

‘SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE’ YET AGAIN!

A Response to Michael Horsburgh’s Paper

**Rt. Rev’d Robert Forsyth
Bishop of South Sydney**

I am very grateful to Michael Horsburgh for this thoughtful critique of Archbishop Peter Jensen’s ‘Speaking the Truth in Love’ paper for the Halifax Portal lectures, and also to Anglicans Together for the opportunity this web site affords for discussion. I must add that in my response to Michael’s response to Peter Jensen I have been significantly helped by the thoughtful contribution of Jeremy Halcrow (of *Southern Cross* fame.)

As Michael acknowledges, his paper is not ‘a direct critique of the Archbishop’s lecture’ but his ‘own discussion on the same subject’, so on one level Michael and the Archbishop are discussing completely different issues. Michael’s concern is to focus on how the Church should determine the government policies it should advocate. In contrast the starting point of the Archbishop - as Michael clearly states in his essay - is that the proclamation of the gospel is the Church’s primary task and from this task flows certain implications for its relationship to society. It is these implications that Michael Horsburgh describes as the Archbishop’s ‘social theology’ (I prefer the term ‘biblical ethics’ but these terms effectively mean the same thing).

Let me make some comments on the sections of Michael’s paper and make some comments of my own.

“Power”

Michael makes a number of very helpful comments about the role of power and justice in social policy. However, his paper seems to be based upon the belief that the church’s main stance in society is to give advice to the government on what it is to do. Throughout the article, the church’s interaction with society is constructed as making suggestions and critiques of social policy which means government policy and its use of power.

However, the very point that Archbishop Jensen was making was that, as valuable as this might be, this is not the main task of the church. The church’s interaction with society is not simply, or even primarily, giving advice to the government on what the government and its institutions are to do. Its primary task is to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ to society understood in the broadest possible sense - to the people, the opinion makers and institutions of society- with a message of the saving lordship of Jesus.

“Love”

It is Michael’s discussion of love that causes me greatest concern. Michael seems to be critiquing a view Peter Jensen’s lecture did not canvas. The Archbishop’s lecture did not propose love as a simple ethic for all matters of social policy, nor did the lecture touch on the relationship between love and justice and thereby dismiss justice as a priority in social affairs. To be fair to Peter Jensen’s position on this subject you need to look beyond the lecture itself.



Over a number of years some members of the Moore Theological College faculty have been developing an evangelical rationale for ethics - what I would label 'Evangelical biblical ethics'. The most comprehensive presentation of this approach is Michael Hill's book *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (St Matthias Press 2002) which was launched this month.

Hill explains (pp. 128-9):

The complexity of biblical ethics is found in that it operates from three perspectives. From the initial perspective the goal is located in terms of nature and purpose. Moral good is achieved by matching nature to purpose, and allowing the design to find its God-intended goal. From this perspective, then, a Christian ethic is simply *to do good...* which means seeking God's purposes.

Within the context of personal relationships, the ethic is more specifically *to love*. The goal is to achieve *mutual love relationships*. This second aspect is dependent on the first, for love is a gracious and unconditional commitment to the good. In the Bible love incorporates all the other moral virtues (see 1 Corinthians 12 and Galatians 5)

Finally, from the corporate perspective, the goal is a community of mutual love relationships, and our ethic is to promote these relationships. These mutual love relationships extend in two directions. There is a vertical relationship between God and the members of the community, and a horizontal relationship between members of the community. The two-way binding is an essential characteristic of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the final goal and as such it is corporate in nature. It includes all the other goals and purposes from the two levels below it.

This extract is a good guide to the kind of framework that underlies Peter Jensen's public comments on government policy matters from refugees to bio-ethics.

There is much I could say about this evangelical framework for ethics but I will limit myself to addressing some of the points Michael Horsburgh raises in his paper.

Firstly, from Hill's book we see that the ethical framework adopted by the Archbishop would define justice as an aspect of love. 'Justice' and 'love' are not two competing models as Horsburgh's paper suggests. In some contexts - particularly those relating to government policy on which Horsburgh focuses- *to love* will be *to seek justice*.

Secondly, Hill's book disputes Michael Horsburgh's central claim about the appropriateness of a 'love'-based ethic. Horsburgh claims 'there is a tinge of artificiality in suggesting that an aggregation of persons called the church can 'love' another aggregation called the nation or society'. However Hill points out that any distinction between individuals and social groups is arbitrary saying that the Bible presents an inter relational model (individuals-in-relationship) which does not make this artificial division between individuals and community (eg. the Trinity but also Jesus' sermon on the Mount).

As I read Michael's paper, I could not help but feel that there was a confusion between the church as a community of members within the larger society and the church as somehow a part of the governing circle implementing social policy. I believe this inter relational model cuts through some of this confusion about the place of the 'church' - which is a voluntary body made up of individuals members - and the role of government in society.



“Truth”

In discussing the place of Christian doctrine Michael writes,:

The principle problem with the most fundamental Christian beliefs when presented as doctrinal statements from positions is they do not take us very far in responding to current issues in society.

It is clear from his discussion that Michael takes ‘responding to current issues in society’ to mean ‘developing policy positions’ [for government implementation].

If that is what ‘the current issues in society’ really are, then his points are well made. However, this is begging the very point of Archbishop Jensen’s speech. Peter was asserting that main role of the church is to speak the words of eternal life to a society desperately in need of it and ignorant of God. His whole argument was that the church should not simply give advice on those matters society already thinks is important but to raise an issue which society has forgotten, that fundamental issue of the lordship of Jesus and of the need for members of the society as well as institutions to be properly related to that Lord.

Indeed, the task of the church is to challenge that very identification of ‘responding to current issues in society’ with ‘developing policy positions’ [for state action]. For the sake of the society we belong to, the church must to say to society that what they think are their current issues are not really as important as the society thinks.

Take a matter as important as unemployment. It is indeed a serious issue, but it is by no means anywhere nearly as important as the greater matter of millions in our society going to face the judgement of God unforgiven. The Christian understands the society in the context of Jesus’ resurrection and coming again in judgement. From that perspective, issues look very different from what you will read in the daily press or learned discussions of social policy.

“Speaking”

In this section Michael is right to draw to our attention that the church is a player in society and needs to take great heed to its own behaviour, its justice and faithfulness and the virtues it exemplifies in its institutional life. While he may be right that there is a real point in the church ‘commending the goodness of fellow citizens’ (as the common grace of God is expressed to all people) surely the distinctive contribution of the church to society is to speak of Christ, his coming his death and resurrection and of the members of our society’s forgetfulness of God and addiction to idolatry and self-centredness. The church needs to remind them that they and the society come under the judgement and mercy of God. It is to remind them of a truth the society does not want to hear, in fact without the Spirit of God cannot hear.

Although we are admittedly a long way from the situation in the first century, I search the New Testament in vain to find the kind of stance towards the society recommended by Michael Horsburgh. The church may indeed see the government as ministers of God for our good (Romans 13). The main message of the church is to talk about the God whom the state and other institutions unknowingly are serving.



A clash of models of how Bible is used?

Michael Horsburgh's paper presents two ethical models drawn from two Bible passages. Firstly he presents the 'love' model which he claims the Archbishop has based on Ephesians 4. Secondly, Michael presents a model which emphasises 'justice' which he bases on a passage from Micah 6.

Michael rightly points out that the Ephesians 4 passage on 'speaking the truth in love' is about dealing with internal congregational issues and not the most appropriate passage to use when building a social ethic. But I would contend that this is not what the Archbishop is attempting to do, or indeed has done.

As I have explained above, the Archbishop's ethical framework - which is the same as that explained by Michael Hill - is far more comprehensive than any one biblical passage. Indeed even when the Archbishop has discussed the wider societal implications of ethical issues that relate directly to evangelism - eg Jewish-Christian relations and evangelism in the workplace - he has not turned directly to Ephesians 4.

Indeed when discussing workplace evangelism, the Archbishop turned to 1 Peter 3: 8ff a passage which clearly describes Christians' relationship with wider society:

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing... Always give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

It is interesting that we see here the same three elements - love, speaking, the gospel truths - but they are reversed. The Apostle Peter is suggesting to the Christian churches to whom he writes that if they want to 'earn the right to speak the truth' then they must love each other and their neighbours in such a shockingly self-sacrificial way that the non-Christians take notice and start asking questions.

Maybe what Michael has helpfully pointed out is that the slogan 'Speaking the truth in love' is not a helpful summary of the evangelical ethical position. Like any slogan it can become a distortion.

However, part of the problem here is that Michael has not presented an accurate picture of how evangelicals use biblical material to determine social policy positions. An "Evangelical biblical ethics" approach advocates a four fold step for *applying* biblical material to real life situations. 1 Exegesis. 2. Biblical theology (determining the overall story of God's revelation in the Bible) 3. Systematic theology (using this overall picture of the biblical narrative to integrate the various relevant biblical texts so as not to distort their significance). 4. Once you have gone through these three steps (which feed back on themselves as well) then you are in position to determine some acceptable ethical principles. By using these ethical principles drawn from the Bible, Christians are then in a position to debate the range of government policies that might be on the agenda.

It seems to me that Michael's paper misrepresents this process by compressing the number of steps involved. Michael imagines that evangelicals arrive at social policy positions straight from doctrine (the Bible's teaching). Michael assumes that the Archbishop is relying simply on a direct application of the text of Ephesians 4.



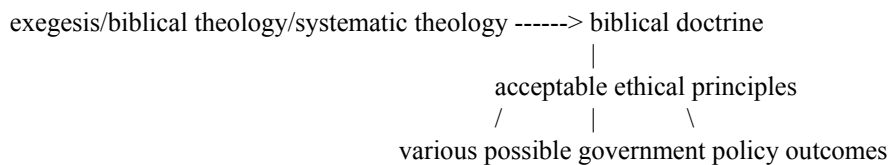
He writes:

It might be argued that, by analogy, the church should adopt the same approach in its exchanges with society that epistle's author suggests should occur internally. For this to happen, however, the case must be argued in its own right, not as a direct consequence of the biblical passage. In other words, we cannot rely simply on the proposition that the phrase exists in the Bible... What must be argued is the Archbishop's proposition that this text mandates the role of the church in the public arena. This is a much larger task and on that the Archbishop did not undertake in his lecture. Rather, he relied on the importance of the ideas the text suggests.

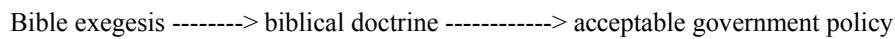
By not realising that evangelicals see biblical ethics as a subset of biblical doctrine, Horsburgh mistakes the grounds upon which they enter debate about public policy. Contrary to Horsburgh's description, the Archbishop argues that the Bible helps us to be certain of a number of ethical principles that we can then use in debates about government policy. This position acknowledges the complexity of much policy debate and the possibility that some biblical ethical positions may need to be weighed up against each other in formulating the details of policy.

This diagram summarises the alternative understanding of what is going on:

An Evangelical biblical ethics approach -



How Michael depicts the Archbishop's approach in his paper -



This unfairly characterises the evangelical approach as makes it seem more unreasonable that it actually is. Indeed Michael seems to imply that evangelicals would hold other Christians heretical for taking differing views on government policy issues. The fact that there is a very wide range of views in the Diocese on the most appropriate government policies to deal with the asylum seekers issue demonstrates that evangelicals are aware of the complexity of determining the detail of policy even when there is agreement on the ethical principles involved. Similarly the recent position taken by the Archbishop on embryonic stem cell research was not a statement about the detail of government policy but a statement on the ethical principles applying to human embryos that should be taken into account when determining government policy.



Conclusion

What is at stake in this debate is the issue is not only how to use the Bible but what is the central mission of the church. At the recent Provincial Synod, the Archbishop and Metropolitan Peter Jensen laid out the mission as he sees it:

The church which reflects the mission of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit will have a universal care for the creation and for all its citizens; it will without doubt seek the welfare of all and especially the weak; but at the heart of its mission will be the task of seeking and saving the lost, of bringing people who are 'without God and without hope in the world' into a living knowledge of God for the forgiveness of their sins and the salvation of their souls. That above all is our business, and it is business that no one else on earth will do. In other words, if mission does not centre on evangelism, it is not fully Christian. Indeed, I would say that mission needs to start with evangelism.¹

This is not to say that evangelism replaces an adequate social theology as Michael has defined it. But it is to say that the mission of the church is first and foremost evangelistic, in word and action. All else is secondary.

¹ The address is available at <<http://www.anglicanmediasydney.asn.au/nsw/synod2002/presidentialaddress.htm>>