping, reading the Bible)? Do we seek the input of others in making important life decisions? What resources can we share in circles beyond our immediate family? Are our communities hospitable to those who are marginalised, difficult or different? What does sexual responsibility mean in relation to family and community?

If we are to hold a sense of responsibility for the world around us, then it is imperative that we live responsibly. If we are not prepared to change our own lives for the sake of peace, justice and community, how can we hope that others might? How can we expect that professional politicians (of all people) will make responsible choices that we have not yet made

ourselves? Moreover, we do not have time to wait for someone else to lead us – the global crises of human suffering and of ecological decline demand that we act now!

Building the Church

If it is the vocation of Christians to live differently, it also our vocation to live differently together. Indeed, the task of living differently – certainly the task of living well - cannot be accomplished alone, because a central criterion of our difference should be that we do not live merely as individuals, but rather that we live with and for others. This is the meaning of the church (*ekklesia* – literally ‘the gathering’) – a gathering of believers whose very functioning is principally described in scripture by words such as Body and Family. These are more than religious terms; they describe the mutual dependence, the care, the intimacy and the responsibility that are essential to the nature of the proper functioning Body of Christ. A body functioning in these ways, focussed around wholeness of living, is inevitably also a *Body Politic*. But it is clear that we are a very long way from this today.

It is now well accepted that we are living in a post-Christian era. This is variously lamented, celebrated or fretted about, depending on which nook of the church you might occupy. The demise of Christendom is generally seen as a recent fact, but actually it has been a long time coming. Visser ‘T Hooft, an ecumenist and leader in the European Student Christian Movement, saw this with remarkable clarity as early as the mid-1930s:

What is the Christian task at this crucial moment? In the very first place it is necessary that Christians understand the new position, which is completely different from the old one. They must realise that they can no longer count on the momentum of the old tradition, that they are no longer going to be treated as the honoured representatives of the main current of culture, or, to put it quite shortly, that they will be less and less at home in the West. The West is again becoming for them what the Roman world was for the early Christians: a world whose presuppositions contradict their faith, *a world which is not only secretly but quite openly indifferent or even hostile to their essential convictions*.¹⁷

Despite such early warnings, the church is only just coming to terms with this realisation, and this is one reason the church in Australia is in a parlous state. While the numbers of Pentecostals seem to be growing (although probably not as much as they claim), the Catholics are really only holding their ground, and the mainstream Protestant denominations are generally in decline, some of them haemorrhaging their membership at an alarming rate.

It should not surprise us that the church is in crisis. For several centuries now the church has made too little distinction between its own gospel and the social norms that underpin ‘the West’. Only a minority within the church perceived any need for difference. But now that the crutch of cultural sanction has been removed, it has become apparent that much of the church was leaning more upon the values that embody ‘the West’ – individualism, modernism, capitalism – than it was upon any set of values which were distinctively its own. Hence it is falling over.

Therefore, the great task before believers today is to rebuild the church as a *community of difference*, a body of people who clearly and unequivocally stand for another way, a better way. In this respect, it is not so much the public position that the church adopts on matters of society and politics that is important. What matters is the actual form of society and politics that the church *embodies*, which is its primary witness. Stanley Hauerwas, the Anabaptist theologian, once wrote: ‘The church does not have a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy’.¹⁸ Christians cannot expect the government to lead us to a better country; it is our role to begin the new society now, in the midst of the old. That is what the church is: the firstfruits of things to come.

That the church’s primary calling is to ‘em-body’ good news to the world is most fully articulated by its designation in the New Testament as the Body of Christ. When the Apostle Paul talked of the Body of Christ, he was not just using the term metaphorically, as we so naturally tend to do. Rather, Paul was attempting to convey the enormity of the task entrusted

to the followers of Christ, which is nothing less than the mission of Christ himself. This means that the church is to be the physical manifestation – the continuing incarnation – of God’s presence with humanity. The Christian revelation asserts that God’s communication with humanity is *never* abstract – the Word *always* becomes flesh. Thus the task of the church is not just to speak a message but to *live* a message, to shape it into the form of a body and to actually be the Body of Christ, which is the Word of God made flesh in this world.

That this Body is made up of many members, is itself illustrative of the nature of God and the nature of the kingdom to which he calls us. Jesus’ awesome prayer on the night of his death points to this:

May they all be one; as you Father are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one...
(John 17:21-23, NRSV)

It is critical to note that this unity with God envisioned in the Gospel of John, unimaginable to us, is not a product of the cohesiveness of any earthly institution we might call the church. It is only as we grow in Christ and Christ in us that we can grow towards any real unity. It is only as we move vertically toward God that we move horizontally closer together - the distances between us become less in the presence of God. It is the movement of its members towards God that is the means of the church’s embodiment of Christ, and not some divine right or privilege conferred upon a nominated institution or a select group of people.

The importance and the function of *all members* of the church are taken up repeatedly by Paul. ‘The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor can the head say to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’’ (1 Corinthians 12:21). Unfortunately, when it has come to the church’s involvement in political or social issues, this is often the very thing which ‘the head’ has said to ‘the feet’. Historically, this has largely been a failure of institutionalism within the church. Religious specialisation (priests, pastors and preachers), and more recently professional specialisation

(lawyers, academics, advocates and social workers) have tended to displace, rather than nurture, the essential missionary function of the laity, and the laity has too often accepted this with a sigh of relief. However, the church has no right outsourcing its political message to specialists, because the communities of the church *are its message*. Where the message and the people have become disconnected the voice of the church is hollow and literally disembodied.



This is not an argument against the institutional church or the need for priests, pastors, scholars and whatnot. It is an argument against the profound inadequacy of the present structure of things. The church in Australia is in desperate need of the breath of renewal. It is in need of re-building and the re-building will not come from the top – perhaps it cannot come from the top. Perhaps some things must be pulled down first. And this is where we must expand our view and look to all members of the Body of Christ. The building of the church must be from the ground up.

So what is it exactly that must be built? The language of building is very useful here because the *building up* of each of its members is central to the task of the church.

He [Christ] is the head and on him the whole body depends. Bonded and held together by every constituent joint, the whole frame grows through the proper functioning of each part, and builds itself up in love.
(Ephesians 4:16-17, REB)

To be ‘built up’ means to be restored into that wholeness of living which marks the Body of Christ as ‘holy’, and this requires each member finding its ‘proper functioning’. The church is holy only in so far as it is an expression of people seeking to live well, to live for one another, and to live in service of the world. This means a sharing of our spiritual lives, our material lives and our decision-making. Insofar as wholeness of living requires a reorientation of the social and economic frameworks of our

lives, this is something that can only be achieved inter-dependently, with the support and the wisdom of others.

If the vocation of the church is to build up its members in wholeness, then that means the church is called to be a community of healing. Perhaps one of the defining marks of the Body of Christ – that is, a body which is animated by the Spirit of Christ – is its struggle to hold and to heal brokenness. ‘It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick.’ There is no doubt that this should be for all those who are sick – both the poor and the poor in spirit – but neither can we ignore the particular priority of Christ for those who are the least. Perhaps the church is never more holy than when it is seeking to honour and restore the human dignity of the outcast, the marginalised, the crushed and the tormented. If there was ever a community that needed building, it is one such as this.

Building the church also means building a *community of resistance*. In the church, the system of the world – in this case, the dominant political and economic ideologies – should be contested. Wherever the church has been healthy it has been viewed with alarm by ruling elites - they have recognised it as a force which stands in opposition to their own political interests. And their fear lies in the fact that a healthy church has always been in the true sense a popular force – a force of the people and not of elites. By simply being itself, the church is called to be a visible presence of dissent in the face of the powers.

It is generally understood that the church is to be a place of spiritual formation. But in the Christian faith - where there is no division between body and spirit, public and private - the natural corollary of this is that the church must also be a place of political formation. And here is something which certainly needs rebuilding. A thousand years ago, the Christian church



had developed teaching on most issues of society, economics and politics. Not only did the church have an opinion on the price of carrots, but also on how the price of carrots was set, and it knew precisely why this was a matter of religious and biblical concern.

Whatever the failings of the Mediaeval Church, it generally understood that religious doctrine flows logically and seamlessly into economic doctrine. We have lost this sense. Indeed the church is bound to lack confidence about how faith speaks into the social and political complexities of the present world when it lacks confidence about the basic *religious* affirmations of the faith. Clearly there is much work to be done in recovering essential understandings of Christianity; only from this basis can we begin to re-discover the comprehensiveness of Christian concern for the world. Eventually we need to recover an opinion on the price of carrots.

The building of the church, then, is necessarily the building of a political movement. However it should be a movement whose politics are not like the politics of other movements. The politics of this movement should be hard to categorise; it should not represent a single cause or interest, but should be concerned with everything. It should not be a movement that is wedded to any particular policies or political theory; its chief concern should be the root causes of problems, and therefore political theory and policy positions should be seen only as provisional tools. It is critical that this movement should not lapse into the opposing camps of ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’, which is a stalemated debate between two equally stubborn forms of ignorance.

Most importantly, the fullest expression of this movement’s politics cannot be found in the effective organisation of its institutions or the prominence of its leaders. For too long the political voice of the church has equated to that of a few eloquent and politically-minded leaders. But there is little to be gained from a religious elite speaking of justice when the majority of their constituency are primarily committed to rising incomes and falling taxes. It is a hollow façade and our politicians know it. The politics of

the church must begin with the life of its body. If the public voice of our leaders is to have integrity then that voice needs to be a reflection of real things to which the Christian community bears witness. The extent of the disconnection between Christian political voices and the witness of the everyday lives of Christians is the precise extent of our irrelevance in society and politics.¹⁹

Making Disciples

The church is not only to be the beginning of a better country, it is to be a community of sending out and bringing in. For the church does not exist only for itself and those who are its members, but for all of humanity. And it is for this reason that the followers of Jesus are given a commission to go into all the world, making disciples, baptising, and teaching the commands of Christ (Matt 28:19-20). This is what we call evangelism, and it is one of the most important tasks of Christian discipleship.

What an impasse we have come to then, where evangelism has become an idea that is barren ground for the church. In the parts of the church that still claim a concern for evangelism, it is often imposed as an obligation that ends up trivialising belief and selling trite religious formulas. In other parts of the church it is a word that provokes much embarrassment, or even open hostility – it is something to be decried, a past that is to be forgotten.

However, evangelism describes what Christianity *is* and what it is *for*. The word derives directly from the Greek *evangelion*, which simply means good news (from which comes our word ‘gospel’). The whole point of the Christian faith is that we have received good news and that we bring good news. Perhaps our present difficulty with evangelism is that we are generally not very clear about what this good news actually is.

One thing that is clearly evident in the church in Australia is that the good news has been sundered. There are those who are concerned with the

‘spiritual’ priority for saving souls, and there are those concerned with the ‘political’ priority for social justice; it is rare that the two come together. What this has meant on one side is a message of salvation which can seem superficial, credulous and even spiritually dishonest, and which offers very little guidance on how we live in this world. On the other side it has meant a message of social justice which can also seem superficial (in its understanding of causes and remedies), unimaginative, prone to becoming lost in games of power politics, and unable to come to terms with the human condition.

The distinction between the ‘spiritual’ witness of Christianity and the ‘political’ witness of Christianity is false. The good news of Christ is that human life can be (is being, will be) restored to the wholeness – the connection of the life of the body and the spirit - for which it was originally intended. The news of our need for justice has been separated from the news of our need for God, and until the news is made whole, it will not be fully good. Christianity is inherently a faith that reaches out, and more than anything it is a faith that reaches out to suffering. But if Christians seek to reach out to a world in distress without taking seriously its spiritual need, we divorce body and spirit and we fail in compassion. Human injustice and depredation of nature are fundamentally consequences of alienation from God. If we are interested in the root causes of our social and political malaise, we must be interested in restoring people to God.

But where are we to start? It needs to be stated from the outset that the Body of Christ, in its day to day living, is both the starting point and the end point of evangelism, and it should be our greatest evangelical resource. It has already been stated above that the vocation of the church is to embody good news. It should be no surprise, then, that the process of effective evangelism is often closely related to the gathered life. Coming to faith often begins with an interest in the gatherings of Christians before it leads to any intentional commitment to the faith. Moreover, the Christian gathering, when it is healthy, offers a place for exploring the really big issues of life with a depth that can be found in few other places. This is as it should be, for the ultimate end of evangelism is to draw people into

the Body of Christ – not because Christians are concerned with numbers, but because by definition the Body of Christ is the loving communion of humanity and God.

One of the greatest (and most evangelical) services which Christians can render our desperately unhappy society is to live well, and to show people that it is possible to live well. This means living by a logic which is different to that promoted by governments, advertising, the media and academic elites. In the words of Cardinal Suhard, the founder of the worker-priest movement in France, ‘The vocation of the Christian does not consist in engaging in propaganda, nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one’s life would not make sense if God did not exist.’ By living well we will demonstrate two things. Firstly, we will highlight the extent to which the dictates of mainstream culture are tyrannous, and that conformity to them is really a dehumanising (if materially comfortable) form of slavery. Secondly, we will show that such a slavery does not have to be submitted to - that the Red Sea can be crossed to liberation. It is through our difference and our defiance that others may begin to see new possibilities, and begin to question the basis of their own captivity.

Another great evangelical task we can undertake is to ask questions. Many of the presuppositions of our society and economy do not make sense, but it is rare that anyone takes the time to seriously interrogate them. Christians must continually ask the important questions which are otherwise being forgotten. Like the prophet Isaiah, we must probe our culture’s pre-occupations:

Why do you spend your money
for that which is not bread,
and your labour
for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me,
and eat what is good.
(Isaiah 55:2, NRSV)

In a world ruled by perpetuating confusion, mis-information and distraction, getting people to *stop and think* is the beginning of evangelism.

If we are going to proclaim good news responsibly, we must acknowledge that so many of our ‘God words’ have become almost meaningless in our culture. Words such as sin, salvation, redemption, holiness, righteousness and glory, have become laden with baggage and unladen of meaning. This places us in an extremely difficult position. We cannot abandon these words; they express the heart of what our gospel means. Nevertheless, the task of restoring meaning to such words is immense, and one that can only be accomplished gradually.

Therefore, the *use of words* is an evangelical discipline in which we need much training. I do not mean that Christians need to be orators or writers; I mean that we need to be careful about how we speak. We need to carefully re-invest our words with meaning, which means first understanding them ourselves. Essentially, it means speaking honestly. Our language, like our lives, should be different; but it must be centred around communication. Our words must not be used to judge, or to hide our own confusion. We would do well to remember Paul’s exhortation to the church at Colossae:

Be wise in your dealings with outsiders,
but use your opportunities to the full. Let
your words always be gracious, never
insipid; learn best how to respond to each
person you meet.
(Colossians 4:5-6, REB)



Why is evangelism essential to the social and political witness of Christianity? Because real change will come only through a deep shift in the hearts and minds of people, so that they become willing to live for

something greater than themselves. Such a change can come only through a fundamental reorientation of trust. The thing to which we ultimately entrust our lives and security is perhaps one of the simplest definitions of a god. Everyone, whether atheist, agnostic or believer, has a god. The lesson of the biblical story is that people continually invest this trust in things and in systems which they have constructed themselves – these are called idols. Today we have entrusted life and health to two great human constructs – the capitalist economic system and technological advancement – the greatest idols of the modern pantheon of gods. Like the Baals of the Old Testament, these idols can be tyrants, demanding the sacrifice of our children upon the altar of conformity and competition. People may not even like these gods; the point is that they see no other alternative.

It is not enough to see merit in a different way; if we are being asked to step away from all that we have been taught about success, security and happiness, we need to be able to entrust our lives to something else. Essentially we are being asked to change our whole way of living, to die so that we may find new life. We need to know that there is a God who guarantees our wellbeing through such a momentous journey. Faith in a God who is justice, who is mercy, who is love, is the only sure bedrock on which we can begin to live for a better country.

A Distinctive Voice

Let us return to our original question, ‘What is the responsibility of Christians in relation to the world of society and politics around us?’ So far I have endeavoured to stress that the age-old vocations of Christians – to seek holiness, to build the church and to evangelise – are the primary vehicles of our engagement with the world of society and politics. Far from being exercises in exclusivity and irrelevancy, these things resonate with political and economic consequence when they are properly understood and actively lived out. More than that, they are the foundations of a program of social reconstruction more radical than that conceived by any revolutionary.

In engaging this question I have purposely stayed well clear of the multitude of sophisticated theological and missiological discourses which offer clever new frameworks for Christian political action. I am not saying that some of these are not without merit, but my chief contention is that more than anything, we need to do old things well. Without a constant focus on the heart of Christ’s call to us, we are doomed to social and political impotence, and more seriously, we are doomed to spiritual decay.

Does this mean that there is no room for forms of Christian action which are ‘political’ in the conventional sense? Certainly not - but perhaps it does mean that some of us need to lay aside any direct focus on the political process for a season. We have lost so much of the basis of Christian engagement with the world that its recovery will require concentrated effort. If we are to speak, it is better to wait until we really have something to say.

Towards this end, I will conclude this essay by offering a three-point agenda for action. These suggestions are merely starting points - it could well take a decade (or more!) to move from points one to three. Moreover, this agenda assumes that seeking holiness, building the church and making disciples forms the real focus of our Christian mission. Without that basis, these suggestions would be pointless.

- (i) To begin to reclaim a corpus of Christian social teaching that can usefully instruct and inform life and action. This work must begin with the basic New Testament teachings about the work of God in Christ, inquiring into the full implications of what they mean for life in this world. It should proceed from there to the social teaching of the church through the ages, to discover examples of the real application of Christian belief to economics and politics. Finally, this work must seek to understand the real conditions of the political-economic system in which we live, and offer real possibilities to those seeking to live faithfully.

- (ii) To begin a long term work of Christian education which seeks to disseminate and nurture understanding of Christian social teaching. For the first phase of its life this should be an entirely grass roots work; it should have no direct goals and objectives in relation to the political process, which would only be a distraction. The starting place for this teaching should obviously be the church. However, it might not be long before those undertaking such work found groups outside the church that are ready and interested to hear.
- (iii) To begin to imagine new ways of organising and speaking politically. Such thinking would spring from the active life of Christian communities and their ongoing discoveries of faith. The mode and the language of political engagement would be different from the established political/activist orthodoxy – it would play by different rules and for different ends. Yet despite its difference, it would be fundamentally concerned with *communication* and *transformation*.

By returning to the heart of faith in Christ, the church will rediscover that it has a voice that is clear and distinctive and resonant with hope. Paul's prayer for the church should be ours today:

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
(Colossians 2:2-3, NRSV)

We need to rediscover that profound religious insight is the source of profound social and political insight. The world needs people who are able to work towards a vision which is far greater than themselves; people who are prepared to give their lives to actions which may yield only remote consequences - who, although they have not received the things promised, yet see them far



ahead and welcome them. And when we discover that our own longing and working for a better country is a faltering and feeble thing, we are able to trust that there is One who is committed to seeing the great work through from beginning to end.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Of course, much more useful than listing the woes would be to explore their causes. Unfortunately, while this is essential work, it cannot be attempted here.
- ² William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1943, p.16.
- ³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Signs Amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 2003, p.101.
- ⁴ cf. *ibid*, p.36.
- ⁵ cf. *ibid*, pp.35-54.
- ⁶ I have also long been on the fringe of campaigning and activism around a range of other issues, particularly those of peace, environment, worker's rights, and gambling.
- ⁷ The Make Poverty History campaign demonstrates some of these tendencies. While it has been reasonably successful in galvanising public sentiment (especially amongst the young) about suffering in the developing world, it has tended to trivialise the causes and remedies of this suffering. It has suggested that by simply increasing foreign aid to 0.7% of GDP, by making trade 'fair', and by remitting developing world debt, we can eradicate world poverty in this generation - a rather naive and ahistorical view of what causes poverty around the world. More to the point, Make Poverty History has achieved much of its appeal by tapping in to the very consumer culture which underpins the current economic order: *'Wristbands, t-shirts, wallpaper for mobiles and other products are playing a bigger part in campaigning and are attractive to new audiences. Catching consumer and online 'fads' early and using them in our campaigning could provide valuable campaigning opportunities. This is an effective way to mainstream an issue.'* (from a Make Poverty History Campaign Trends strategy document).
- ⁸ By 'technologism', I am referring to modern rationalist thought

exemplified in the claim that science can unravel the mysteries of life, combined with an overpowering hubris about the ability of technological advance to solve all of humanity's problems.

- ⁹ This is the metaphor from *Alice in Wonderland* so effectively employed by the iconic movie-hit, *The Matrix*, which painted a startlingly apocalyptic image of the 'system' which we live in. Ironically, the *The Matrix* was itself a highly successful product and servant of that system.
- ¹⁰ Nevertheless, the modern secular manifestations of environmentalism and social liberalism both owe much of their origins to Christian thinking and action.
- ¹¹ The classic study of this is R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Pelican, Harmondsworth, 1938.
- ¹² Of course, one of the great weaknesses of 'progressive' politics is that it is fatally wedded to the idea of progress, which evaluates history by a simple scale of past = bad, present = better, and future = good. It is highly condemnatory of 'ignorance', but dislikes the idea of a flawed human nature which is inherent in the concept of sin. The Christian version of this generally comes to understand 'the Kingdom of God' as a religious term for the process of human betterment that is the product of enlightened rationalism. For a fuller discussion of these themes, see Newbigin, *Signs amid the Rubble*, pp.3-55.
- ¹³ As someone who is employed as an 'advocacy coordinator' within an 'advocacy section' of a 'campaigning and advocacy' NGO, I have a vested interest in upholding the legitimacy of this occupation.
- ¹⁴ This is a trend that had its origins in the Reformation, but was really catapulted forward in the eighteenth century by that European intellectual revolution we call the Enlightenment.
- ¹⁵ Wendell Berry, 'The Body and the Earth' in *The Art of Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Shoemaker and Hoard, Washington, 2002, pp.98-99. This essay is also found in Berry's monograph, *The Unsettling of America*.
- ¹⁶ See W. Howard-Brook & A. Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Understanding*

Revelation Then and Now, Orbis, Maryknoll, 2000, for a useful discussion of the meaning packed into the use of 'Babylon' in Revelation.

- ¹⁷ V. 'T Hooft, *None Other Gods*, SCM Press, London, 1937, pp.106-107. My emphasis.
- ¹⁸ S. Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1989, p.43.
- ¹⁹ There are some impressive Christian policy platforms which demonstrate attempts to present a Christian political voice which is distinctively its own, and not the mimic of some other 'ism'. Jim Wallis' *God's Politics: A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America* (recently published in Australia with a foreword by Tim Costello) is one example. However, whatever the merit of *God's Politics* as a new policy vision, it still ultimately assumes that the primary Christian political responsibility is to influence the state, rather than to actually embody the new politics. The problem is that the church cannot really achieve a distinctive voice until it becomes a distinctive community.

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The Pioneer

(Fredrick McCubbin, 1904)

The images used in this booklet are all taken from Fredrick McCubbin's Australian masterpiece, *the Pioneer*. In this triptych, McCubbin tells an idealised story in which the new colony is advanced from humble beginnings (the dark forest) to a great civilisation (the city in the distance) through the vision and sacrifice of its founders; it is a secular myth of progress. However, the imagery chosen by McCubbin also allows *the Pioneer* to be re-imagined as a different story - not about building a nation, but about building, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one.'

'All these died in faith. Although they had not received the things promised, yet they had seen them far ahead and welcomed them ... that is why God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he has a city ready for them.'
(Hebrews 11:13,16)