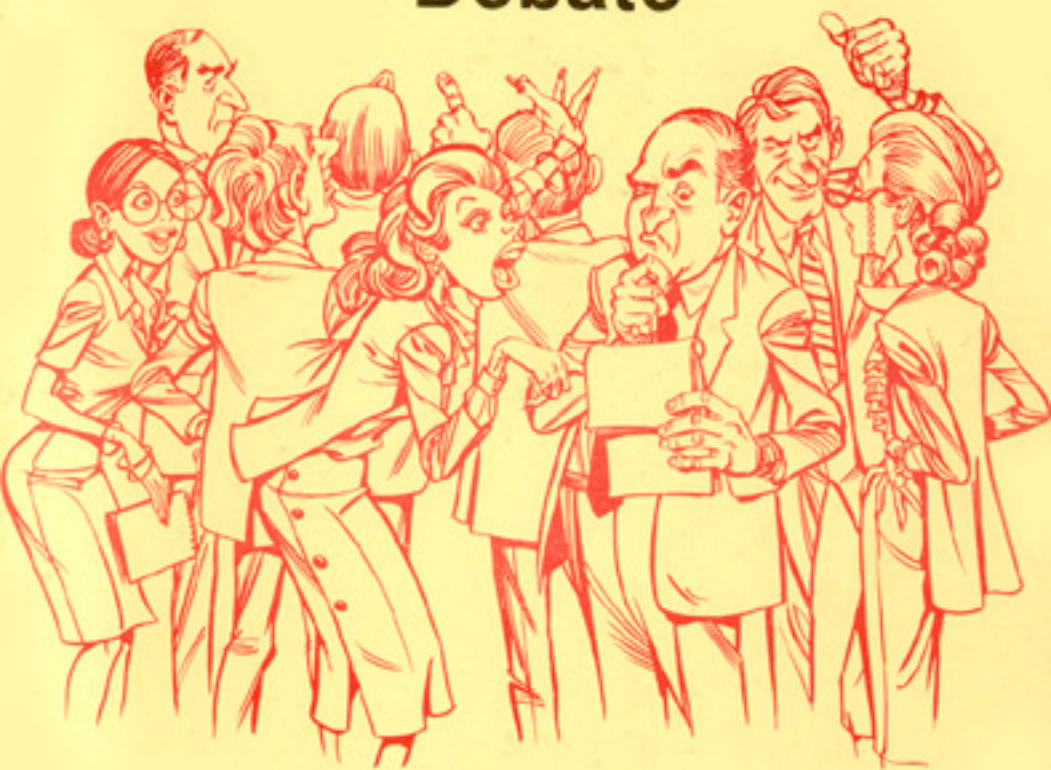


Contributing to Social Action and Debate



Grant Thorpe

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FOREWORD

This paper attempts to describe the framework within which Christians can feel confident as participants in the daily business of life, whether in private conversations or public debate, personal living or community action, and whether it be in matters of quiet development or situations of conflict.

Considerable discussion has taken place in recent times regarding a Christian's duty in his social environment. I have not sought to catalogue the various views taken, but have sought to clarify some of the 'givens' within which a person may discover how they should act and talk in the world. I have not been able to fully expound any Biblical perspective, nor make applications in any detail, but have tried to give some direction for further consideration.

Grant Thorpe January, 1983

TWO WORLDS

At the outset, we should be aware that Christians live in two worlds: the world that is, and the world that is to be. The world that is, as a creation of God, is the context in which mankind serves his probation and is the raw material from which the new age is to be fashioned. It is the world in which God has expressed his nature and in which those formed in his image must share his work. But the present world is in revolt, and therefore its perspectives are unreal. Persons and situations are seen as other than what they really are.

Jesus Christ was the inauguration of the new age or new creation—the world that is to be. Old Testament saints lived in the hope of its coming, but now this time has come. It is to this next, creation that Christians are primarily committed—not as something which is ‘other worldly’ but precisely because it is that for which the present creation is in travail (Romans 8: 18-25).

The world (the word is often used in Scripture of the world as it has become under rebellious control) has its own agenda dictated by its unreal perceptions. Its people may talk about and work for justice, human rights, and liberty, and Christians may often have reason to agree with or work with them. They should be aware, however, of the limitations and aberrations from which these things arise, and ensure that their own actions arise from their own bases. It is in this that Christian testimony so often lies. Christians and non-Christians talk about the same needs, suffer the same injustices (in many respects), and share the same creational mandate, but Christians come at those problems from the perspective that God has already acted decisively in this world to destroy what is false and establish the true order, not by force, nor by brilliance, but by grace and truth. This is the kingdom of God, and at this stage, the kingdom grows within the kingdoms of this world as a testimony to them as to how things should be done. In fact, Christians

should often be the ones to first perceive, most acutely discern, and most ably direct society onto its true path.

The need for this independent thinking and speaking is acute. Christians cannot be limited to discussion on the world's agenda. Inevitably, they must relate to such items, but point to a larger context in which these things can be evaluated, and perhaps, in which other issues can be shown to be more pressing.

Christians expect a return of Christ to this earth. In one sense, this will mean the passing away of the present order of things and the beginning of a new order. In another sense it will be the kingdoms of this world becoming the kingdoms of our God and his Christ (Revelation 11:15). Satan could only tempt Christ with an offer of all the kingdoms of this world if Christ knew they were destined to be his. To have received them then, however, would have been a non-event, because they would have remained in their defilement. By gathering a people of his own who are purified and zealous for good works, Christ has established the new creation in the midst of the old as a testimony to its need to be renewed. Those who have lived for the new in the midst of the old will have the satisfaction of knowing, in the new age, that what they did before has counted toward the new, and in the end that is the only assess-merit of one's work which will count (see Hebrews 11:13-16).

Because of this there is no real distinction between proclaiming the gospel and true social action. Both are a testimony to the truth of God as Creator and Redeemer of his creation and are therefore part of the action of the kingdom.

It is a very real question as to whether the Christian has very much to attract the world as it is. There is no question, however, that the Christian has everything to offer the world as it is to be, and that he must make it available to the world that is as a testimony to the truth of God.

In many cases, a point of view arising from Christian perspectives may appear ridiculous or decidedly unpalatable to someone outside the Christian faith, and this should not matter greatly to the Christian. I know it will be answered that we should be concerned for unbelievers who despise our message, but that is a different matter from being concerned for ourselves when we are not

understood. Christians are not likely to be of much value to the world as it is to be if they are courting the recognition of the world that is. Matthew Henry's comment on Galatians 6:14 reminds us that Paul 'was become as indifferent to it [the world] as one that is dying out of it.' We are not called to join a defiant world demanding the return of Eden, but to engage in creational duties which will glorify our Father. If, in fact, our good works glorify our Father, then people who 'are being saved' will find them 'a savour of life' (2 Corinthians 2:14-17). These people will glorify our Father 'on the day of visitation' (1 Peter 2:12). This is the only true relevance for which we should strive. Sometimes believers may find themselves without an opportunity to share their insight or concern. Then, as always, the truth about life must be demonstrated in all their life, and particularly in the community of faith, so its validity can be revealed to the world that is. To those who persist in unbelief, our works and our views will smell of death.

FINDING A CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW

God has said many things about our world, his plans for it, and care for it, our duty in it, his renewal within it (by the gospel), and his renewal of it in the end. If we can understand these things, we will have a world view that will help us see our way through many differing situations.

CREATION

All things are from God and for him. As Creator, God has a purpose in all he has made, and these purposes are only understood as people acknowledge that all things are for God. Many people have assumed they are only as valuable as the worth their parents gave them, or the amount an employer will pay them, or the number of trophies they can accumulate, etc. A Christian has a basis for believing otherwise.

We should not be surprised to discover that even something as

beautiful as love becomes tawdry or short-lived when it is seen only as something for humans to enjoy between themselves. Likewise the cry for justice will often revert to a struggle for 'just-us' if seen as justice for human beings. Justice too is for God—for His glory. It is he who is offended more than any of us. This world his. (Cf. Revelation 6: 10. The saints in heaven, and beyond self-interest, cry out for justices—for the honour of God's name.) Knowing this will prevent Christians from contributing to social action or debate on a merely reactive basis.

The sexuality debate will not be settled while we only talk about gaining rights for women or restricting the dominance of men. The issue will always recur in another form. Masculinity and femininity are for God so that together, and in harmony, the image of

can be reflected. Only this perspective can provide the balance in which a woman can be fully a woman and a man fully a man.

PROVIDENCE

God is good to all his creation. His providence may be discovered in all the earth (Psalm 33:4-5). We are inclined to disbelieve this 'the lucky country', and we certainly cannot prove that it is true. Our knowledge of God's goodness arises from the revelation of character, especially in Jesus Christ.

The Christian's contribution to this world therefore arises, from the worrisome notion that God's goodness is limited to the spasmodic benevolent action of humans, but from the truth that God's goodness is present to his whole creation and that, under him, we are to bring justice to the nations. This motivation strong and consistent, and full of hope. We live under one who 'will not fail or be discouraged until he has established justice the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law' (Isaiah 42)

Social debate or action which arises from this perspective does not need to be sympathetic with people's resentments for wrongs done to them. Resentment does not lead to justice but to revenge. Those who are assured that God has been busy doing good to his whole creation and that he will not fail, make a contribution to

debate or action which reflects truth and does not join the pendulum swing caused by self-righteousness opposing evil.

Many issues which excite conversation or debate, wrangles or uprisings are in fact reactions to injustices or inadequacies in the past, and are not necessarily healthy responses to a present situation.

Faith is believing that God rewards those who diligently seek him (not necessarily with prosperity and ease!), so the man of faith keeps working because he believes in the goodness of God. This is why Jesus did all his works (John 5:17, 10:32, 14:8-11).

It is instructive to see that when Jesus was directly confronted with an injustice and knew he was unable to remedy the situation, he did not feel helpless but urged his suppliant to beware of covetousness (Luke 12:13-34). In fact there was a rebuke involved in his 'Who made me a judge or divider over you?' If this man perceived that Jesus had authority, he was presuming that thing God ought to do (through his representative) was give him justice. For this man, God's goodness was tied to his giving him justice. In fact, God's Messiah did not have authority to enforce justice there and then. Nor did the revelation of God's goodness require it. The man needed to understand that his life did not consist in the abundance of his possessions, and that, in what was essential, God was rich towards him.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus congratulated those who were poor in spirit, and mourning, and meek, and hungry (see Matthew 5:3-6, Luke 6:20-21). People who could not be satisfied with what this world offered, in whatever way this came about, were better able to receive the true knowledge of God's goodness. The other side of this truth is that, for many, justice has done no more than provide them with idols, and a full background leads presumption, aimlessness, and lack of nerve. The teaching of Jesus encourages us to know the goodness of God in its wholeness.

MAN

The duty of man is to love God and his fellow man. This is to be

expressed in understanding tile creation and managing resources so as to reflect God's nature and purposes. This must elude every human being rising to their highest capability in serving others, not only in favourable conditions but wherever a person is placed. The life of Joseph should be read in this connection. The duty of man must also include the role of authorities encouraging all to their duty, and punishing those who fail to attend to it.

Christians need to beware of prescribing solutions to thorny problems when the problem requires the thinking and acting of all concerned in order to be overcome. It is the Christian's perspective and motivation which are unique, not his knowledge or ability. This understanding not only allows but requires us to seek the contributions of all parties to a debate. God's action in the world calls on all people to live responsibly for their fellow men. God's action in the world also means that none need lament that they are unable to do more than is given to them to do. Jesus finished the work given to him to do. So did Paul.

In the present climate of high unemployment we should encourage the formation of a new definition of work which is not based on being employed or well-paid; something like 'Being responsible for something necessary to the well-being of other people.'

There are many matters in life which are not going to be resolved in one lifetime. People with a perfectionist streak, or a lazy one, may use this as an excuse to retreat from responsibility. This could be true at a family level, or at an international level. The Christian can be very practical at this point because he knows that whatever the given situation, he is responsible for something—and so is everyone else to whom he talks. Having the confidence born of the conviction that God trusts us to act releases us from our inhibitions and releases true creativity (see Psalm 8).

It may often be at this point that a Christian is unwittingly seen at his best. Anyone who is not learning the meaning of truth from Christ becomes unable to fulfil his civic or any other human duty, and must feel the shame of it. (See the example of Pilate in John 18:28-19:16.) On the other hand, Christians working creatively

under the Father may bring new direction, hope, and a sense of responsibility in situations where others are tempted to ‘wash their hands’ of an affair. It is this workability of grace that often commends itself when other things are being found not to work.

The statement in Ephesians 4 to the effect that captivity has been taken captive and that gifts have been given to men, infers that God is able to provide both opportunity and ability for Christians to bring about what he wants to happen. If this is true in a church setting and God is also the God of all the earth, the same must be true in Society (cf. Proverbs 18:16).

It is instructive to note that Scripture addresses itself to Christian duty rather than to the ultimate shape of social interaction.

Getting involved in debates and movements to change structures is not essentially a Christian exercise. It must be done by those who govern and choices must be made by those who vote. But issues among people are always so complex that we must expect to have Christians seeing community benefit coming in a variety of political or social measures. Their testimony then lies in the respect for and heeding of one another’s insights. Their common voice must sound clearly, however, where the line of duty or principle is clear.

An obvious example of this is the presence of Christians in a variety of political systems. But Christians must also work with or choose from a variety of monetary systems, management systems, expedients for reform, and so on. If we believe that man is to manage the earth’s affairs, he must be bigger than all or any of these systems so he can use the systems to fulfil his duty rather than to be mastered by them. No system will ever be ‘right’ or even universally ‘best’ in a given situation, and Christians should learn to rely on God for strength to work out their duty in a given situation until the system is forced to change, or until the Christian is obligated to leave it. In short, human systems, and changes in them, should be subservient to persons undertaking their God-given tasks.

Consider the role of a business enterprise. Its stated object, according to the capitalist system, is to make a profit. That is the system, and a person in business must work with that. But the duty

of those who run a business is to facilitate the services that can be rendered by people to best use available resources to meet human need.

Consider also the desire of Christians (often-times with others) to restrict social perversity (eg. racism, pornography, divorce, abortion, etc.). Means used have included legislation, public opinion polls, academic research and argument, provision of alternatives, demonstrations, denunciation, lobbying, and so on. Each must do what he sees can be done, but should not suppose that all other Christians will see his means as the thing most needing to be done. What must be agreed on is that to be Christian is to be prophetic. This means Christians will act because God's nature is to be revealed and his reign through Christ demonstrated. It will not be done merely to make life less dangerous for Christians! If many Christians believed this and lived this, their influence would pour out in many differing ways and the world would find itself authentically confronted at every turn.

FAMILY

The world is essentially a family affair. That is, it was made by a Father, through his Son, with the object of people living under the Father and Son as brothers and sisters. In the world that is to be, this will be how things are, and already God is gathering his family, his people, together. This is the church, and they, together, are the light and salt of this present world. They show how society should really be.

The implications of all this are magnificent in their array!

(a) One should talk not so much about human rights as about human responsibility for others. This does not exclude the need to pursue justice for the oppressed but gives a higher motivation for it. All should be free to bring their best to the family! Old Testament law did not so much preserve individual rights as legislate for the well-being of a whole society.

(b) Leadership in any area should be basically a matter of fathering. No system of management of human affairs can replace

the need for fathers who are practised in their own families in matters of care and control and encouragement, sensitive to their mistakes and forgiving of others' errors. These are the men who should be trusted with public positions.

(c) Responsibility to immediate families, and, then extended families, and resolution of problems there becomes the key to the strength of all other social and public life. If a bad parent can run a good business, then that business has little to do with the world that is to be and its impact will pass away.

(d) Because God is a Father to the fatherless, and a Husband to the widow, the duty of society's fathers is to especially provide a context in which the unprotected can live with dignity. (It is not sufficient to talk about changing the role or shape of institutions. Institutions will only do what people want them to do.)

(e) The church, as mentioned above, becomes the model for how life is to be lived. United States Senator, Mark Hatfield, has said: 'Our political involvement begins with the shape of our church.' (Quoted in Christianity Today, 8/2/80, p.20.)

Christians should unapologetically believe in the church, not for what she has been but because it is given to us by God to belong to her, long for her, to discover our gifts in serving her, and so to be a working case-history of how life is to be lived.

EVIL

Evil is universal among persons (aside from Jesus), and is not the result of chance errors but deeply imbedded in each person's consciousness and choices. It becomes deceptive because of the need to hide and to justify itself, and gathers pace because of its need to destroy anything that 'shows it up' (cf: I John 3:11-13). All this is exacerbated by Satan, who marshals the interaction of evil with exquisite perversity.

Therefore a Christian must be as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove, as a sheep among wolves (Matthew 10: 16). He will also be aware of his own shortcomings and therefore have ample understanding of the motions and habits of evil, as also

plenty of reason to be merciful.

Without the gospel, self-interest, sensual gratification, despair and hatred rob the world of positive motivation. The negative motivations of resentment or self-justification, etc., are very strong and may appear to produce movements which improve social conditions. Christians at times may find themselves working for a common goal with people whose motivations are different from their own. As this is often the only way to meet a need, this must be done. But the Christian may well be able to modify more extreme elements that would become destructive and, more importantly, to reveal the character of God in 'the meekness of wisdom' (see James 3:13-18).

it is because evil continues to exacerbate all attempts to build a true society that Christians must not limit themselves to goals of reforming the world that is. It is their reference point in the world that is to be that informs their action in the here and now.

JUDGEMENT

Isaiah the prophet said to Israel (and to us) that when God's 'judgements are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness' (Isaiah 26:7-10). Probably no society is long without some manifestation of God's judgements.

It is a fact of life that people are not so concerned with doing wrong as they are with facing the consequences of having done wrong. Therefore judgements are sometimes the only path to an awakening. (See also Isaiah 59.)

No evaluation of a social crisis is complete unless this factor is remembered (see Amos 3:6). It follows that the help given by a Christian in such a crisis will only be the action of God's kingdom and be ultimately fruitful if it works in harmony with the true situation.

Several other things must be remembered:

- (a) God's judgements are never vindictive.
- (b) The person suffering most is not necessarily most under judgement or most guilty; many other factors also relate to suffering and social distress.

- (c) The fact of judgement probably does not need to be declared to a suffering person. If they have any sensitivity they will be aware enough of it already; and if they are not open to God, telling them may only add to their reasons to scoff. Australia has not had a good history in this regard. Suffering persons need most to see Christ entering into their judgement on the Cross. It is this grace which leads to their repentance more effectively than being told why they are suffering.
- (d) The fact that social disturbance reflects God's judgement does not mean Christians are relieved of their creational duty to work for justice and the well-being of all. If judgement is necessitated by people not doing their duty, it will not help if duty continues to be neglected.

If the collapse of human plans are necessary reminders of our need for a Creator, how futile it is for us to think that the kingdom of God depends in some way on the success of the kingdoms of man. The plan of God for the world as it is to be is so complete and necessary and desirable that it renders the sufferings of this present time, or the collapse of empires, as not worth comparing with it. (So Paul in Romans 8:17-20.)

Malcolm Muggeridge has said: 'Let us rejoice that we see around us on every hand the decay of institutions and instruments of power... For it is precisely when every earthly hope has been explored and found wanting... that Christ's hand reaches out sure and firm'. 'It is in the breakdown of power rather than its triumph that men may discern its true nature and in an awareness of their own inadequacy when confronted with such a breakdown, that they can best understand who and what they are!' (*The End of Christendom*, p.23 .) Solzhenitsyn has told us that it was in a labour camp that he learnt what freedom meant and became free (Muggeridge, p.23).

THE GOSPEL

it is by the good news of God's reign that the world is brought to its goal. The kingdom of God established by Christ means righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17), and by it all things will be brought to unity (Ephesians 1:9-10). God is renewing people so that justice can be done in love.

He is not merely concerned with just structures. Ghandi talked disparagingly of ‘dreaming of systems so perfect that no-one will need to be good.’ (Quoted in Schumaker’s *Small is Beautiful*, p.18.) Christians likewise should show by their lives and in their arguments that everything was made to work by love, and never without love. This must be true of marriages, monetary systems, education, commerce, medical healing, and all forms of human interaction. It must also be clear, and clearly demonstrated, that love is an effusion from one’s inner life, eager to be of service to others, and discerning in its application: a love, in short, which arises from an experience of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

A person who loves is the very stuff out of which true society is built. Therefore a Christian’s thinking, attitude and experience of living by love in community (the church) will often commend itself in debate and conversation.

Note how many social questions come back to knowing one is loved, having a purpose to live for, relating to authority, and understanding what society is creationally, and especially understanding what it has become through alienation from God. Through the preaching of God’s grace, people can come to see they are no longer under judgement, and can love. They no longer have a reason to be ashamed of their inner life and can give themselves without pretence to other people. They can relate to God as Father, and can appreciate the wisdom of his design for creation.

For this reason Christians should not feel they are changing the subject, or acting as religious opportunists, when they express their convictions concerning the gospel in the context of social issues. Rightly understood there is nothing more relevant to all of life than the gospel and nothing more socially constructive than proclaiming it. Finally, it will not be the fact that Christians are good that will change the world, but their belief that God is good.

At the heart of the gospel is the revelation that God has not given us justice but mercy. Those who discover this cannot rest with only the pursuit of justice, but long for the establishment of justice by love. This is what the Messiah is about: a justice arising from the nations longing for Messiah’s teaching (Isaiah 42:1-4). A

Christian must do justice, and exhort others to do the same. But he cannot afford to mislead the victim of injustice to believe that he is less than a whole person without his rights. He comes to wholeness of life in Christ. It is probable that a large percentage of Christians in the early church were slaves. There is no suggestion in the New Testament that they were to be pitied.

WISDOM

There is no alternative to wisdom, and there are no short courses on wisdom. It begins with the fear of God (Proverbs 1:7). It grows with experience (Luke 2:52, Romans 5:3-5). It learns from many sources {Proverbs 15:22). If it does not stumble, it is only because it loves (1 John 2: 10). All of the counsel of God (the Scriptures) must be applied to all of life with meekness (James 3:13-18). Out of this walking in truth will come many insights which will be self-authenticating to any others who long for truth. Where this discernment is lacking a whole nation can suffer (Isaiah 27:11, 29:9-16).

The Christian must be aware of those whose worldly wisdom includes politicking, manipulating, ‘taking in’ weak people, involving people on false pretences, and the like. But he needs to be secure enough to know that he does not serve the best interests of either the world or himself by using them. In fact, true wisdom will expose the hidden works of darkness (Ephesians 5:11).

CONCLUSION

Each Christian will have presented to him issues that press for his attention or action—and each Christian will feel that some issues are more significant than others. I cannot agree that one or two single social issues are more important than others for Christians. Every person has their own area of contact with this world, insight into its needs and responsibility for making a contribution to its future, and should be encouraged to act authentically within the

area of their calling. The following points may be helpful to consider when determining how to act in a given situation.

- (a) If a point of principle is clear to you, make what you know as clear as you can to others. Their progress depends on your input.
- (b) Don't assume the position of ultimate authority. There is one Judge and we are all under him. Those with this perspective can be definite without being dictatorial.
- (c) Be thinking of your own duty in the situation. What do you have to contribute? What can you change? How can you help another to see their situation more clearly? Be thinking also of the duty of those with whom you are dealing. What is their proper response to the existing situation?
- (d) Don't be 'blunt' with someone who has an 'axe to grind'. Sometimes silence is the best contribution. Look out for those who are of the same mind as yourself and seek to model your belief. A gram of demonstration is worth a tonne of argument.
- (e) Don't be disturbed if Christians disagree about what should be said or done about an issue. Christians have rarely agreed as to what should happen in society—in *particular*. This reflects, not necessarily the divisiveness of Christians but the essential complexity of all issues involving groups of people. On those occasions when Christians have agreed enough on a particular issue to have gained power, they have not always excelled themselves in displaying the character of God. Christians, as Paul found, best display the nature of God through weakness rather than strength.
- (f) Maintain a sense of humour. Muggerridge develops this theme in his book, *The End of Christendom*. This does not mean Christians should be nonchalant about serious affairs, but it does mean that more suffering may be caused by people overestimating their importance.
- (g) Recognise that the voice being heard most dimly may be the one most needing to be heeded. Former Victorian Chief Justice, George Higinbotham (1826—1892), has said: 'Wealth will always outstrip poverty and fraud will always outweigh simplicity.'
- (h) Remember that our wisdom lies in Christ and in the fact of his redemption (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Don't assume that your

perspectives are axiomatic to all 'reasonable' people. All of our social contact, if it arises from faith, will bear witness to truth, and the response of people to our social comment and action, particularly when its whole nature becomes apparent, will express their attitude to the truth.