

The Faithfulness of God, Then and Now

The 2014 Gore Lecture, Westminster Abbey, March 4

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I am delighted and honoured to give the Gore lecture for a second time. When Charles Gore was here as Canon of Westminster he was here he devoted himself not least to biblical exposition both spoken and written; and then and subsequently he brought together fresh scriptural exegesis with his lifelong and Jesus-based missionary devotion to areas of great social need. In commemorating him this evening I bring together, as I think Gore himself would have wanted to do, some reflections on Paul and some reflections on the relevance of one of his greatest themes to matters which face us today.

Paul and the Faithfulness of God

In my recent book on Paul, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, I have highlighted the theme which sums up much of his work. This theme of the divine faithfulness has been obscured in much exegesis and theology, and we should restore it to its proper place. But here right away we face a double difficulty.

The first problem has to do with words. Paul's key terms do not usually translate exactly. Some of his most vital words are large cargo-ships which have stopped at many ports in the ancient world and picked up a variety of containers. We don't have the same fleet, and we have to make our own differently shaped vessels carry his luggage as best we can. The best example, central to tonight's theme, is the word *dikaiosyne*. When we meet it in Plato, we translate it as 'justice', often assuming, riskily, that Plato meant by that what we mean. When we meet the word in Paul, we traditionally render it as 'righteousness', a word all but useless today: we can insist all we like that Paul was *attacking* what we call 'self-righteousness', but that's what people usually hear in the word. But what can we use instead? Paul regularly echoes the Psalms and Isaiah, where the ancient Greek translations mostly used *dikaiosyne* and its cognates for the Hebrew root *tsedeq*. That word carried meanings of which Plato was unaware: the general sense of loyalty to a relationship, and then the very specific and focused sense of God's loyalty to the covenant with Israel. When Israel's God demonstrates his *tsedaqah*, his *dikaiosyne* in that sense, he is doing things which display, in action, not just some kind of impartial justice but rather his *faithfulness to the covenant*. Sadly, many English

translations fail to bring this out, in either testament: in vital passages in Isaiah, for instance, we find words like ‘deliverance’ instead. But the point is not the act of deliverance or rescue itself, but the underlying promise-keeping character of God. God does not act randomly, or on a whim, but out of radical covenant loyalty, trustworthiness and faithfulness. And, as I have argued at length in the book, when Paul speaks of the *dikaiosyne theou*, usually rendered as the ‘righteousness of God’, it is this divine covenant faithfulness that he has in mind.

That could lead straight into a study of Romans, which would be fun, but is not our purpose tonight. The point is that when Paul looks at the gospel events of the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, what he sees is an apocalypse: the great curtain between heaven and earth has been torn back, revealing to the astonished world the fact that its creator, the God of Israel, has been faithful to his promises. He has done what he said he would do. It may be startling, but this shocking, dramatic new event is what God had promised all along. That is why Paul so carefully explains that what has happened through the Messiah is in fact the fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham, and how, exactly in keeping with that, what has happened in the Messiah is in fact the long-awaited ‘new exodus’. Both those points are foundational for Paul, and both are central to his exposition of the divine *faithfulness*. The Exodus was the archetypal act of divine faithfulness; in the new Passover, the new Exodus of the Messiah’s death and resurrection, God has unveiled his faithfulness once and for all.

But what was the covenant there for in the first place? If the first problem about the divine faithfulness had to do with words, the second has to do with history, in this case, the history of the western church since long before the Reformation. Ever since the Middle Ages it has been assumed that the point of Christianity was to provide salvation after death. By the late Middle Ages, this focused especially on the novel doctrine of Purgatory. Thus, when the Protestant Reformers re-read Paul, they were looking for fresh biblical answers to those mediaeval questions; but when we re-read Paul in his own context, we find he was not addressing those questions, but subtly different ones. He too expounds salvation, of course, but he comes to it from a very different angle, a first-century Jewish angle rather than a mediaeval European angle. I honour the Reformers for trying to find biblical answers to the questions they were facing, but it is the task of the exegete to discover, as still more important, what questions the original text was facing. I have come to the view that centuries of post-Reformation readings, while grasping some aspects of what Paul was saying, have squeezed out others, not least the central one of the divine faithfulness itself.

This, too, had to do with words. In the middle Ages, and especially since Anselm, the Latin word *iustitia* was entrenched in the popular mind as the natural translation of *dikaiosyne*, bringing with it all the overtones of the mediaeval system of 'rights'. This meant that the original Hebrew and Pauline meanings of God's 'righteousness' were overlaid and obliterated. Now the question became one of the divine *iustitia*, with God as a cold, distant judge dispensing a fearsome justice against those who lacked any *iustitia* of their own. That was what the Renaissance rediscovery of Lucretius reacted against from one angle, and Luther and Calvin from another. For the latter, God possesses a different kind of *iustitia*, which could be imputed or reckoned to humans who lacked any of their own.

Two points about this historical problem. First, if you accept the question in the terms the mediaeval church had posed it, and if you search the scriptures for answers, you will indeed come up with something like Luther and Calvin. Fine. But, second, the texts themselves demonstrate that this was the wrong question to be asking. And, in the long, slow unwinding of church history since the Reformation, we have seen the churches struggling to make sense of Paul in that way and thus missing out something that lay at the heart of his thought, with dire consequences in terms of Christian life and mission. Since I persist in the old Protestant and evangelical belief that scripture itself must challenge and reframe all our traditions, including our protestant and evangelical ones, I am all too aware of many debates, some of them quite fierce, which are as it were waiting in the wings at this point.

This is so particularly because in the last two centuries there has been a further shift. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment embraced a version of Epicureanism in which God and the world were firmly split apart. God lived upstairs, and the downstairs world ran itself without reference to him. In science, this produced not just evolution – that was quite compatible with the idea of a present and active God – but *evolutionism*, the dogmatic Epicurean assertion, which science itself could never prove, that the natural world proceeded without divine presence or action. In politics, the same thing happened: the divine right of kings was replaced by a self-perpetuating democracy. God had been banished upstairs, leaving human political processes to fend for themselves. I shall say more about this later.

The Enlightenment is still the ruling philosophy in our world, despite the accurate if shrill postmodern critique. Christians have sometimes tried to hold out against the Enlightenment's radical scepticism. But in other ways we have gone along for the ride. The monuments here in the Abbey make the point graphically. Until the late eighteenth century, the dominant motif is resurrection: I am lying here at the moment, but *Resurgam!* – I shall arise. From

the nineteenth century on this has changed. Now people declare that they have ‘gone home’; that they are ‘at rest’, or in ‘eternal peace’. The churches of the west, having allowed the Middle Ages to set the terms of the question about salvation, allowed the Enlightenment to dictate the content: a distant salvation in ‘heaven’, to be anticipated by a private or detached spirituality in the present.

It doesn’t take much biblical knowledge to see what has happened. In the Bible, God, the creator, promises new heavens *and new earth*. In the New Testament, Jesus teaches us to pray that God’s kingdom will come *on earth as in heaven*, and at the end of Matthew’s gospel declares that all authority in heaven *and on earth* has been given to him. Paul in particular declares that the new creation which has already come into being in the resurrection of Jesus has ushered in a new era, not of a detached spirituality and an escapist heaven, but of the rule of Jesus through which God will finally put all things under his feet, including death itself. *Resurgam* indeed, because God will make a new world and raise his people to new life within it. By abandoning this creational hope, the western churches, including those that think of themselves as ‘biblical’, have routinely ceded ground to the secularists, and have embraced as a result various kinds of dualistic spirituality, including types of Gnosticism itself.

This has resulted, as with early Gnosticism, in a flight from involvement in the world. The church was first in the field in medicine, at a time when only the rich could afford it. The church was first in the field in education, similarly. It is good that whole countries have caught on to this vision, but that doesn’t mean the church can give it up, still less that the Johnny-come-lately secular governments can dictate terms to the church in these or other matters. And, particularly, the church was first in the field in caring for the poor – something to which Paul himself gave particular emphasis. To this I shall return. But my point is this. By sticking with the mediaeval questions and the Reformation answers to them, the church made itself vulnerable to the Enlightenment’s Epicurean polarization of God and the world, and was seduced once more into accepting the terms of the question and then struggling to give biblical answers within it – this time about a detached salvation and spirituality. And it was against that, of course, that Charles Gore himself, and others like Bishop Westcott in Durham, fought so strongly, trying to recapture the Christian social vision. But more recently those who, like them, have kicked against the trend have often tried to do so without biblical foundations, producing a non-biblical ‘social gospel’, while those who speak loudest about the Bible have often colluded with the muzzling of its world-embracing vision.

What does Paul have to say to all this with his particular vision of God and God’s faithfulness? Here there are two answers which might appear obvious but

which readers of Paul, at both an academic and a popular level, have found difficult to articulate alongside all the other aspects of his thought.

The two answers are that in scripture God has promised to be faithful both to his *covenant* and to his *creation*. The covenant appears the more obvious: in the Psalms and prophets God promises Israel that the covenant will stand fast, and that, if it has been broken from Israel's side, God will find the way to restore it. There has been enormous resistance within Christianity to any retrieval of this deeply Jewish theme, since so much Christianity has had a hard time figuring out how to relate to its own Jewish inheritance. But this simply won't do. The first section of Romans climaxes in chapter 4, where Paul expounds Genesis 15 – the chapter where God makes the covenant with Abraham, promising the childless patriarch a family and the landless nomad a territory. Here, as earlier in Galatians 3, Paul picks up precisely these promises and declares that God has been faithful to them – only on a grand scale. The 'family' is not to be one ethnic people only, but a huge, uncountable family composed of Gentiles as well as Jews, the ungodly as well as the godly. The 'land' is not to be one strip of territory only, but, as in the Psalms, the whole cosmos. For Paul, it is this covenant to which God has been faithful. The initial restriction of the promises to a single nation and a small strip of territory were to be seen as signposts, pointing forwards to the claim of the covenant God on the whole of creation. And the sign of that claim was the Temple, the meeting point of heaven and earth, not a place of retreat from the world but rather the bridgehead of God's sovereign claim upon and into the world.

Because, of course, ancient Israel believed that the covenant God was also the creator God; and, at crucial points, we glimpse the link. When we stand back from the narrative of Genesis it becomes fairly obvious: *the covenant is in place in order to rescue creation, and make it at last what it was meant to be*. God called Abraham to undo the sin of Adam and its effects, and to get creation back on track. The promised land is to be the new Eden. Abraham's seed are to inherit it and look after it – though they, like the primal pair, will be ejected if they rebel. And so on. That is the rubric over all Old Testament theology. So again, in one passage after another God promises that whatever happens he will be faithful to *creation itself*. With the land as the symbol, and the Temple as the focal point of that land, itself functioning as a microcosm, a 'little cosmos', God will not let the forces of corruption and decay, of arrogance and violence, have the last word. There will be a new creation in which the wolf and the lamb will lie down together, because the earth shall be full of the knowledge of YHWH as the waters cover the sea. That promise in Isaiah 11 is expanded in Habakkuk, where the whole creation is to be one giant temple, flooded with the presence of the glorious God: the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of YHWH, as the waters cover the sea. God will be faithful to creation, not merely

in the sense of rescuing it from utter ruin, but in the sense that he will do with it what he always intended, making it a world saturated with his presence, throbbing with his glory, alive with his own life. And, just as Paul was working closely with the Abrahamic covenant in Romans 4, so he expounds this future for all creation in Romans 8. The whole creation will be set free from its slavery to corruption and to obtain the freedom which comes when God's children are glorified.

Paul's vision, rooted in the Old Testament, is thus about the faithfulness of Israel's God, the creator, both to the covenant with Israel and to the whole creation itself, the material world. I shall shortly be suggesting, in the second half of this lecture, that all this gives us a much better platform than we might have expected from which to address some urgent issues today. But before we can get there we must address the all-important link between creation and covenant.

That link is made, in the ancient scriptures and in Paul, by the figure of humankind: man and woman, made in God's image. For Paul, as for scripture, the 'image' is not static, as in many proposals, but active: to be in God's image is to reflect God, not back to God, but as with an angled mirror to reflect God into the world, and the world back to God. That is fully in keeping with the idea of the original creation as a temple, a place where God and humans meet: the final thing you put in a temple is the image, which lets the worshippers see who their god is and so worship and serve him. That is the role that humans are given within creation as a whole, the role summed up in the vocation, first of Israel and finally of the renewed people in Revelation, to be the 'royal priesthood', kings and priests. And now at last there comes into view the more normal territory of Pauline thought, which has been isolated in western readings but which only makes its intended sense when put back into this larger framework. Now, and only now, can we understand the purpose of God in saving the human race.

The point is this. In biblical thought, humans were made to be God's agents, God's stewards, in creation. Humans were made to sum up the praises of all creation, to bring the inarticulate worship of trees and mountains and beasts and cattle into wise and joyful speech; and they were made to bring God's wise order to that creation, naming the animals, tending the garden, looking after the flocks and herds and making them flourish. The original mandate, given in Genesis 1 and 2, is repeated gloriously in Psalm 8, which becomes important as a New Testament vision both of humankind in general and of the Messiah in particular. 'You have made him little lower than the angels, to crown him with glory and honour, putting all things in subjection under his feet.' That is the destiny of humankind, seen in the New Testament as gloriously fulfilled already

in Jesus. And that is the clue to the puzzle of how Paul, and with him all New Testament theology, actually works.

God's plan, it appears, was for creation to be brought to wise ordering through his imagebearing human creatures, who were given 'glory', that is, sovereignty, over the world. Creation was designed, not to work all by itself, but to work under the gentle, wise stewardship of worshipping humans. This plan was itself designed with the incarnation in mind. God made humans to reflect his loving wisdom into the world in order that he might himself embody that loving wisdom. The plan always necessitated what we rather loosely call human freedom; and since that posed an obvious risk, we might say that God knew that if the worst occurred, and the human creatures rebelled, that would not demand a 'Plan B', but only an intensification of 'Plan A'. The incarnation would have happened anyway; but, granted human sin, the incarnation of God's loving wisdom would mean that the second Adam would come into a world of sin and shame and take it all upon himself, offering to his Father the ultimate sacrificial worship of a life obedient to death and bringing to the world the salvation that would enable the original plan to be brought back on track.

Here, then, is the deep point of Paul's vision of salvation. So often we hear the story told like this: God made us for fellowship with himself; we sinned; God sent Jesus; we now have fellowship with God once more. All that is true, but it is not the whole truth, and if claimed as the whole truth it becomes an untruth, as though the purpose of the whole project of salvation is 'me and my fellowship with God'. The kingdom of God is not about God and his people getting it together. It is not just about, as is sometimes said, God's people in God's place with God's blessing. It is all of that, of course, but the point of the kingdom is that it is about God reclaiming his sovereign rule over the whole world, *through* his people – his people, of course, being focused on and redefined around Jesus himself. We were created to be God's imagebearers, and, says Paul, we are to be 'renewed in knowledge according to the image of the creator'. Or, in the carefully-phrased climax of Romans 8, with its vision of creation renewed: God's plan was that we should be conformed to the image of his son, that he might be the first-born among a large family. And to be imagebearers means to be glorified: not to shine like electric light bulbs, but in the sense of Psalm 8: crowned with *glory and honour*, with all things put underfoot. That is the goal. We are rescued in order to be rescuers. We are put right with God in order to be putting-right people. This is clear in Revelation, where those redeemed by the Lamb are to be kings and priests to reign on the earth, but it is clear in Paul as well, where those who receive the gift of covenant membership will *reign* (Romans 5.17).

Does this in any way modify the centrality of Paul's vision of the cross of Jesus, in all its glory and grace? Not at all: it sets it in its proper context. God made humans to reflect his wise, glorious sovereignty into the world, and to reflect creation's worship back to him. When humans reversed this, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the creator, and so corrupting their own imagebearing and fruitbearing humanness and allowing creation to fall into thorns and thistles, God called Abraham, the childless nomad, so that through his family, created by grace alone, he might restore the human race and reclaim the whole creation. That is the purpose of the covenant. But then, of course – since Abraham and his family are also rebel humans – the covenant itself appears to go horribly wrong. The warnings and curses of Deuteronomy come tragically true. Did God know that would happen? Yes. Had he already provided for that eventuality? Yes. Just as God made humankind to reflect his loving wisdom into the world so that he might come himself and embody that loving wisdom, so God made Israel as his covenant partner, to rescue the human race and so get the project of creation back on track, in order that he might come himself, as Israel in person, and take the weight of Israel's failure and hence of the entire human failure on to himself, to deal with it once and for all and make a way through to the renewal and restoration of the whole of creation.

That is the heart of Paul's gospel. Jesus comes and dies precisely as Israel's Messiah – when Paul says *Christos*, this is not a proper name, as has so often been imagined – to take Israel's sins and hence the world's sins on to himself. Israel has been faithless to its vocation; he is faithful, faithful unto death. This is how the exile works out in biblical theology: as most Jews of Paul's day believed, the exile had not yet run its course, but Jesus comes to take upon himself the curse of curses, dying at the hands of the pagans outside the walls of Israel's capital city. He has taken upon himself the strange servant-vocation marked out in the vital central passages of Isaiah, wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities – not as an abstract theological transaction but precisely in the sense it has in Isaiah itself, where chapter 53 explains how the kingdom of God is coming (chapter 52), in order that the covenant be renewed (chapter 54) and creation itself should be rescued from thorns and thistles into new flowering and flourishing. All that is part of what it means to say that 'The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.' Jesus on the cross is Jesus the true image-bearer, reflecting the saving wisdom of God into the world and reflecting, as the ultimate sacrifice, the true self-offering of all creation back to the Father. As Paul says, there is 'no condemnation for this in the Messiah', because God has condemned sin itself in the Messiah's flesh.

But of course it doesn't end there. The Messiah was raised on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures – because, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians

15, which opens with that summary of his gospel, the resurrection of Jesus is the launching of the new creation that was promised all along, that God had in mind from Genesis onwards, from the call of Abraham, from the promises to David. The resurrection of Jesus has often been reduced, in western theology, to an odd dogma which either proves ‘life after death’ or which just shows how great God is, or something like that. It isn’t. Nor is it about ‘going to heaven when we die’. It is the fulfilment, in the close-up personal physical body of Jesus, of the promise that the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. Paul echoes that promise, as well as the creation narrative, when he says in 2 Corinthians 4 that we have glimpsed the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah. That, too, in context has to do with new covenant and new creation. This is all Temple-language; it is all Exodus-language; it is the language of the return of YHWH to Zion. We are here in touch with the deep structure of Paul’s thought.

Thus Paul’s vision of salvation, when you see it whole, is not simply about how God and humans can get back into fellowship. That happens, and remains central, but it is always a means to a larger end. Humans are saved in order to resume their place in the divine order, worshipping the creator and bringing his loving wisdom into the world. And humans are saved because the creator God, in order to be faithful to his creation, has been faithful to the covenant through which humans were to be restored so that creation itself could be restored. I venture to suggest, and my book tries to demonstrate this, that if you read Paul this way there are all sorts of passages which are difficult on other readings but become clear on this one. Many western readings of Paul, both Catholic and Protestant, both liberal and conservative, work with a severely reduced canon within the canon, even privileging certain chapters within Romans itself over against others. That is a sign of radical weaknesses in the underlying theology, which have emerged, as I have hinted, in the form of radical weaknesses in the life and witness of the church, not least in the last two hundred years of a shrunken post-enlightenment Christianity. Some of those I shall address presently.

But before we get there, I face another objection. Does this mean that the basic structure of Paul’s thought is horizontal – dealing with the church and its mission to the world—rather than vertical, dealing with the relationship between the sinner and God? Not at all. God’s sovereign initiative – call it ‘vertical’ if you like – remains vital. But what that initiative does is to bring God’s long, dark, strange covenant purpose to its horrifying fulfilment on the cross, and so to launch in the resurrection the believing family whose mandate begins with the risen Jesus declaring that all authority is given to him in heaven *and on earth*. This is what it means to be angled mirrors – for Jesus himself to

be the ultimate image-bearer, the ultimate angled mirror: to bring together the vertical and the horizontal in proper relationship.

I have tried, in this brief and compact account, to give a bird's-eye view of how Paul's theology actually works. All that I have said comes into view once we take Paul seriously when he speaks of the *dikaiosyne theou*, and once we allow that phrase to resonate in the biblical world from which he obviously takes it. In the Messiah and by the Spirit, God has been faithful to the covenant with Israel, and thereby faithful to the creation itself, *by being faithful to his calling to his human creatures*. The rescue-operation of the cross, and the launching of new creation in the resurrection, is the focal point of this divine faithfulness. If we are Christians, then according to Paul we are caught up in this movement, in this purpose. That is why our own faith or faithfulness, our belief and our allegiance, is the only badge we wear as Christians, ruling out any badge which signifies our membership in one or other subdivision of the human race.

All this leads us, not before time, to the second and shorter section of my lecture. What does the faithfulness of God, as expounded by Paul in the light of Messiah and Spirit, have to say about the urgent tasks and issues that face us today?

God's Faithfulness in Tomorrow's World

There are many ways in which Paul's vision of God's faithfulness might be applied in tomorrow's world. I want, very briefly, to name just five of them.

I begin with the most obvious one. In Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians and Ephesians, but also visibly in the other letters as well, we glimpse Paul's vision of God's faithfulness to his whole creation. The divine purpose, he writes in Ephesians 1, was to sum up in the Messiah all things in heaven and on earth. All things were created through and for the Messiah, and are reconciled through him and for him. Thus the whole creation will be liberated from its slavery to corruption, and God will be all in all. This glorious vision of creation renewed has remained unknown in much western theology, or if it has been glimpsed it has been pushed off to the distant future. Some have even suggested that such language is mere hyperbole, and that Paul is really only interested in the salvation of human beings *from* creation. But that misses the whole point. Humans are rescued from their idolatry and its consequences in order once again to be imagebearers, given sovereignty and glory over creation. And – here is the point – *this has already begun with the resurrection of Jesus*. The new creation has already been launched. And the power of the Spirit is there to

enable new creation not only within humans, in the fruit of the Spirit and holiness of life, but also *through* humans.

This is part of the now-and-not-yet character of Paul's eschatology. The ultimate new creation remains in the future, but it has already burst into the present, and those who belong to the Messiah are not only beneficiaries of this, certainly not mere spectators of this, but also active participants. That is why Paul ends his great resurrection chapter by saying that what you do in the Lord is 'not in vain'. That is the 'now' and the 'not yet': we do things, we work at new creation in the present, without seeing how what we do contributes to God's ultimate future. But the point of the resurrection is that it does indeed contribute.

The two obvious areas where this applies are ecology and art. God has already launched new creation at Easter. To refuse to take part in the healing of creation in the present, even though we know it is currently only partial, is to be like the servant who hid his master's money in the ground. This is not to legitimate every faddish 'green' project, but it is to call into question any backing off from ecological work with the excuse of a purely future kingdom or a warning against worldly concerns. In the New Testament, the kingdom is already here: Matthew's Jesus claims already to possess all authority in heaven *and on earth*, and in 1 Corinthians Jesus is already reigning. That is the ecological mandate. As for art: one of the great gains of postmodernity is to challenge the hegemonic rationalism of modern culture, and to recapture the sense that the beauty and horror of the world are to be understood and expressed, precisely through human artefacts and activities, in ways which flow from, and re-engage, the right brain where the real decisions should be made. I could say much more about this. It was in obedience to this imperative that I made a small start with the use of poetry in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.

If the first area of application concerns God's faithfulness to *creation*, the second follows from God's faithfulness to the *covenant*. For Paul, this meant that God had provided in the Messiah the single family which he had all along promised Abraham. The western church has been largely blind to Paul's emphasis on church unity across ethnic and cultural divisions. For every one time he discusses Justification, he discusses and insists on church unity a dozen times, depending how you count. In particular, Galatians, so often seen as the polemical letter about how to get saved, actually never mentions salvation at all, but instead insists in every chapter on the unity of the church -- on the ground of that unity, the vital importance of it, and the way in which the Spirit enables it. The whole point of the letter is that God promised Abraham *one* family, not two or three or several, and this family consists of the Messiah and all his people. Here is the irony. Galatians became a key text for the sixteenth-century

Reformers as they struggled to give answers to mediaeval questions about soteriology – but, in giving those answers, the Reformers accidentally set in train the fissiparous church disunity which is now a global scandal. If Paul were to come back today this is one of two or three areas that would astonish as well as appal him: not only that we are so radically disunited but that we take it for granted. God has been faithful to the covenant, but those who claim membership in that covenant family have been utterly faithless to the very nature of that covenant.

Note what follows. The western Enlightenment has produced a parody of the gospel, in which the new secular paradise claims to provide a unity transcending national boundaries. That was the impetus for the essentially modernist projects of the United States two centuries ago and the European Union of a generation ago. But the secular version of this Christian imperative has run out of steam. Postmodern identity politics has called time on the big, top-down modernist projects, producing new nationalisms of various sorts. We wring our hands at Basque terrorists and the stand-off in the Ukraine – not to mention South Sudan or Syria, or the lingering awfulness of the Balkans – but our big secular narratives have nothing to say to these situations. Meanwhile Paul’s vision of God’s radical faithfulness to the covenant remains on the shelf, unnoticed, waiting for the day when the church will once again embrace it and discover, as Desmond Tutu did in South Africa, that it actually works on the ground. Paul wrote in Ephesians that through the church the many-splendored wisdom of God was to be made known to the principalities and powers. As long as the church remains divided, almost always along ethnic and cultural lines, the powers will take no notice. That’s why the media are always happy when Christians squabble amongst themselves.

God’s faithfulness to creation and to covenant then focuses, as we’ve seen, on his faithfulness to humans themselves. But this faithfulness to humans, this reconstitution of what it means to be human, is the ground of all Christian holiness, and once again we have managed to lose that vision almost entirely. Some have translated the call to holiness into a bunch of rules to be imposed from above and obeyed blindly. Others, in reaction, have insisted that what matters is being true to your innermost self. But neither that neo-legalism nor that neo-gnosticism comes anywhere near the biblical and Pauline vision of renewed humanness. Nor can we get there by parroting the slogans of postmodernity, whether by talking of ‘inclusivity’ or of ‘embracing the other’. As I say in the book, those who try to sail the moral seas with that equipment look suspiciously like a handful of survivors clinging to a broken spar as the ship goes down and the sharks close in. Rather, the faithfulness of the creator and covenant God to his human creatures is expressed exactly in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, imprinted on his people in baptism; and the

reaffirmation of imagebearing humanness in the resurrection happens precisely because the old nature has been left behind on the cross. To set up any part of that old nature as an ‘identity’, and to insist that this at least must be rescued from the death of Calvary, is to fly in the face of chapter after chapter in Paul. It is time to rebuild our central ethical debates on the rock of Jesus himself, away from the shifting sands of postmodern fashion.

Those were my first three comments: God’s faithfulness to creation, covenant and to humans generates all kinds of challenges. Now for my last two.

First, for Paul as for all the early Christians, following Jesus himself, the faithfulness of God was seen very obviously in the church’s service to the poor. ‘Be sure to remember the poor’, said Peter, James and John to Paul as they shook hands on their missionary agreement; and he responded that this was what he was most eager to do. Following recent scholarship, I don’t think this meant simply ‘please send some more money to us here in Jerusalem,’ though that was clearly involved as well. Again and again we see the imperative: do good to all, including especially of course those of the household of faith – but doing good to all, as an imperative for a small group of people most of whom were poor themselves, was an unheard-of challenge in the ancient world, and we should recognise it as such. The church, as Paul envisaged it, was to be an active and visible sign of the creator’s faithfulness to his whole creation, not least by bringing direct and immediate help to those who needed it most. From the earliest days to the present, helping the poor has thus been central to the Christian mission, not simply a good deed added on at the side but something that lay at the vital core. But, as with matters like education and medicine, what the church had always done the post-Enlightenment state has declared that it will now do.

That is in all sorts of ways a very good thing, though here as elsewhere the secular vision is trying to get the fruits of the Christian gospel while quietly but clearly denying the roots. But the roots – the faithfulness of the one God, made known in Jesus and his death and resurrection, and then continually visible in the spirit-led church that is the Messiah’s body – are the only way to keep the fruit coming. So when those in the churches who are a lot more in touch with the real needs of truly poor communities than the politicians in the Westminster bubble speak up and say that things are becoming intolerable, it simply will not do to wish this away as ill-informed leftie rhetoric. I have worked in the north-east with communities whose poverty would take your breath away – families where children take it in turns to wear the one pair of shoes and so to come to school, families who desperately hope there may be one or two more coins in the tin beside the gas metre, or down the back of the sofa, because otherwise they will be freezing cold until the end of the week. When life is that hard – and

it is for millions in our glitzy society – the imposition of novelties like the bedroom tax is bound to be seen as yet another way of dumping on the poor while the rich get richer. To have, in the same week, politicians complaining about bishops speaking up for the poor while a loss-making state-owned bank pays out millions in bonuses would be funny if it wasn't so serious. From the second century onwards, local officials in the Roman world didn't know very much about the church, but they knew the bishops were always banging on about the needs of the poor. That has always been part of what it has meant to be a bishop, and I thank God that the present generation is sustaining this tradition, this Pauline vision of the practical faithfulness of God.

So, finally, to my other larger area. I have argued in the book that the Pauline vision of the faithfulness of God engages with all the issues of philosophy and politics which have usually been marginalised in the study of the New Testament. The central challenge in these areas in our own day lies in recapturing the vision of God's faithfulness in the face of the still enormously powerful agenda of the Enlightenment.

Just to be clear: I do not think the Enlightenment was an unmitigated disaster. It brought many blessings. But it taught us to think within an implicit narrative which is radically different from the biblical one, and the results have been disastrous.

For a start, it taught us that world history reached its defining climax when Europe and America abandoned 'superstition' in the eighteenth century. As Christians we believe – or we should believe – that world history reached its defining climax when Jesus rose from the dead. Second, cognate with this, the Enlightenment taught the doctrine of 'progress', a Whig reading of history in which moral and political progress was now inevitable: we had discovered where history was going and simply had to get on board. This is still an unshakable dogma in the world of the media. The twentieth century should have disabused us of this nonsense, but so should a reading of Paul. His vision of God's faithful outworking of his purpose has nothing to do with 'progress', with an immanent movement within the world, and everything to do with the rule of Jesus the Messiah confronting the powers and often requiring his people to stand in the breach as his representatives.

Let's be clear: the reason the West has been so inept throughout the so-called Arab Spring, never mind the ill-advised middle eastern adventures that preceded it or the present Crimean disaster as it unfolds, is that we have lived on our own small-scale political narrative, growing directly out of the previous two features of the Enlightenment, in which we have imagined that all human societies will work as France and America did in the late eighteenth century: get rid of tyrants

and liberal democracy will magically emerge. Actually it wasn't that easy in either of those cases, it has never been that easy in most of the world, and it certainly isn't that easy today. But our politicians still talk as if the modernist utopia is just round the corner, and that if only we can survive this crisis, or win this next vote, then we'll be there. They are still living off the inaugurated eschatological gospel of eighteenth-century secularism. And the media, which have claimed the right to be the effective opposition, thus usurping the role which the church ought to have, go along for the ride, playing to the galleries, stirring up hopes and fears which then in turn drive politicians and elections. And if the church colludes with this by confining itself to supposedly 'spiritual' matters we are, quite simply, letting down the Jesus who already claims all authority on earth as well as in heaven. We are letting down the God who, in Jesus and his death and resurrection, has been faithful to his purposes and promises for the whole creation. We have learned, in recent years, just how corrupt and untrustworthy all our institutions have become – banks, the police, the health services, the journalists, the politicians of course – and tragically the church itself has often been caught out in corruptions of our own. This poses the classic postmodern problem: who on earth can you trust?

But, as Paul said, we do not preach ourselves: we preach Jesus the Messiah as Lord, and ourselves as your servants through Jesus. The church must recover its nerve and bear faithful witness to the faithfulness of God, the creator God who said 'let light shine out of darkness' and who has shone in our hearts, in renewing his covenant, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah. This is not an escapist message. That would only be true if the 'God' in question were after all the distant Deist or even Epicurean divinity. He is not. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, now made known fully and faithfully in Jesus and the Spirit. It is in his name and his cross-shaped power that we must take up our own tasks for tomorrow's world, bearing witness to his faithfulness, unveiled in Jesus' death and resurrection, in a world where faithfulness of any sort has been in remarkably short supply. If Paul was here tonight, I think that's what he would want to say. And I think Charles Gore would have agreed.