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## 'Speaking the Truth in Love III'

Where our response to the world has been intellectual, it is the more liberal Christians who have made the running. One of the most famous contemporary Christians, and probably the best selling one, is Bishop Spong. But the version of Christianity which he has to purvey is far, far removed from Nicene Christianity. Furthermore, the Christian apologists and educationists seem unwilling to advance and teach a doctrinal Christianity. Not surprisingly, when the opportunity comes to speak on matters such as divorce and remarriage, or euthanasia, there is no attempt to ground our approach in the teaching of scripture; our spokespersons seem to feel that all they must do is present a plausible case to the modern mind.

My thesis is that the role of the churches in Australia today is to speak the truth in love. It will be evident by now that I mean by the truth the gospel of Jesus Christ as enshrined in the inspired Bible, the word of God. What is the importance of this truth? Let me make three observations.

First, please notice that no one else is going to speak it. The message of Jesus is the message of the church, not the world. We cannot expect that the world will be at all interested in propagating this message, or supporting its proclamation. Indeed we know that the world is very dismissive of missionaries, and will only justify their activities if they can be shown to have some connection with development projects. The silence of the church about its own message is inexcusable. The inevitable impression is that we do not believe it ourselves.

Second, we must notice the tragic absence of truth in public discourse. Of course there is the general sense in our community that the organs of communication, especially the mass media cannot be relied on. Fair or not, (and it is by no means always fair), many people will say that when they have anything to do with the media on a personal nature, the story is wrong, twisted or inadequately told. The general criticisms of those in public life are the same; time does not permit the telling of how the advertising and selling worlds are viewed. In short, we are taught through experience not to trust, but to be cynical.

What we don't realize is how much is lost by this cynicism. Human relationships depend upon truthful communications. You cannot trust a liar; for a time you may love a liar, but you cannot really live with one. And yet, without trust, human relationships are doomed. Cynicism is

the death of satisfying communion between people; a culture that breeds cynicism is a culture in love with loneliness and un-happiness. The present response to this is to make reading and listening subjective exercises, to make meaning depend upon the recipient rather than on the giver or the actual words said.

But God is the master of his own meaning. The Christian gospel is the insertion of the truth into the untrustworthy discourse of the world. It re-establishes an area of trust, and calls upon us to speak the truth. We identify God in the first instance because his promises may be trusted; you may rely upon his words. He made certain promises to the patriarchs, promises which only God could fulfill, promises which are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We find that we may trust these promises, that we may trust him. He gives his law, that the human conscience recognizes as true and wise. In particular he promises through Jesus Christ eternal life and the forgiveness of sins and we are invited to trust him for his mercies in this life and the next.

Third, and most important of all, the truth of the gospel is the means by which people become Christians and so receive forgiveness, come to know God, and receive the gift of eternal life. These are the things which really matter in human life. How do people become Christians according to the witness of the New Testament? It is through the preaching of the word of God. The word of God tells us about Jesus Christ and the promises of God associated with his coming into the world. The word of God is neither domestic or bland; it is 'sharper than a two edged sword' (Heb 4:12). The truth is like that; it is a narrow line; error is the broad path that leads to destruction. This word of God is about Jesus Christ. When the first Christians preached the gospel, they were accused of preaching another king, Jesus. Although they were misunderstood to be preaching a political message, their real purpose was far more revolutionary than that. They were pitting Christ against the Emperor who demanded worship; that is true. But they were pitting him against every power, every authority, every lord and every god. That was the essence of the Christian challenge from the beginning. Without such an absolute they did not speak the truth about Christ, and hence the truth about the universe. That is why if we were to abandon the absolutist edge of Christianity, or even accept the Herald's humanistic Christology, with Christ shorn of his divinity, we would entirely lose the truth and the gospel. And yet by our own unwillingness to witness to these truths, we have almost lost them anyhow.

I want to say that to hold to the Nicene Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity, with all that this implies, is the best way in which we can serve our community. It says to all of us that Jesus Christ is Lord, and it therefore calls on all of us to serve him with single hearts. It is this message which has unparalleled power to transform human lives, to save people, to provide an authentic pattern for human life, to liberate people to live lives of sacrificial and community-blessing love. It is no accident that the Red Cross was founded by a convinced and dedicated Christian man. The churches in our community have a magnificent record of blessing the community through loving and caring social work. But the starting point, the dynamic, is the truth of the gospel. It is through trusting in the promises of God and being ruled by Jesus Christ that we are set free to love others. In other words, the dynamic of the Christian life is the truth of the gospel, and to abandon, or re-write or even assume the gospel, is to commit spiritual suicide.

## Archbishop Peter Jensen

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