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SPEECH TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

SATURDAY 21 MAY 1988

INTRODUCTION

Moderator and Members of the Assembly:

I am greatly honoured to have been invited to attend the opening of this 1988 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; and I am deeply grateful that you have now asked me to address you.

I am very much aware of the historical
continuity | extending over four centuries, |
during which the position of the Church of
Scotland has been recognised in
constitutional law | and confirmed by
successive Sovereigns.

It sprang from the independence of mind
and rigour of thought | that have always
been such powerful characteristics of the
Scottish people.

It has remained close to its roots and has inspired a commitment to service from all people.

I am therefore very sensible of the important influence which the Church of Scotland exercises in the life of the whole nation, both at the spiritual level and through the extensive caring services which are provided by your Church's department of

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social responsibility.

I am conscious also
of the value of the continuing
links which the Ch. of Scotland maintains with
CHRISTIANITY - SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL other churches

Perhaps it would be best if I began by speaking

personally / as a Christian, as well as a
politician, / about the way I see things.

Reading recently I came across the starkly
simple phrase:

"Christianity is about spiritual

redemption, not social reform".

Sometimes the debate on these matters has

become too polarised / and given the

impression that the two are quite

separate.

Most Christians would regard it as their

personal Christian duty to help their

fellow men and women.

They would regard the lives of children as a precious trust.

These duties come / not from any secular legislation passed by Parliament, / but from being a Christian.

But there are a number of people who are not Christians who would also accept those responsibilities.

What then are the distinctive marks of

Christianity?

They stem not from the social but from the spiritual side of our lives.

I would identify three beliefs in particular:

First, that from the beginning man has been endowed by God with the fundamental right to choose between good and evil.

Second, that we were made in God's own image

and therefore we are expected to use all
our own power of thought and judgement in
exercising that choice; and further, if we
open our hearts to God, He has promised to
work within us.

And third, that Our Lord Jesus Christ The Son

of God, when faced with His terrible

choice and lonely vigil / chose to lay down

His life that our sins may be forgiven.

I remember very well a sermon on an

Armistice Sunday when our Preacher said

"No one took away the life of Jesus, He
chose to lay it down".

I think back to many discussions in my early

life when we all agreed that if you try to

take the fruits of Christianity without

its roots, the fruits will wither.

And they will not come again | unless you
nurture the roots.

But we must not profess the Christian faith

and go to Church | simply because we want

social reforms and benefits | or a better

standard of behaviour | - but because we

accept the sanctity of life, | the

responsibility that comes with freedom | and

the supreme sacrifice of Christ expressed
so well in the hymn:

"When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride."

BIBLE PRINCIPLES - RELEVANCE TO POLITICAL LIFE

May I also say a few words about my personal

belief in the relevance of Christianity to

public policy - to the things that are

Caesar's?

The Old Testament lays down in Exodus the Ten

Commandments as given to Moses, | the

injunction in Leviticus to love our

neighbour as ourselves and generally the importance of observing a strict code of law.

The New Testament is a record of the Incarnation, the teachings of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Again we have the emphasis on loving our neighbour as ourselves and to

"Do-as-you-would-be-done-by".

I believe that by taking together these key

elements from the Old and New Testaments,

we gain:

a view of the universe,

a proper attitude to work

and principles to shape economic and

social life.

We are told we must work and use our talents

~~There is a clear mandate~~ to create wealth.

"If a man will not work he shall not eat"

wrote St. Paul to the Thessalonians.

Indeed, abundance rather than poverty has a legitimacy which derives from the very nature of Creation.

Nevertheless, the Tenth Commandment - Thou

shalt not covet - recognises that making

money and owning things ^{could} ~~can~~ become selfish

activities.

But it is not the creation of wealth that
is wrong | but love of money for its own
sake.

The spiritual dimension comes in deciding
what one does with the wealth.

How could we respond to the many calls
for help,

or invest for the future, |

or support the wonderful artists and

craftsmen whose work also glorifies God, |

unless we had first worked hard and used
our talents to create the necessary wealth?
And remember the woman with the alabaster
jar of ointment. //

I confess that I always had difficulty with
interpreting the Biblical precept to love
our neighbours "as ourselves" until I read
some of the words of C.S. Lewis.

He pointed out that we don't exactly love

ourselves when we fall below the standards
and beliefs we have accepted.

Indeed we might even hate ourselves for
some unworthy deed. //

POLITICAL ACTION AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

None of this, of course, tells us exactly what
kind of political and social institutions
we should have.

On this point, Christians will very often

genuinely disagree, though it is a mark of Christian manners that they will do so with courtesy and mutual respect.

What is certain, however, is that any set of social and economic arrangements which is not founded on the acceptance of individual responsibility will do nothing but harm.

We are all responsible for our own actions.

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We cannot blame society / if we disobey the
law.

We simply cannot delegate / the exercise of
mercy and generosity to others.

The politicians and other secular powers
should strive by their measures to bring
out the good in people and to fight down
the bad: but they can't create the one or
abolish the other.

They can only see that the laws encourage

the best instincts and convictions of the people, instincts and convictions which I am convinced are far more deeply rooted than is often supposed.

Nowhere is this more evident than the basic ties of the family which are at the heart of our society and are the very nursery of civic virtue.

It is on the family that we in government build
our own policies for welfare, education
and care. /

You recall that Timothy was warned by St. Paul /
that anyone who neglects to provide for
his own house (meaning his own family)
has disowned the faith and is "worse than
an infidel".

We must recognise that modern society is

infinitely more complex than that of

Biblical times and of course new occasions

teach new duties.

In our generation, the only way we can

ensure that no-one is left without

sustenance, help or opportunity, is to

have laws to provide for health and

education, pensions for the elderly, and

succour for the sick and disabled.

But intervention by the State must never
become so great / that it effectively
removes personal responsibility.

The same applies to taxation for while
you and I would work extremely hard
whatever the circumstances, / there are
undoubtedly some who would not unless the
incentive was there.

And we need their efforts too.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Moderator, recently there have been great debates about religious education.

I believe strongly that politicians must see that religious education has a proper place in the school curriculum.

In Scotland as in England there is an historic connection expressed in our laws between

Church and State.

The two connections are of a somewhat different kind, but the arrangements in both countries are designed to give symbolic expression to the same crucial truth -

that the Christian religion - which, of course, embodies many of the great spiritual and moral truths of Judaism - is a fundamental part of our national

heritage.

I believe it is the wish of the
overwhelming majority of people that this
heritage should be preserved and
fostered.

For centuries it has been our very life
blood.

Indeed we are a nation whose ideals are
founded on the Bible.

Also, it is quite impossible to understand our history or literature without grasping this fact.

That is the strong practical case for ensuring that children at school are given adequate instruction in the part which the Judaic-Christian tradition has played in moulding our laws, manners and institutions.

How can you make sense of Shakespeare

and Sir Walter Scott, or of the
constitutional conflicts of the 17th
century in both Scotland and England,
without some such fundamental knowledge?

But I go further than this.

The truths of the Judaic-Christian
tradition are infinitely precious, not
only, as I believe, because they are true,
but also because they provide the moral

impulse which alone can lead to that
peace, | in the true meaning of the word, |
for which we all long.

TOLERANCE

To assert absolute moral values is not to claim
perfection for ourselves.

No true Christian could do that.

What is more, one of the great principles
of our Judaic-Christian inheritance is

tolerance.

People with other faiths and cultures have
always been welcomed in our land, assured
of equality under the law, of proper
respect and of open friendship.

There is absolutely nothing incompatible
between this and our desire to maintain
the essence of our own identity.

There is no place for racial or religious
intolerance in our creed.

CHRISTIANS AND DEMOCRACY

When Abraham Lincoln spoke in his famous

Gettysburg speech of 1863 of "government
of the people, by the people, and for the
people", he gave the world a neat
definition of democracy which has since
been widely and enthusiastically adopted.

But what he enunciated as a form of government was not in itself especially Christian, for nowhere in the Bible is the word democracy mentioned.

Ideally, when Christians meet, as Christians, | to take counsel together | their purpose is not (or should not be) to ascertain what is the mind of the majority | but what is the mind of the Holy Spirit - something which may be quite different.

Nevertheless I am an enthusiast for democracy.

And I take that position, not because I believe majority opinion is inevitably right or true, indeed no majority can take away God-given human rights.

But because I believe it most effectively safeguards the value of the individual, and, more than any other system, restrains the abuse of power by the few.

And that is a Christian concept.

But there is little hope for democracy if the hearts of men and women in democratic societies cannot be touched by a call to something greater than themselves.

Political structures, state institutions, collective ideals are not enough.

We Parliamentarians can legislate for the rule of law.

You the Church can teach the life of
faith.

CONCLUSION

For, when all is said and done, a politician's
role is a humble one.

I always think that the whole debate about
the Church and the State has never yielded
anything comparable in insight | to that
beautiful hymn "I vow to thee my

country".

It begins with a triumphant assertion of what might be described as secular patriotism, a noble thing indeed in a country like ours:

"I vow to thee my country all earthly things above; entire, whole and perfect the service of my love".

It goes on to speak of "another country I heard of long ago" whose King cannot be

seen and whose armies cannot be counted,
but "soul by soul and silently her shining
bounds increase".

Not group by group | or party by party | or
even church by church - but soul by soul -
and each one counts.

That, members of the Assembly, is the country
which you chiefly serve.

You fight your cause under the banner of

an historic church.

Your success matters greatly - as much to
the temporal as to the spiritual welfare
of the nation.

I leave you with the earnest hope

May we all come nearer to that other

country whose

"ways are ways of gentleness

and all her paths are peace".