

Hope for a Lost World

Fathers & Brethren and friends

I wish to address you today on the subject "Hope for a lost world".

We live in a society that has lost its way. I speak primarily of Scottish society, but because we live in a global village, there has been massive interaction with the rest of the world and with Western Europe and America in particular. That traffic has been two way. While in the past, several Scottish thinkers influenced the world, today we are more likely to be on the receiving end of such influence.

But I begin with "a Tale of Two Statues".

Within a stone's throw of where we meet today (I don't suggest anyone actually throws any stones!) there stand two statues that speak of two Scotlands, two windows on our past, two explanations of our present and two visions of our future.

A few steps to the east, in a prominent position in the centre of Edinburgh, outside the High Court on the Royal Mile, the recent statue of David Hume broods over the High Street, the massive form and classical pose speaking of the huge philosophical influence Hume has had on this land, and beyond, since the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

By contrast, a few steps to the north, now shut away from the public gaze in New College Quad (lest he frighten the children!) is the statue of John Knox which once stood in a much more prominent position on the Mound; its present position indicating that in the estimation of many of his fellow countrymen, Knox is relegated to an isolated religious interest, or at best an object of academic research.

Nonetheless, both these Scotsmen cast long shadows, not only over the subsequent history of Scotland to the present day, but also through the spread of their ideas to Europe and America and throughout the world. It is significant that when Roderick Graham, retired BBC producer, started to write popular (and highly acclaimed) biographies of significant Scottish figures, the first subject he chose was John Knox (*John Knox Democrat*) and the second, David Hume (*The Great Infidel: A Life of David Hume*).

Knox and Hume stand not only as the source figures of two of the greatest influences on Scotland – Evangelicalism and Enlightenment, but also as archetypal Scotsmen in themselves. It is no small tribute to the sculptors' art that their statues illustrate this. The Hume statue is sedentary, contemplative, lethargic, despondent even, while the Knox statue is erect, robust, energetic and visionary. These two character types run deep in the national psyche.

In addition, while John Hutchinson, who sculpted the Knox statue in 1895, has attempted to capture a realistic 16th century preacher who had been through the mill as a galley slave in French ships and during years of persecution, exile and turmoil,

Alexander Stoddart presents us with an idealised version of Hume as a classical philosopher (he might not have looked quite so impressive as a rotund figure in wig and breeches!)

However, it is not primarily with Scottish psychology or art that I am concerned, important no doubt though they are. What concerns me most is Scottish philosophy, or what is now known as worldview. And these two men represent radically different worldviews. Again the sculptures are helpful here.

Knox holds a Bible under his left arm, close to his heart, with his finger holding the place from which he is preaching. But it is his right arm that is so dramatic. It soars heavenwards from the shoulder. Unlike the modern public speaker, who has to contend with hushed studios and small screens where hand movements must be kept to a minimum, Knox had to command large crowds of thousands, in the open air or in the cavernous St Giles. But there is something more than a hint at his pulpit oratory. His arm with the outstretched hand is uplifting – it directs the attention to something higher than “the doings of men”. It lifts our minds to the source of all meaning, value and authority in the God who has communicated to us in the Bible.

By contrast, in Stoddart’s 1998 sculpture, Hume looks down to the earth and holds out a tablet for our attention – but the tablet is blank. God is silent. It is as if a new Moses has come down from the mountain and there is no news from heaven. We must derive our own meaning and values and authority from our own reason and from our own experience of nature.

So there we have them, the twin great influences on our nation, Knox and Hume, Jerusalem and Athens, faith and experience, the Evangel and the Enlightenment, neatly encapsulated in two powerful statues in the heart of our capital. And the history of more than the past century in Scotland has been hugely influenced by the decline of one and the ascendancy of the other.

A world that has lost its way

But what has all this to do with a world that has lost its way? And how can we say anyway that our society, that Scotland, that our world, has lost its way?

It is my conviction that we have indeed lost our way. Our society is riddled with confusion and anomalies:

- We bring up our children in the name of undisciplined self-expression and then are indignant when they express that freedom in drunken aggression on our streets.
- We do everything we can to discourage the teaching of Biblical Christianity in our schools, but fail to highlight that, throughout the last 100 years, the rise in youth crime and delinquency is in inverse proportion to the decline in attendance at Sunday School.
- In education, for decades we have been denigrating manual labour and practical skills and encouraging everyone to think that the only worthwhile career is the academic and the intellectual and the white collar. We are then surprised when we have a huge shortage of plumbers, joiners and other skilled tradesmen!

- Never has there been more sex education in schools and supposed “sexual freedom”, but as a nation we are suffering from apparently irreversible population decline, and soaring rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- We feed our youngsters on a diet of sex and violence in films and video games, and then are puzzled and shocked when some of the most vulnerable and disturbed of them commit appalling sexual and violent crimes. (And if what we see on screen doesn’t influence us, why do multinationals spend mega-bucks on TV advertising?)
- The whole concept of justice has been turned on its head. Instead of the criminal paying for his crime by restoring to the victim what has been lost, society (including the victim) pays for the crime by keeping the convicted person in prison from which he will emerge more schooled in crime, more embittered and more socially maladjusted than before.
- The sceptic Pontius Pilate asked, “What is truth?” and then condemned the innocent (in this connection isn’t it worrying that outside our High Court of Justiciary stands the statue of a sceptic about truth?) But we have propagated and imbibed this scepticism about truth; and then we are indignant when everyone from politicians to journalists to garage mechanics are guilty of what Winston Churchill called “terminological inexactitudes” (they lie through their teeth).
- As the great C S Lewis said, “We make geldings and bid them be fruitful”.
- We have lost our way spiritually. The Churches by and large have a message no different from, and just as confused as, that of the secular world. And everyone wonders why the church is in apparently terminal decline in Western Europe.
- In news reporting the media are obsessed with what is going to happen, not with what has happened, resulting in a focus on speculation and opinion masquerading as news and replacing a healthy emphasis on the facts.
- Our high priests of art subscribe to a postmodernism where there are no absolute values, but continue to make snobbish value judgements whereby a dead shark in a tank of formaldehyde is high art and Jack Vettriano’s rather bleak visions of human relationships are not.
- We bewail the huge rise in alcohol abuse, while failing to act on the indisputable evidence that over the past 100 years alcohol abuse has risen in direct proportion to alcohol consumption, and alcohol consumption has risen in inverse proportion to the falling price of alcohol (in real terms).
- We demonise anyone guilty of any form of the abuse of children, except if it’s performed before birth, when they can be destroyed or poisoned with impunity if their presence in the womb is inconvenient. And we are astonished and indignant if anyone has the temerity to suggest there might conceivably be any philosophical or moral connection between the prevalence of abortion and child abuse and neglect.
- We wish to be politically correct about the disabled (or is it now differently-abled?), but the Crown Prosecution Service at least has decided it’s OK to abort an unborn child with the eminently treatable disability of a cleft palate.
- We are in a state of moral confusion. On the 12th of March this year *New Scientist* carried an article highlighting the tension between the theory of evolution and the response to the tsunami disaster and giving the opinions of Robert Trivers of Rutgers University in the USA. Referring to altruistic

behaviour it says, *'In evolutionary terms it is a puzzle, because any organism that helps others at its own expense stands at an evolutionary disadvantage. So if many people really are true altruists, as it seems, why haven't greedier, self-seeking competitors wiped them out? One possibility, Trivers suggests, is that evolution actually is wiping these people out – it just hasn't finished the job yet... "The benefits we gained from reciprocal altruism in our evolutionary past lead us to behave with 'inappropriate' altruism ... Our brains misfire when presented with a situation to which we have not evolved a response."* If Trivers is right, then true altruism is what evolutionary biologists call a "maladaptation".' So are we doing the right thing to put our hands in our pockets to give to charity or not? Little wonder that a tabloid newspaper headlined the story "Why giving to charity is bad for you".

- The film *Trainspotting*, based on the book of the same name by Irvine Welsh begins with a voiceover from the character Mark Renton (expletives deleted!): *"Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a ... big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers ... choose DIY and wondering who ... you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing ... junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all ... nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish ... brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose a future. Choose life ... But why would I want to do a thing like that?"*
"I chose not to choose life. I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?"

Then at the end of the film, after he has given up heroin and then betrayed his friends in a drugs deal, he asks himself:

"So why did I do it? I could offer a million answers, all false. The truth is that I'm a bad person. But that's going to change – I'm going to change. This is the last of that sort of thing. Now I'm cleaning up, moving on, going straight and choosing life. I'm looking forward to it already. I'm going to be just like you. The job, the family, the big ... television, the washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electrical tin opener ... nine to five, good at golf, washing the car ... indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing the gutters, getting by, looking ahead, to the day you die."

We clearly are a society that has lost its way. But why are we in the state we're in?

It makes me laugh when I read or hear people pinning the blame for our devastated society on Calvinism or Presbyterianism or John Knox. The vast majority of them have never read one word of Calvin or Knox and wouldn't know a real Presbyterian if they fell over one! But it is ludicrous to blame Calvinism for everything from the teenage pregnancy rate to the state of the arts in Scotland today! Calvinism has not been a force in Scottish public life for well over a century. You cannot blame John Knox for the catastrophic state of our nation today.

So, if not Calvinism, what has been a force in public life over the past century? The Enlightenment, or we should say, the fruits of the Enlightenment. Changes in world view can be a long time in incubation and development before reaching full-blown influence. The changes that took place in philosophy in the eighteenth century came

to fruition in the twentieth. This was certainly the case in Britain and America where the worst effects of Enlightenment thinking were immediately averted by the Evangelical revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was not so in France, of course, where the Enlightenment produced the monster of the French Revolution. The scepticism of men like Hume and his contemporary and friend, Jean Jacques Rousseau, were undoubtedly contributory factors to the anarchy of that bloodbath which ended with the imposed dictatorship of Napoleon. Of course, we must recognise that that was not at all the intention of these men – particularly of Hume who was extremely urbane and civilised. Nonetheless it was the outcome of their thinking.

But it is the delayed reaction of their thinking on the modern and postmodern world that concerns us. Francis Schaeffer (who was dubbed “the missionary to the intellectuals” in the 1960s and 70s) said that “the utopian dream of the Enlightenment can be summed up by five words: reason, nature, happiness, progress and liberty.” That has a strangely modern ring to it! And it sounds very attractive. So what’s wrong with it? It will be helpful to consider Hume’s influence for a moment.

Hume sought to exclude everything that was not rational or empirical – passing the two great acid tests of reason and experience. What he claimed to be excluding was authority – simply accepting something was true because some “authority” said so. What in fact he was excluding was any idea of revelation – any idea that God speaks.

Roderick Graham (and others) are at pains to show that Hume was not an atheist. Strictly speaking, he was not an atheist in the strong sense of the word, because he did not come out and say “God does not exist”. What he did say is that miracles are so improbable as to be next to impossible, the soul is not immortal, suicide is permissible and we cannot know if God exists either by reason or experience. In other words his position was what has been called “strong agnosticism”. God may theoretically exist, but it is impossible for us to know. This was all part of his sustained attack on the Christian faith. He was always dismissive of those called in his day “high-flyers” and “fanatics”, who were of course the Evangelicals, the spiritual heirs of John Knox. In his scepticism, Hume wanted to replace God’s revelation with human reason and experience. It is possible that Hume was a deist – that he believed a Supreme Being existed, but his existence could be of no practical relevance to the human race. The proper study of man is man. It is a position that is better described as practical atheism. And his civilised scepticism is a position that remains extremely popular today.

Hume’s position may be summed up in three words. God is silent. And because God is silent, man has to work out his own philosophy, morals, social theories and science. Such has been the history of the West ever since. The trouble is that this scepticism has led to the confusion, to the moral chaos and the lostness of our society.

Scepticism leads to the devaluing of human life

The personal autonomy and moral liberty resulting from Hume’s scepticism appear very attractive. However, they lead more or less directly to our present moral chaos. One area where this has been apparent is in the overlap with science and particularly with the theory of evolution.

Hume anticipated the theory of evolution and he was not alone in this. Evolution was an idea that had been around for a long time before Darwin gave it some scientific respectability. Even Darwin's grandfather was an evolutionist. Hume suggested that the world could have reached its present form through innumerable revolutions which produced "at last some forms, whose parts and organs are so adjusted as to support the forms amidst a continued succession of matter" (*Dialogues*, Part 8, p.184). The idea preceded the search for evidence! This is because belief in evolution is fundamentally a philosophical choice. Some have been perfectly honest about this. The evolutionary biologist, D.M.S. Watson, said, "The theory of evolution is a theory universally accepted, not because it can be proved by logically coherent evidence to be true, but because the only alternative is special creation which is clearly incredible."

But what were the fruits of the replacement of belief in a loving Creator and Sustainer of the universe with the blind impersonal force of evolution? Several philosophers took up these ideas, ideas that led directly to the First and Second World Wars of the 20th century and the horrors of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. Englishman Herbert Spencer and the German Ernst Haeckel developed the idea of the evolution of the human race by the survival of the fittest into the area of sociology, leading to the development of eugenics and the idea that it was morally wrong not to eliminate the disabled and the incurable, and ultimately those judged racially inferior.

The Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky says in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "If there is no God, everything is permitted" or if we put it in a more Humean, sophisticated form, "If the soul is not immortal, if there is no Last Judgement, if God is silent, then man will decide what is permitted or not."

And in the following century man did decide what is permitted and what is not. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who died in 1900, declared that God is dead. And unlike other atheists he relentlessly followed that logic to its bitter end. He rejected utterly the last vestiges of Christian morality. People were free to create their own values. What mattered was the will to power. The ideal was the Superman who would impose his will on the weak and worthless.

All this led inevitably to the devaluing and the degradation of human life. The cry that God is dead was quickly followed by the realisation that man is dead. If the concept of God has no meaning, neither has the concept of humanity. We are only animals.

The late Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish survivor of the Holocaust wrote about his experiences in Auschwitz in the book *If This is a Man*. Of the 650 people on the train that took him to Auschwitz, only 3 returned to Italy after the war. His book opens with a poem of the same name:

*You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.*

*Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about...*

If God is silent, we have no basis for the value of a human being and the sanctity of her life, because it is God's Word that tells us that human beings are made in the image of God. The image of God in man tells us that no matter how poor or weak or even depraved an individual may become, she has an inherent dignity and worth. But if we are merely evolved animals, the individual has no inherent worth or dignity. Why should we be surprised when, after telling generations of children that they are animals, they start behaving like them? The truth is, of course, as Dostoyevsky pointed out long ago, it is a gross injustice to the beasts to speak of bestial cruelty – a tiger would never dream of nailing a man by his ears. Or, we might add, kneecapping him, or torturing and raping her, or selling heroin to him while laughing all the way to the bank. There is something hellish in the heart of man.

Similarly, if there is no Last Judgement, there is no ultimate sanction against the abuse of human power. Another survivor of the Holocaust tells of the day it dawned on him why the Nazis carried out their atrocities in full view of others. It was because they believed there would be no living witnesses to testify against them. They would never be called to account. If there were no Last Judgement, that would be true. If there is no God, everything is permitted.

But this loss of respect for human life did not of course die with Hitler and Stalin. It is alive and well and living in our postmodern world. Not only is it apparent in the casual disregard for unborn human life in the huge abortion rate, and the pressure towards euthanasia, but also in the street attitudes of so many young people of our pitiless housing schemes. Not only in self destruction through drugs, but also in aggressive violence. This is not just true in the fictional world of *Trainspotting*, but in reality. Let me mention just two young men we got to know through outreach. Gary was homeless and had a background of drug and alcohol abuse and violence. But he was attending church, beginning to respond to the gospel, beginning to get his life back together. In a street in Leith he intervened in a fight to save his brother. He was stabbed and bled to death on the street. Or Willie: he died alone in a flat from a combination of drugs and alcohol.

This is the postmodern world we are living in, formed by the scepticism of generations – a world that has lost its way, a world full of lost, confused and despairing people.

Scepticism leads to credulity

Hume rejected anything not proved by “reason” and “experience”. This had a profound effect on the development of science. Modern science, as is recognised by most serious historians of science, arose through the belief in one supreme Creator and Lawgiver. The early scientists like Galileo are often represented in popular thought as rebelling against Christianity. What they were in fact rejecting was the mistaken place given by the Roman Catholic Church to the philosophy of Aristotle as

an authority in all matters scientific. Galileo actually justified what he was doing from the Bible. The same is of course true of Newton and most of the other early scientists.

However, the Enlightenment influence of Hume and others on science led in a different direction. Whereas Newton and others believed that God revealed himself in two books – the Book of Scripture as well as the Book of Nature – nature came to be viewed as the only source of truth, and it was accessible only by human reasoning and observation. In the long run this has led to the reductionism (what Prof. Donald Mackay of Keele University called the ‘nothingbuttery’) of the modern world: human beings are *nothing but* biochemicals, their thoughts are *nothing but* the product of electrical impulses in their brains.

The pressure of this situation was increasingly felt. Francis Schaeffer pictured it as being forced below a line of despair. Below the line were the rational laws of science, but beyond it, out of reach, were meaning and freedom and love and all that makes human life worthwhile. This led to the desire for what Schaeffer called an upper storey leap or experience, trying to find meaning in the irrational or even the absurd. Thus were existentialism and postmodernism born. Schaeffer’s friend, Hans Rookmaaker (Professor of Art History at the Free University of Amsterdam) called this “jumping out of the box”, the box of rationalistic science that could not satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, the materialistic science that leads us down a destructive *cul de sac*.

Not only has this rejection of the rational resulted in the chaotic lifestyles of many young (and not so young) people, but also in an increasing credulity. It was the Catholic writer G K Chesterton, I believe, who said (or if not, he should have said it): “When men cease to believe in God, they do not believe in nothing; they believe in anything!” And of course that is what we see. Once you have lost rationality and revelation, anything becomes believable. Truth and evidence are boring. If it chimes with your preconceptions and your desires it must be right. A prime example of this is the *Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, soon to appear as a film. The premise on which the book is based is that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and that their family is the Holy Grail. The ideas on which the story is based have been around for years (for instance, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, 1982), and have been refuted by historians. It is good fiction, and that is all it is – fiction. But it is presented and received as so much more – as reality. And because it chimes with contemporary new age feminism it is instantly believable for many.

In the postmodern world, people receive their ideas through stories, whether in television soaps, or films, or books, or songs. The amazing success of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* testify to the present openness to good stories. But the problem is that people have no categories by which to judge the ultimate truth or reality of these stories. One is as good as another – only differing in technical brilliance. And according to postmodern deconstructionism it is not the author who determines the meaning of the story but the reader, the viewer, the listener. However, in the new openness to the power of stories there is an opportunity for the Christian Church (a thought I will return to later).

Scepticism leads to despair

Scepticism also leads to despair. I already mentioned Irvine Welsh. Dr Willy Maley, lecturer at the University of Glasgow's Department of English Literature comments on Welsh: "Looking at life through schemie windows, with twenty storey vision, Welsh sees the world with a colder eye than the old Scottish school of radicals, and he manages to be dispassionate, even as his characters burn with a fierce indignation. Prolific and provocative, Irvine Welsh has left his imprint on the postmodern Scottish psyche. He has been called 'the poet laureate of the chemical generation.'" But it is a bleak, despairing vision of a world populated by hopeless, selfish, degraded human beings.

Douglas Coupland, who coined the term 'Generation X' as the title of his first book, describes the alienation of this generation in *Shampoo Planet* – "I think I know a person, then I discover I only knew a cartoon version, unknowable and *just as lost* as I am, and equally unable to remember that every soul in the world is hurting, not just themselves."

One of the most influential figures in music in recent times has been Kurt Cobain of Nirvana. His lyrics spoke of the boredom and despair of a generation. The following quotes are from the album *Nevermind*:

*I found it hard, it's hard to find
Oh well, whatever, nevermind* (Smells like Teen Spirit)

*I love myself better than you
I know it's wrong so what should I do?* (On a Plain)

Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails wrote the song *Hurt*:

*i hurt myself today
to see if i still feel
i focus on the pain
the only thing that's real
the needle tears a hole
the old familiar sting
try to kill it all away
but i remember everything
what have i become?
my sweetest friend
everyone i know
goes away in the end
you could have it all
my empire of dirt
i will let you down
i will make you hurt*

*if i could start again
a million miles away
i would keep myself
i would find a way*

So you see it is not exaggerating to speak of a world that has lost its way, and of individual people who are lost. And lost most of all because they think there are only two possible ways, neither of which satisfy. Irvine Welsh's dichotomy of chaotic, nihilistic, drug fuelled rebellion on the one hand, or mild conformism to bourgeois materialistic values on the other, accurately reflects the options as many see them. And the materialistic option is no more fulfilling than the rebellion.

The tennis player Boris Becker illustrates the emptiness of materialism and fame. He came close to taking his own life because of an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and emptiness: *"I had won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything . . . I know that this is a cliché. It's the old song of the movie and pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything and yet they are so unhappy . . . I had no inner peace. I was a puppet on a string."*

The tragedy is that these are not the only two options. There is a genuine third way! There is the Christian alternative: the message of hope for a lost world through Jesus Christ. But the tragedy is doubled because this message, this good news, this life-changing gospel, is not being communicated as it ought. This is due largely to the failure of the Church.

The Church has lost its way

It is not only the world that has lost its way. The real tragedy is that the Church has lost its way. In fact, one of the great contributory factors to the world losing its way has been the silence, the confusion and the downright dishonesty of the Churches.

It is, of course, as dangerous to make generalisations about the Church as about the world, but he who never made a generalisation, never said anything! The truth is the Church has lost its way mainly in one of two different directions. Jesus warned against two errors in John 17. The first is being "of the world". The second is being "out of the world".

By and large the established Churches – even the Church of Scotland, Knox's Church – have erred in the direction of being "of the world". This is the mistake, in attempting to be relevant to the world's needs, of adopting too much of the world's thinking. Of course, this is true not only of the predominant thinking in the established churches, it is the characteristic of what has been termed theological liberalism which has affected the majority of churches in the western world. The problem with liberalism is that it has accepted the rationalist and empirical starting point of Hume – nothing is credible but what can be proved by reason and experience. It attempts to create a Christianity that conforms to these twin demands as they have taken different forms over the last two centuries. The trouble is, therefore, it has nothing new to offer the world. Indeed it appears at every step to be echoing the world. Its other trouble is that this is not the Christianity that comes in the source documents of the Christian faith. These do not discount reason and experience, but they tell us we need help from outside. We need a revelation and a power and a grace from outside ourselves, indeed from outside this world, because our own reason and experience are no match for the hellish forces of rebellion and destructiveness inside us – indeed they are corrupted by them.

There is another way too in which the Church can relate wrongly to the world by being “of the world”. That is through the development of traditions via reason and experience, rather than the Bible. The Roman Catholic Church in particular has developed its teaching in this way. Notwithstanding the strong stance firmly based on Biblical insights which the Catholic Church takes on many moral and spiritual issues, its extra-Biblical emphases together with its whole hierarchical, authoritarian structure, all lead to confusion in the popular mind as to what the real Christian message is.

But it is not only the Roman Church that is in need of reform in the area of examining its traditions. We ourselves in the smaller Presbyterian churches need to be constantly reassessing our traditions which were worked out from Biblical principles, no doubt, but on the basis of reason and experience and for a previous age and different circumstances. These need to be examined again in the light of God’s word. The language we use in communicating the gospel, the very aspects of the Biblical message we need to emphasise, our attitudes to our buildings, our concept of ministry – all these and many other areas need to be constantly re-examined in the light of Scripture and the society we live in. The motto of the Reformation, after all, was not “We are Reformed” but “*Semper Reformanda*” – always reforming.

Into the world

However, it is the other error of which Jesus warned that is a particular danger to us, and to all in the Evangelical church. He said his plan was not to take us out of the world, but to send us into the world. Now in certain ways and at certain times, Evangelicals have been good at following this plan. We have been good at it geographically, but not good at it culturally and politically. This is particularly true of ourselves in the Free Church. We send missionaries to the ends of the earth and encourage them to understand and interact with and influence the cultures of those nations to which they go. But we have found it more difficult to encourage our people in Scotland to understand and interact with and influence the surrounding culture here. We plant new churches in different areas in Scotland, but find it hard to play a part in the social and political life of the community.

We need to retrace our steps – back before Hume and the Enlightenment and the resultant separation of faith and reason – back to Knox and the great Reformation thinkers.

In one sense they lived in a world very different from ours. Christendom was still a reality. They were interacting with thinkers who by and large had a theistic worldview. But we forget that they were living through the ferment of the Renaissance, when the world was awash with new developments in science, art, and politics.

There is no doubt that for both Calvin and Knox, art held a small place in their thinking, due to the contemporary perversion of Christian worship by the use of images. In that regard they were children of their age and of the main battle they were called to fight. But at another level theirs was a humane perspective. Expensive works of art (even legitimate art) are of small importance when people are starved of the word of God and even starving literally. However, we ought to ponder the words of

Hans Rookmaaker: “Dutch seventeenth century art has a stronger connection to Calvinism than people usually think and historically speaking it is simply not true that Calvinism was negative towards the arts. Calvin himself never made one negative remark about the arts as such”.

Positively, these men encouraged people to live and work as Christians in all walks of life. They would have been just as horrified by the existence of a “Christian Music” scene, as by a “Christian Carpentry” scene. The Calvinistic understanding of the Bible encourages us not to develop our own compartmentalised, privatised “scenes”, but to play a Christian part in society and its activities.

However that may be, it is indisputable that the thinking of Calvin and Knox had a huge influence on the areas of science, education and politics. For Calvin there was no dichotomy (as in the predominant thinking in the late Medieval Catholic Church) between nature and grace. “All truth is God’s truth” as he so memorably put it, and his writings are characterised by encouraging mentions of scientific developments.

It is in Knox, however, that we find a huge impetus to political, social and educational involvement. He famously wanted the huge wealth of the late Medieval Church in Scotland to be used for education (a school in every parish) and for relief of poverty. Due to the greed of the nobles this remained largely a dream, but a dream that stimulated Scottish society over the coming centuries.

His political views seemed so revolutionary at the time that even Calvin was nervous about them, but they were the views that gave birth in due time to our modern democracy, as Graham points out in his book *John Knox Democrat*. Knox taught that if the ruler oppressed the people, they had the right to remove him from power.

A communication breakdown

However, Knox has another important lesson for us, the most important of all. Knox was fundamentally a preacher, a communicator of the gospel. This is the area where the church has failed most of all. Enter three quarters of the churches in Scotland on any particular Sunday and you will not hear the preaching of the gospel. You will hear a post-Enlightenment, postmodern sound bite – no doubt professionally done – but eviscerated of the great themes of God’s supernatural and sovereign love and power revealed in the Bible.

But what about the remaining one quarter – the churches where Knox would still recognise the gospel being preached? He might recognise some of the content, but would he recognise it as preaching? One of the few eye witness accounts we have of Knox’s preaching is by James Melville, when Knox was old, worn and ill. But even then “he was so active and vigorous that he was like to ding that pulpit in blads and fly out of it”!

Such vehemence may not commend itself to our more restrained age, but there is one thing that Knox had in spades that we so greatly lack. That is *conviction*. I’m afraid, Fathers and Brethren, it is an attribute sadly missing from much of our modern preaching. We have the right doctrines, we explain the Biblical passages correctly, we have thoughtful illustrations, we even remember there are people to whom this message must be applied! But somehow so often it all falls flat. It lacks conviction. It

lacks power. Such conviction cannot be engineered. It comes from the heart. A heart full of the love of God and love for the lost. Regent Morton said of Knox at his death, "Here lies one who never flattered or feared any flesh." He feared the face of no man because he had seen the face of God. And having looked in the face of God, he burned with indignation against those who had led Scotland astray, and with love for a Scotland that was just as lost as it is today.

To conviction we must add *communication*. All the conviction in the world will be of no avail if our communication is poor. Not only must we preachers seek to develop and hone our communication skills, but as a Church we must put communication at the very top of our agenda. There are hopeful signs in this area already in the recent creation of a Communications Committee and the even more recent appointment of a Communications Officer. We must constantly be looking for new ways to communicate the old message. The Reformers were adept at using the new invention of the printing press. For us a similar emphasis may involve the mastering and the utilisation of the internet and web technology, CDs and DVDs, PowerPoint presentations and other hi-tech methods, as well as getting our message out through the media.

However, in this postmodern age, sometimes a lo-tech approach is what is needed. Recently, as you may be aware, I have been experimenting with retelling stories from the gospels from a different perspective. The response of people has encouraged me to think there is something here that can be developed. Not only do we live at a time when many don't know the gospel stories, but there is a new openness to story in general. Above all, it is a method that Jesus used to great effect. In our communication we must not only appeal to the reason, emotion and the will, but also to the imagination.

Hope for a lost world

Supremely, if the Church is to fulfil its God-given role in society, our communication must have *content*. It is ultimately this gospel story, not our skill in telling it, that is the hope of this lost world. But even here we need to have sensitivity to our age. Knox and the other Reformers emphasised the Biblical truth needed by their age – such as the doctrines of revelation, of salvation and of the Church. Those to whom they spoke believed (at least theoretically) in the existence of God, the Trinity, the objectivity of truth, the reality of sin and the person and work of Jesus. What needed to be emphasised was that the Bible alone is our rule of faith and life, that God's grace working through faith is the only way of salvation and that the church was not some hierarchical organisation placed between the people and God, but the community of believers called to serve Christ in the world.

Today, however, the scene is vastly different. The scepticism of the Enlightenment has had full effect. We need to start by emphasising the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith which we can no longer take for granted - the existence and nature of God, the nature of human beings and the communication that God has made to us in the Bible. We are much more in the position of the Apostle Paul speaking to the Greek philosophers in Athens, than in that of Knox speaking to the people of Edinburgh or to Mary Queen of Scots.

It is precisely in this complete information package that there is hope for a lost world. We cannot live in the rationalistic scientific box created by the scepticism of Hume and those who followed. Our rationalistic science tells us we are animals or carbon-based computers, but we cannot live that way. We either react in despair or we try to leap out of the box in some irrational, but perceived “spiritual” way, hoping art, sex, poetry, music, film or even some kind of spirituality will give us some hope. Why is that? Why is it that we are not ultimately satisfied by materialism or materialistic explanations?

Why is it that our art, music and literature pitilessly portrays human degradation and despair, but simultaneously gives us glimpses of a longing for dignity. Bob Dylan (you wondered how long I’d take to get round to him!) has a song called *Dignity*:

*Drinkin’ man listens to the voice he hears
In a crowded room full of covered up mirrors
Lookin’ into the lost forgotten years
For dignity*

*So many roads, so much at stake
So many dead ends, I’m at the edge of the lake
Sometimes I wonder what its gonna take
To find dignity*

(Bob Dylan, *Unplugged*)

The first movement in the music of hope of the Christian gospel is that there is an explanation of the conundrum of human experience – the paradox of a creature that is lost in bewilderment and degradation and failure, but at the same time has longings for beauty and love and meaning. The explanation is the Biblical one: that man is created in the image of God and that he is also a traitor and a rebel against God.

Because he bears God’s image, his life has dignity and meaning. Because God is Spirit – a Personal Being – human beings are also persons. Because God exists in the community of three Persons, human beings are also community creatures (there is such a thing as society!) Because God is love, human beings also love. Because God is the Creator, man also creates. Because God is the great communicator, human beings also communicate and are capable of receiving communication from God. Because God is just, men also have consciences.

But the Bible also has the explanation for why this amazing creature with the potential for such glory is struggling and hurting, corrupted and corrupting, lonely and despairing. He’s a sinner. Not that some are sinners and others aren’t. Granted, some may be worse sinners than others, but all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. The whole human race is tarnished and polluted and infected by a rebellious rejection of God’s will for our lives. This is why we are lost. The essential losing of our way is that “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way”.

But the gospel gives us more than an analysis of our predicament. It gives us hope, it gives us a message of rescue, it gives us a redemption song. We, who are lost and are

on the high road to being eternally lost, are called back from the brink of destruction by God's great love. This second great movement in the music of hope depends completely on the Lord Jesus, God's eternal Son, and what he did in living and dying for us. He himself said that he had come to seek and to save the lost. His life demonstrated that. He said it was the sick, not the healthy, who needed a doctor. And he went looking for the disturbed, the lonely, the lost, the disreputable, the corrupt and the guilty. Those who thought they were spiritually healthy without him rejected him. But those who knew their own moral bankruptcy and spiritual despair responded to his love.

He not only went looking for the lost, he also found them. This was not a search operation only. It was a search and rescue mission. In one of his most famous stories, the shepherd goes out to look for his one lost sheep – one in a hundred – and finds it. In another of his stories, he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. It is in the Cross that his love is seen at its greatest. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." He also said that he had come "to give his life as a ransom for many". We need to be set free, we need to be rescued, and he has done it – at great personal cost. Little wonder that the apostle Paul referred to our Lord as "Christ Jesus our hope". It is this redemption story of God's transforming love that needs to be whispered in the ears of this lost generation, this message of hope that needs to be broadcast to a society that has lost its way.

All of this explanation, this message of hope, comes to us because God is not silent. Since Hume, the voice of God has been progressively silenced in Scotland. Will it finally be silenced in this generation? Or will the church of Jesus Christ rouse itself from its sinful slumber? Will we realise our desperate need to be reformed and revived again? And realise the desperate need of our lost world? Will we again, like Knox, "sound our Master's trumpet".

Just as in Knox's day, there are those who would silence that trumpet; and like Knox, we must not be cowed or browbeaten into silence or mealy mouthed compromise. The revealed word of God is non-negotiable. There comes a time to stand for the truth. But just as Knox can put steel in our backbones and fire in our bellies, so he can put compassion in our hearts. It is now not remembered how tenderly he spoke to those in distress and darkness, or longed for the salvation of those who were lost. He said of William Kirkcaldy of Grange: "The man's soul is dear to me, and I would not have it perish if I could save it."

Compassion

We are called to show the love and compassion of our Saviour to a lost world. In his third book, *Life After God*, Douglas Coupland says, "My secret is I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love." Many people are crying out for genuine love.

Now I know that there's the problem we have at the moment in the Free Church of trying to carry on this work of preaching God's message of love and showing this love, while all the time we are being attacked and dragged through the courts by those who see the law as the answer to everything. Almost inevitably we are tarred with the same brush in the eyes of the public – law and legalism, not love. Somehow we must overcome that. We must show that it is not unloving to defend the weak and the

deprived, even if the weak and the deprived in this case are some of our own congregations. The law is part of the established order of God for our protection. After all, true Calvinism does not recognise a division into the sacred and the secular. But, most of all, we must not be distracted by all this from carrying on this work of compassion in our local communities.

We must reach out and we must welcome in. And just as in Jesus' day, it may be the most surprising people who respond. The raggedy man who comes into your church – he's your neighbour – he still bears the image of God. That young man you speak to may look or act weird. But he's your neighbour. That woman may dress outrageously, but she's your neighbour.

And yes, God is at work. In this cynical age, people are responding to this message of God's love. May Nicholson came from Ferguslie Park in Paisley. Ferguslie Park was the biggest housing scheme in Europe. In one way it is the product of the Enlightenment and the modernism that flowed from it. All that was required was the clearing of the old slums and the building of modern housing with modern facilities and our social problems would be solved. Science and economics and material progress were the answer. Instead it became a nightmare, an area marked by despair, notorious for drink and drug abuse and every social problem. And May Nicholson was notorious in a notorious community. This is how a local doctor described a visit to her house:

I recall one late night visit when I arrived to find a real fracas in full swing. May could be quite good at hurtling things around, at doctors too on occasions. When I arrived to make this visit I found the entire tenement brightly lit. The noise was such that nobody around was able to sleep. It was obvious that May had been drinking heavily and she might also have taken tranquillisers. She was bawling and shouting, cursing and swearing. Her house was in utter chaos. It was a very difficult situation altogether. Particularly as she had slashed herself, both her wrists and abdomen. As May was pregnant at the time she required immediate hospital admission. Following a time in the acute hospital, she was transferred to the psychiatric hospital, not for the first time. By then she had a long history of alcohol and drug abuse as well as self-harming. May was a woman going nowhere, a poor soul lost in the world.

“May was a woman going nowhere, a poor soul lost in the world.” But then on the 22nd of September 1981 she walked into a meeting of *Stauros*, a Christian organisation reaching out to alcoholics, and her life was changed for ever. She was a mess, but the people there told her the good news of God's transforming love and showed her that love. That night God changed her heart. And from that day to this she has been reaching out with that same compassion to others who are as lost as she once was – in Paisley, Dundee and now with the Preshal Trust she set up in Govan.

To show compassion we must be able through our own experience or imagination to enter into the experience of those who are hurting and lost. One of the greatest recent expressions of such compassion is the late Johnny Cash's singing of *Hurt*, the Trent Reznor song I mentioned earlier. The video of Cash as a weary, sick, old man singing that song is almost unbearably moving. A hell-raising drug addict in his younger days, now the old Christian, Cash could compassionately identify with the hurt and pain of the lost and their longing for a redemption that he had found:

what have i become?
my sweetest friend
everyone i know
goes away in the end
you could have it all
my empire of dirt
i will let you down
i will make you hurt

if i could start again
a million miles away
i would keep myself
i would find a way

Conclusion

It is my conviction that the world is lost – that it has lost its way spiritually, philosophically and morally. And that is particularly true of our nation of Scotland. But it is also my conviction there is hope for this lost world, hope for this Scotland that has lost its way. It is the hope that John Knox found, that Johnny Cash found, that May Nicholson found – Christ Jesus our hope. Hope because God is there. Hope because God is not silent. Hope because God is love.

David Hume couldn't live with his sceptical worldview: "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends, and after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strained and ridiculous, that I cannot find it in my heart to enter into them any further."

Scotland has found out the hard way that we cannot live with it either. It doesn't explain, it doesn't heal, it doesn't satisfy. The human spirit cries out for so much more.

By contrast, John Knox and those who have found the same hope, lived and died by that hope. As he was dying, Knox asked his wife, Margaret, to read to him Jesus' prayer in chapter 17 of John's Gospel. It was, he said, "where I cast my first anchor". In that prayer Jesus says: "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." That was the worldview by which Knox lived and died. And that is the worldview that alone can give hope to a lost world, and which we must make known to a Scotland that has lost its way.

Free Church of Scotland
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