

Ideas Have Legs

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Mr. Chairman, members and friends of CLAC:

Perhaps you wonder, as I first did when Ed Vanderkloet first asked me to speak to you, what a philosopher can have to say to the membership of a labour union. Does a philosopher automatically qualify to speak on issues in all kinds of fields, including labour relations? I think you know better. The fact is that I know very little about the world of labour and could not begin to tell you anything new about the specific problems of being a Christian in the world of labour relations. I accepted the invitation to speak to you this afternoon for quite a different reason (apart from the fact that I was simply flattered). I accepted because the struggle of the CLAC in the labour field is part of a much larger struggle, a struggle in which I, as a teacher of the history of philosophy at a Christian institution of learning, am also vitally involved. Although we are fighting on different fronts, we are waging the same war, against a common enemy and it is of crucial importance that we integrate our war effort. There is a sense in which the kind of work which I do at the Institute for Christian Studies is comparable to the work of military intelligence—finding out and communicating to the fighting forces on our side what are the war aims and battle strategies of the adversary. For philosophy is one area where the spiritual battle of man in this world is fought out with special intensity.

Perhaps you think that this kind of talk is militaristic and inappropriate for a Christian fellowship. Christianity, you say, is the religion of love, Christ is the King of peace. The fruits of the Spirit are kindness and gentleness and patience. All this is true, but it is true only in the context of the very fundamental spiritual warfare of which the Bible speaks so clearly. To speak of love and kindness outside of this context is to make Christianity a Sunday School religion and to miss entirely the scope and power of biblical religion. The love of which Jesus the Christ spoke, and which he himself demonstrated for our salvation, is the love of enemies, motivated by a force stronger than we ourselves can muster; the meekness and gentleness which the New Testament requires and promises is the inner-strength not to retaliate in

kind to hostile provocation. The dimension of hostility, enmity, battle, conflicting armies and generals, strategies of defence and assault, is never absent in the New Testament message of radical renewal in Christ. And it is because this warfare is as total as this renewal, involving each one of us in every aspect of our lives—political, economic, ecclesiastical, aesthetic, intellectual, emotional or whatever—that I as stumbling philosopher in Christ can feel free to speak for a Christian labour union about ideas and the role they play in our lives, for they are very much a part of the clash of opposing life-perspectives which is embodied in the CLAC and its struggles.

Listen with me to Paul's warnings to the Colossians on the subject of philosophy. He says:

Let your life's walk be in Christ Jesus, the kyrios, the way you have come to know him (by official instruction). Have your roots in him, being built up in him, and so getting (progressively) steadier in the faith, and lust overflowing with thanksgiving. Be on your guard, and let no one use philosophy to take you prisoner of war and carry you off as so much booty. It is nothing but an empty ruse based on what men have traditionally taught in line with the grinding principles of the world, but not in line with Christ.

This is the one place in the Scripture where the word "philosophy" occurs, and I would like you to note particularly that it occurs in the context of a military image. Philosophy, Paul is saying (and we must remember that in his day all philosophy was pagan), can be the means in the enemies hands to take you captive in the spiritual conflict between a life rooted in Christ and a life according to the world. The Greek word Paul uses is *sylagogein* meaning literally, "carry off as the spoils of war," and we know what that meant in the ancient world. The vanquished in a battle, if they were not killed outright were taken as booty by the victors, and subsequently sold into slavery, which meant hard labour in life.

It is in this context of philosophy and spiritual warfare that I want to make a few remarks about the theme "Ideas have legs." Ideas have legs in the sense that they are not the disembodied abstractions of some ivory-tower academic, but are real spiritual forces that go somewhere, that are on the march in somebody's army, and that have a widespread effect on our practical, everyday lives. Let me read you a quote from John Maynard Keynes, perhaps the most influential economist since Adam Smith and Karl Marx, whose own economic ideas have drastically revamped the economic policies of twentieth century industrial nations. In chapter twenty-four of his *magnum opus*, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, he writes the following:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt, from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.

It is this phenomenon of what Keynes calls, "the gradual encroachment of ideas," with the effect that "the world is ruled by little else" that we must see in the biblical perspective of a conflict of spirits in history. This is the point of contact between the Christian historian of philosophy and the Christian labourer in other fields, however far removed from academic studies.

To illustrate my point, I would like to draw your attention to a number of aired concepts which embody the kind of influential ideas I am talking about. Each of these pairs is commonly used in our everyday speech, and appears constantly in the magazines we read (whether that be the *Reader's Digest*, *Time Magazine*, or *The Nation*), our daily newspapers, in our television and radio programs, in the textbooks of the schools, and in the speeches of national leaders in politics and labour. Whether occurring in pairs or singly (since each member of the pair presupposes the other), these words, and the concepts which they represent, are often the insidious vehicles of that "gradual encroachment of ideas" of which Keynes spoke, and by which no one is unaffected. Consider the following pairs:

facts and values
labour and management
theory and practice
mental and physical
reason and emotions
church and world
freedom and authority
faith and science
philosophy and theology

Each of these nine pairs of words represent a temptation to categorize a certain dimension of our world according to the views of some influential philosophical thinker or movement of the past.

I say "temptation," because each of the nine pairs listed presupposes, I believe, a religiously distorted analysis of some important dimension of our world. Take for example "facts and values." This goes back to the philosophical movement of neo-

Kantianism which was big in Europe, especially Germany, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to the neo-Kantians "facts" were things which could be objectively and certainly known; "values" were creation of the human subject which had no validity apart from man's need to give meaning to the world. It is a "fact" that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit and to think otherwise is to be mistaken. But it is only a "value" to believe that crime should be punished, or that adultery is wrong, or that Jesus is the Christ. About such matters you can think differently, but you cannot be wrong. Facts are true no matter what, values can be said to be "true" only in the sense that they are widely held in a given society or period of history. The religious distortion in this view is obvious to every child in the body of Christ for it is God, not man, who is the law-giver.

Nevertheless, the influences of this neo-Kantian distinction, propagated largely through the social sciences at the universities, has been so great that today most Christians are unwilling to speak any longer of "divine ordinances" or even of the "moral order" as they used to in the nineteenth century, but refer rather to their Christian "values," thereby implicitly conceding the point that their convictions on these matters do not have objective validity or factual status. Because of this prevailing talk of "values," and all that this implies, it has become almost impossible for a Christian, especially in an academic setting, to believe that "thou shalt not kill" is every bit as much a fact as "water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit." The usage has become so common that scarcely anyone, including most Christians, takes any exception to Prime Minister Trudeau (himself thoroughly trained in the social sciences) when he states in a major address that Canadians must find "new values" if they are to weather the crisis of our time.

My point is that in such seemingly innocent-looking words and phrases a whole idolatrous perspective on the world, a whole distorted mind-set and humanistic thought-pattern is subliminally propagated in our civilization.

These ideas are not the harmless speculations of ivory-tower professors, but they are ideas with legs, they march in an army, they are involved in a war, and in this war there are casualties. The ivory-tower professors are religious human beings, involved like all of us with the questions of ultimate allegiance. In and through their intellectual and existential struggles we must learn to discern the great battle between Satan, the adversary, and the Christ of God.

I do not have time in this context to examine with you each of the nine paired concepts which I listed a moment ago. Some of them I am sure need no elucidation before this audience. It is no secret to you that the paired use of "labour and management," which is so common in our everyday speech, goes back to a Marxist concept of class struggle, a secular distortion of the biblical notion of spiritual warfare. When a newspaper editor at election time refers to the "labour vote," we know that is implicitly dividing the populace according to a false scheme, no matter how pragmatically realistic the influence of the idea of class struggle has allowed such talk to be. The very fact that the present-day social realities virtually force us to speak of "labour vote" is telling proof of the practical molding power of a philosophical idea.

In the limits of the time allotted me, I would like to take just a brief look at two more of the nine conceptual twins which I listed earlier, both of which have a peculiar relevance to the topic we are discussing. I would like to single out briefly the current usage of "practical and theoretical" and "church and world," for they bear precisely on the way we all unconsciously tend to think, about such relations as labour and philosophy and labour and religion.

It is ironic that one of the most influential philosophically-based ideas is that theoretical ideas do not have legs that they belong to the area of impractical and irrelevant, that they are merely "academic." This notion of impracticality of theory goes back, strange as it may sound to Aristotle's distinction between the practical and the theoretical life. Aristotle (and a long tradition after him, including much Christian theology) saw the true fulfillment of man in the theoretical, and this has led to centuries of official disdain for the practical, specifically including also the whole area of what we now call "labour." But the modern reaction to this, especially in much of the anti-intellectualism of the New World, simply opted for the opposite horn of the false practical vs. theoretical dilemma, so that man now stressed the practical to the exclusion of the theoretical, not realizing that the true distortion lay in the dilemma itself to which they were still committed. This is a classical example of how apparently conflicting ideas are joined together by a shared problematic, where neither of the contending parties are aware of their fundamental agreement. If we analyze this problematic, we should note that it goes back in a straight, followable line to Aristotle. The very words "practical" and "theoretical" are Greek words which we coined in their present meaning in the context of Aristotle's philosophical ethics. The distinction is a function of Aristotelian Paganism, with its deification of man's theoretical or analytical function, and as such is a prime example of what Paul meant by the religiously dangerous character of pagan philosophy. It also illustrates well the

point which Paul makes to the Romans concerning the fact that men outside of Christ (and he refers specifically to the pagan "wisdom" or philosophy) turn to worship of the creature rather than the Creator. Just as less developed pagan societies worshipped created beasts and birds in their religion, so Aristotle, like many Greek philosophers before and after him, singled out one aspect of created reality, man's reasoning function, and gave it the absolute status of God. Having fallen into this idolatry of the rational, all the rest of man's functions and activities are lumped together and depreciated with respect to it, and are indiscriminately labelled the "practical." Aristotle's words "practical" and "theoretical" thus become the bearers of a whole distorted Greek-philosophical view of the relative value of different kinds of human activity. The result has been, among other things, a tradition of many centuries which gave no worth or status to non-theoretical labour.

The biblical view is quite different. The Bible nowhere used the words "practical" or "theoretical," nor (which is more important) does it ever divide men's walk before God into intellectual and nonintellectual. Consequently, it never contrasts these kinds of activities either or gives one any higher or lower status than the other. The only distinctions of superior and inferior which the Scriptures recognize as valid are distinctions which have to do with obedience and disobedience, and these cut across every dimension and aspect of our life in the world. (This is crucial, e.g., for understanding the Scripture's use of such terms as "wisdom" and "folly," which are both equally "practical" and "theoretical".) By losing sight of a transcendent Creator which all of creation and all of its potentialities are equally called to serve, the philosophers of pagan Greece introduced a false, distorting dichotomy into the integrality of human life before God, and this false categorization has been perpetuated through centuries of using the words "practical" and "theoretical" in an Aristotelian way. As a result, it is difficult for us today to recapture the view of man's theorizing as but one of a large number of other, creationally coordinate, interrelated and equal-valued activities or functions in man's life, each with its specific calling to serve the Lord in cooperative obedience.

The notion of "the practical" then, in its value-laden opposition to "theoretical" is a pseudo-concept deriving directly from Greek philosophical idolatry, and this is true not only when we exalt intellect to the detriment of the other functions, but also and equally when we side with anti-intellectualism to glorify the "practical" to the detriment of the theoretical. It is also true when these twin heresies appear in Christian dress, either as a theologistic doctrinalism or an anti-intellectual pietism which contrasts "doctrine" and "life" as though doctrine (as the New Testament

clearly teaches] were not an important and constitutive element of our total life before God.

But it is time for me to move on to my final illustration.

It is common in our day, as it has been for centuries in the Christian tradition, to speak of "church" and "world" as two concepts which are coordinate and complementary. It is my conviction that this apparently innocent way of talking is rooted in, and by implication carries with it, a deeply distorted view of the Christian life which has had far-reaching historical consequences that daily shape our lives. Although this pair of words does not derive from philosophy as much as from theology, I will discuss it in this context because it illustrates so well the general point I am making about ideas and their impact. Besides, it is only because of the powerful influence of the Western philosophical tradition that theologians have come to speak in this way about church and world.

Here is a philosophy of human culture and society hidden in the way Christians today commonly pair off the words "church" and "world." "Church" means for them the institutional church (with its clergymen and other office bearers), and all Christian work within it or under its auspices. The "world," for them includes all institutions and contexts which fall outside the church so defined, as well as all human activity conducted within them. The state and politics, industry and labour, the university and scholarship, families and housework—all belong to the world and are secular. The implications which this view carries with it is that matters of religion, sanctification and redemption have application only to the "church." The "world" is either religiously neutral or undeniably evil.

I do not know when this fundamental way of categorizing human institutions and activities first arose. I know that it is already firmly established and taken for granted by the Latin church father Cyprian in the third century. I suspect that it goes back to the first generation of converted Greek intellectuals, who became leaders in the Christian church shortly after the apostolic age. Their Greek philosophical upbringing cause them to fundamentally misunderstand some of the key concepts of Scripture including specifically that of "world."

In the Scriptures, and specifically in the New Testament, the word "world" has a number of different meanings. Sometimes, for example, it means simply "creation," or "mankind," but there is one centrally religious meaning which stands out, and it is

this meaning which has led to so much misunderstanding. We find it, for example, in John, where Christ says "my Kingdom is not of this world" or in James, who tells us we must keep ourselves "unspotted from the world," or in Paul when he speaks of the "first principles of the world," or in Peter who talks of escaping "the pollutions of the world."

What "world" means In these contexts is simply the kingdom of darkness as opposed to the Kingdom of God. It refers to the totality of everything that is lost in sin and alienated from God, and includes all that is sinful, distorted and evil. Satan is called the "prince of this world," and wherever Satan or his agents can twist and distort and pervert anything in God's good creation, there we have the "world" in this religiously loaded sense. There is nothing in all the length and breadth of God's good creation which was untouched by the corrosive influence of this all-pervasive corruption—that's how radical the Fall was, and that's how extensive Satan's claims are. But with the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ all things are in principle made new again.

The point is that the proper contrast to "world" is not "church," but Kingdom of God, and that both are creation-wide. As wide-ranging as the effects of sin are, turning creation into the "world," so wide-ranging is the scope of the Kingdom of God, bringing salvation, redemption and reconciliation. By speaking of "church" and "world" in the current manner we are led into the temptation of seeing the "world," as one area, one realm of creation and creational human life, and, moreover, are unconsciously persuaded that religious renewal does not apply to it.

Perhaps I can clarify my point with a very simple illustration. We can compare the created order (including all the creational ordinances for man's institutions and activities in the world) to an oblong grid composed of two parallel rows of squares, like one of those flat chocolate bars which you can break into square pieces.

By taking one matched pair of squares at a time, we can use this grid to classify the various kinds of creationally given institutions. Suppose we labelled the top pair of squares "institutional church" with all its proper functions and activities, the next pair "the state," with all its peculiar activities, and so on down the line, adding the business enterprise, the family household, the university, etc. In this way we are marking off various creationally distinct spheres of human activity. Now, what happens in the "church and world" mentality is that the top two squares of the chocolate bar (representing the institutional church) are broken off, and the rest of

the bar is designated the "world." Since the Kingdom of God and religion obviously belongs with the church, this kind of categorization by implication severs them from the "secular" realm, with its politics and labour and scholarship and art, etc. The consequences of such a view, of course, is that no Christian renewal is attempted in these areas, with the result that great portions of human culture have been abandoned by Christians to the humanists.

But the Scriptures teach us a different religious analysis of culture and society. The distinction between Kingdom (not church) and world runs right through every domain of life. To stick with our analogy, the biblical view is to break the chocolate bar lengthwise, with the result that a clear break emerges in every arena of human endeavor. This is the antithesis between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit, which emerges wherever Christ-disciples engage in cultural as in any other activity. But this break (and this is where the analogy breaks down) is not along creational lines. The distinction between the Kingdom of God and kingdom of darkness is not one which legitimately belongs in creation. To return to our military imagery, the line division between them is really the battle line of the spiritual warfare in which we are all engaged. Christ as King is fighting to regain the occupied territory usurped by his great adversary Satan, and He has already won the decisive battle in his resurrection.

In conclusion, I would like to draw your attention again to a passage from St. Paul. It is from II Cor. 10. Here again Paul speaks of human ideas in the context of spiritual warfare. He uses the image of a military siege:

It is true that we live in the flesh, but we do not wage war according to the flesh. The weapons of our warfare are not those of the flesh. They are engines of war which have the power of God to demolish the justifications of men's defence. (With them) we demolish men's reasonings and every bastion that is erected against the knowledge of God; we take captive every idea and make it obey Christ.

The picture is that of a besieged city. On the side of the besiegers are the missionary Paul, the knowledge of God, the authority of Christ, and the battering rams of divine power. On the side of the besieged city are the ideas of men, and the reasonings and arguments which they erect in self-defence like battlements against the knowledge of God. The contest is unequal, because the forces of the general Christ smash and tear down by the power of God, the wall of defensive argumentation, take prisoner the defenders of the city, and establish the authority of Christ over the thoughts to men so the henceforth they owe allegiance and obedience only to him. The citadel of man's mind has been taken and Christ rules as sovereign within its walls.

That is very powerful language, and a message which we in the secularized twentieth century do well to take to heart. Ideas are in the thick of the battle between the forces of Christ and Satan and we neglect their importance in our peril. There is a war on and we are involved. You are involved and I am involved, each at his own post. Sometimes the struggle can be disheartening, because we lose touch of each other and seem to be fighting a lonely baffle. But on occasions like these we can experience the solidarity of fighting for a common King. At the same time we celebrate the fact that we are on the winning side, for the decisive battle has been won two thousand years ago. We may lose a battle here or there, but the war has already been won. What we are engaged in now are just mop-up operations. In those mop-up operations you and I together, philosopher and bookkeeper and truckdriver and lawyer and teacher and homemaker and artist and student—we all together have been assigned a post, and we have a workers' solidarity in the Lord which excludes no class or profession or walk of life. Our ideas have legs too, and that's why by God's grace, we are on the march.

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