

Editorial

Mark Elliott

When it was first announced that the theme of the 2004 FEET conference was to be 'public theology' many might have wondered: 'what is that?' The conference gave some of us the chance to find out. It is, we discovered, theology which (a) speaks out of the wisdom of the bible and Christian theology and experience about matters to do with public life, matters which touch all citizens, and (b) directs itself to be heard by persons and institutions outside the church. Each of these tasks presents its challenges. (a) involves the necessary marshalling of the counsel of biblical theology and the church's collected wisdom on any issue (e.g., 'war') and applying the appropriate hermeneutical 'lens' so that it is a theology suitable for the modern day. (b) requires that the church's voice is both understandable by the politician, the voter, the civil servant (not in any of the 'languages of Zion'), and that it declares concepts which are to some degree acceptable by those who do not accept the claims of God in Christ.

One approach to this last matter in the 1950s was to speak of 'middle axioms' – principles for policy formation which were inspired by Christian teaching and yet connected on the other side with universally accepted moral notions. This approach has been blasted from one angle – as Christians see their spokespersons too often water down the Christian message for the sake of forming partnerships in the public realm. This seems to get worse when denominations try to present a common Christian voice: the distinctive ideas are reduced to very little even before they have got beyond the walls of the churches. It has also been attacked from another angle: in other words, are there any such 'universally accepted moral notions (in the words of A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*)'?

Another way is to follow a thick strand in the Roman Catholic tradition, to speak of 'the common good': one problem here is that the church needs to show how the practice of a principle in the life of the church is indeed good for its own members before it is to stand a chance of being accepted by

a wary secular society: and, of course, is the good of a Christian community which, e.g., sees the absence of pain as not always desirable, not always good for all human beings.

What have we learned then from the conference just past? Well, that public theology is properly part of an evangelical Christian theology. The gospel is not apolitical nor is it political but rather 'super-political': to summarise Oliver O'Donovan, the 'political energies' of the cry "*YHWH mlk*" get subsumed in (but not cancelled out by) 'Jesus is LORD' in the New Testament. The papers in this volume are eloquent testimony to this. Our closer links with the European Evangelical Alliance in a planned theological consideration of the European Constitution (to take place Spring 2005) was in considerable part forged through this conference and its preparation. Part of the trouble is that Christians, yes even evangelicals, disagree among themselves, often on these 'public' issues (war, wealth distribution, human rights in various aspects, etc.). So then, who is to have the standing to represent us and what are they to emphasise? Well, whoever they are and whatever they believe on any one issue, Evangelicals will in general tend to be both harder and softer. Ours is not an easy moralising, but a hard questioning of secular positions in terms of what they presuppose and what they imply in terms of action and behaviour in the face of a holy Creator, and also an affirmation in the sense of repeatedly confirming the message of God's mercy in Christ. This is our framework: not just 'the Lordship of Christ' but the saving power over all creation for those who call on him. And that is the message of the Cross. So perhaps it is not inappropriate that we shall in the next, 2006 conference, to take place in Prague (4-8 August, 2006), consider the theme of Reconciliation – the Cross of Christ and all the difference it makes. Please accept this as an (early) invitation, on behalf of the FEET committee!