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Words and the Word

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IN A PAPER delivered to the Bristol Theological Society in March 1974, the Bishop of Bristol began by recalling three occasions in his ministry when language seemed inadequate as a means of communication. He shows how in some ways language has become a bore, quoting Gerhard Ebeling's *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language*. We must attempt to communicate experience in freedom, by faith, leading to love. He then discussed the problem of theological re-formulation and the contribution of the late Bishop Ian Ramsey. In the final section, printed here, he queries some of the points made by Dr. Packer in his article in the Winter 1973 issue of *The Churchman*.

And so thirdly to the limits of language and the Franciscan genius for managing without it, or at any rate, without too much of it. First let me call in aid a distinguished predecessor (indeed I think one may modestly say the only really distinguished Bishop of Bristol—so far). In the Introduction to *the Analogy of Religion* Joseph Butler wrote: 'In questions of difficulty where more satisfactory evidence cannot be had, or is not seen; if the result of examination be, that there appears upon the whole, any . . . presumption on one side, and none on the other, or a greater presumption on one side, though in the lowest degree greater; even in matters of speculation; and, in point of prudence and of interest, to act upon that presumption or low probability, though it be so low as to leave the mind in very great doubt which is the truth. . . . Nay further, a reasonable man will think it concerns him to remark lower probabilities and presumptions than these; such as amount to no more than showing one side of a question to be as supposable or credible as the other: nay, such as but amount to much less even than this. For numberless instances might be mentioned respecting the common pursuits of life. (*Analogy*: Introduction: Section 4, pp. 2-3: *English Theological Library Edition*).

I find in Butler's recourse to the doctrine of 'probability' a great consolation in moments when it is clearly impossible to *demonstrate* something to one whom one longs desperately to convince. Instead of dithering, of continuing with the indefinite refining in 'matters of

speculation', Butler urges to recognise when enough is enough and it's time to jump in. Clearly this doctrine must be held firmly in a context as embracing as the *Analogy*. I rejoice whenever my eye falls upon it, in Southey's epitaph on Butler in Bristol Cathedral. 'It was reserved for him to develop the Analogy of Christianity to the constitution and course of Nature, and laying his strong foundations in the depth of that great argument, there to construct another and irrefragable proof, thus rendering Philosophy subservient to Faith.'

So let me now illustrate the limits of theological language *after* you have tried hard, the art of knowing when enough is enough, from an area where I have spent much time, the theological discussion of Christian unity. Indeed any librarian who has dusted the unread volumes of ecumenical reports may well reflect that the Faith and Order Movement is the last place in which to look for those who know when enough is enough.

The issue is sharpened for us in this country by the 'Talks about Talks' which will soon be raising the question of what form of Christian unity we are ready for in England. In that context a challenging recent article by Dr. Packer in *The Churchman* (Winter 1973) raised the question of the role of agreed confessions of faith in the process of church unity. Moving 'towards a confession for tomorrow's Church' Dr. Packer answers the question why such documents should be thought necessary or valuable thus. 'The answer lies in the contribution they make to the fulfilment of the church's four basic tasks—worshipping and witnessing, teaching and guarding the faith. These statements have, broadly speaking, a fourfold function, *doxological*, *declarative*, *didactic* and *disciplinary*. Their *doxological* function is to glorify God by setting forth his works of love and putting into words a responsive commitment. Their *declarative* function is to announce what the communities that espouse them stand for, and so to identify those communities as belonging to Christ's Church, the worldwide fellowship of faith. Their *didactic* function is to serve as a basis for instruction. Their *disciplinary* function is to establish the limits of belief within which each confessing body wishes to stay, and so to lay a foundation for whatever forms of doctrinal restriction or direction it may see fit to impose on its clerical and lay members.'

Now those four functions lead to very different kinds of documents. The 'doxological' is an aspect of liturgy and is a matter of ceaseless life and growth in the Christian community. Any given song need not try to cover the whole ground (e.g., the *Te Deum*) but it has to be within a generally agreed pattern of Christian truth if it is to endure. Surely the best test at this point is quite simply whether successive generations of Christians do in fact want to use those words in their praise of God.

The 'declarative' function has in historical practice been more often than not the badge of Christian division. The First Scots Confession of Faith, the Second Helvetic Confession of Faith, the Westminster

Confession of Faith, the Savoy Declaration, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Augsburg Confession—the very list reads to the roll of drums like the battle honours of the Christian Civil War. Even the earlier Patristic Creeds and Statements have a similar ring in as much as it was the Nestorians or the Monophysites who were being attacked, but in this aspect they belong rather to the fourth function.

The 'didactic' function is certainly best achieved by really frequent revision since the teaching of the young is always an activity in which there must be a delicate balance between inherited wisdom and its wording and the apprehensions of the present generation. There is a pendulum swing of emphasis and the fact that we live in a time when education is highly experimental has naturally undermined our inherited catechisms. But they will come back again all right in a variety of forms. The revision by the Roman Catholic Church in Holland is one way of doing it if it is intelligent adults you have in mind. But our generation has yet to make up its mind how it wishes to teach religion to children.

The 'disciplinary' function is the hardest to be happy about. On the whole I have not the slightest doubt that the church has departed furthest from the mind of Christ at all those moments in its history when it has been zealous to expel its dissident members. If Christ can still kiss the bloodless lips of the Grand Inquisitor, it is only because his compassion is infinite. And yet of course there is a dialectic here though a changing one. The legitimate function of such statements is primarily to be concrete. The Barmen Declaration defining the stand of the Confessing Church in Germany and the recent attempt of the combined churches in South Africa to state the theological basis of their opposition to apartheid are valiant attempts. They symbolise the indisputable fact that if you believe in truth you must also fight error. But the blasphemous cruelty which so often accompanies such an exercise is best avoided when the fight is specific, related to an identifiable time and place and does not profess to catch for ever in the net of doctrinal formulation the elusive character of truth.

Now here of course I recognise that I simply betray sympathy with one side rather than another in a dialectic continuous in the history of Christian thought. It is, I suppose, the tradition which has variously been described as liberal, broad church, as over against that which Dr. Mascall and Dr. Packer have in common which is (as we used to say about the denominations) more significant than that in which they disagree. But I believe that we shall be in very serious trouble with what I would claim for the fifth function of doctrinal statements, the *unitive*, unless we bear in mind the necessary limitations of language.

Dr. Bethune-Baker (that comforting 'Bath Bun' of an earlier generation of Cambridge liberal scholarship) recorded this reminder in his *Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine*. 'All attempts to explain the nature and relations of the Deity must largely depend on

metaphor, and no one metaphor can exhaust those relations. Each metaphor can only describe one aspect of the nature or being of the Deity, and the inferences which can be drawn from it have their limits when they conflict with the inferences which can be truly drawn from other metaphors describing other aspects. From one point of view Sonship is a true description of the inner relations of the Godhead: from another point of view the title Logos describes them best. Each metaphor must be limited by the other. The title Son may obviously imply later origin and a distinction amounting to ditheism. It is balanced by the other title Logos, which implies co-eternity and inseparable union. Neither title exhausts the relations. Neither may be pressed so far as to exclude the other.'

The character of a *unitive* statement is to be as brief as is compatible with saying something decisive. The early Christian affirmation 'Jesus is Lord' certainly served a purpose. The brief statement upon which first the Faith and Order Movement and then the World Council was founded 'A fellowship of churches which accept Our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour', later added the words 'according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit' at the request of the Lutherans who were not happy at the absence of the mentioning of scripture and the Orthodox who wanted an explicit trinitarian statement. The change occasioned a good deal of heart-searching. It was rightly pointed out that it was in danger of making the transition from what aimed at being a simple descriptive statement, sufficient for any given church to decide whether it wished to be associated with the Council or not, into the beginnings of a creed. What I would contend for, as over against those who wish for a full doctrinal statement as the prelude to church unity negotiation, is that the formula on which mutual acceptance is to be based should be as brief and as simple as possible, leaving it to the conscience of the church in its growing unity to decide upon the diverse kinds of statements which are needed for the other four functions. There will then obviously continue to be some sort of tension between those who want to use as few words as possible and those who want the maximum explicitness. But so long as neither party makes it a ground for excommunicating the other this is precisely the theological task of the church in any given generation. The standards to which, for example, the authorised teaching ministry of the church should conform, will not be the same as the catechism taught to its children. I believe that the Faith and Order Conference of Nottingham 1964 was right to suggest that in our generation the main theological task of doctrinal formulation will be more effectively discharged on the other side of the Act of Union rather than by rival statements competing with each other as the terms for union. [Earlier in the paper reference was made to a meeting with a Franciscan which engendered a deep feeling of unity despite the use of very few words.]

But it is time we came back to my Italian Franciscan. For I believe that behind this discussion of the role of formularies, lies a deeper question about the relationship between language and love. Language only leads where love is weak. Where love leads language follows in hymns of praise.

And so it is to my mind at this point that the church of our time must attend with gratitude to the charismatic movement. We all, and especially the academics, are aware of its dangers. Would that Ronald Knox were living still to write a large appendix to his *Enthusiasm*. But when all is done, whatever is said, the fact remains that again and again where our tired churches are being rejuvenated, where our rigidities are melting into spontaneity, where God's frozen people are melting into warm handshake and smile, there is a pristine freshness, as of the early church, a kind of dawn chorus. I speak thus cordially because I am becoming more convinced that the greatest tragedy of our age, following our demonstration that we were too weak to unite, would be to show that we are too cold to respond to this spontaneity. When a body is both weak and cold, the nearness of death can indeed be feared.

But God has promised that his church shall not die and he is faithful. He is offering us yet another chance to unite in his love, which is the only firm bond.

As I neared the end of preparing this paper, I decided to sub-title it 'Talking Trinitarianly' because I discerned in the pattern my thought had been taking at least a faint analogue with the Holy and Undivided Trinity.

(a) God the Creator-Father can alone re-vitalise our tired culture, re-creating a living relationship between man and his environment which was the paradisaical promise. The bored youth with whom we began is waiting to be caught up into a cosmic adventure which will bring him leaping from his armchair! Because God is Creator, Father Almighty, this planet is in good hands for repair and maintenance.

(b) God so loved the world that he gave his Son—and the paradigm of all Christian utterance is 'the Word became flesh'. There is the union, and the tension, between the eternal verity and the historical particularity. God the Son continually sustains his church's life in that electro-magnetic field in which the energy stored between the proton and the electron can release all the power we need.

(c) God the Holy Spirit carries us beyond the point where articulate speech is needed, though he is still the author of peace and not of confusion. In his warmth, we need fewer words.

It is only an analogy and not a neat scheme. It is one way of affirming that theologians, like other human beings, need the complementarity of varying insights. As we accept our responsibility to articulate that Mystery in which 'none is afore or after other: none is greater or less than another', we may discover that the way to talk sense is to talk trinitarianly.