
Facing the Issues

Graham Harrison

From this significant book, D MARTYN LLOYD-JONES: THE FIGHT OF FAITH 1939—1981, by Iain H Murray (Banner of Truth, 831 pp, £15.95), our reviewer concentrates on a controversial feature which remains crucial for the BEC.

This volume is a fascinating story well told and a labour of love. Murray has a deft biographical touch that coupled with his limpid, easy-to-read style ensures the attention and probably involves the emotions of most readers.

It covers the period from the settlement of Dr Lloyd-Jones at Westminster just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War to his death in 1981. If Francis Bacon was right when he said 'Church History thoroughly read and observed is of great virtue in making a wise divine' then present day pundits of the ecclesiastical scene would do well to peruse what Murray has written. Indeed, I would venture the opinion that you do not really have much hope of assessing the contemporary situation without informing yourself of the story of these years.

One of the virtues of the book is the way in which the opportunity is seized of putting the record straight and in the process dispelling some of the myths that have been accumulating around the Doctor's memory. — myths that have effectively poisoned the memory of the man in the minds of some.

In doing this Murray forces us to face issues that, despite the efforts of some to persuade us that they are no longer relevant, are very much part of the current scene. Rather than range over the whole spectrum of men and events that the book covers it will be better in this brief review to concentrate on one issue that has occasioned more controversy than anything else that the Doctor said or did and that is still of crucial importance for the welfare of the church. It should also figure prominently on the practical agenda of the BEC.

I refer to the 'call' that he gave at the specially convened National Assembly of Evangelicals in October 1966 for our oneness in Christ to be demonstrated at the church level. All that Lloyd-Jones did was — at the request of the Commission on Church Unity — to state in public the views that he had expressed to them in private during previous months. Far from abusing the occasion and in the process splitting Evangelicalism, he showed God-given restraint when the chairman did just that in his concluding remarks. What the Doctor did, and Murray provides the conclusive evidence for this, was simply to bring into the open the divisions within the constituency regarding ecumenism and the toleration of false teaching involved in all that. In principle he had been saying the same thing over the years, not least in his address and booklet MAINTAINING THE EVANGELICAL FAITH TODAY. He was making a call for the gospel to determine our ecclesiology.

As Murray clearly shows, he was not summoning men there and then to leave their denominations. Neither then nor subsequently did he put a time limit on that call. He made full allowance for pastoral considerations that would vary from situation to situation. Nor was he singling out the Anglicans for special treatment and in the process working off his Welsh Nonconformist hang-ups. Rather he was calling upon men of any denominational connection to recognize the sin of schism that effectively sundered them from one another, church-wise, while binding them in many cases to the most unholy ecumenical alliances. The author clearly is unhappy, and says so, that Lloyd-Jones came up with no blueprint to guide the formation of this loose fellowship of churches which he envisaged. Murray's Presbyterian predilections cause him some problems at this point. But this was surely one of those secondary areas that, given goodwill and a recognition that primaries are more important than secondaries, need not have proved insurmountable.

The issues are still with us — only more so! Is it right to regard as Christians those who deny the faith? Is it right to remain indefinitely in denominational fellowship with such? **Is it right to engage in an ecumenism that regards evangelicalism as merely one option amongst many equally valid, or maybe superior, ones?** In the light of subsequent events there was surely something prophetic about the insight which enabled Lloyd-Jones to place such issues before an unwilling constituency then. In fact if the situation was serious in 1966 it could be argued that it is nothing short of calamitous now. If there were confusion then it is surely confusion worse confounded today.

Which, perhaps, brings us to the present day relevance of this story. Is it all about '... old, unhappy, far-off things; And battles long ago'? Does the manifest failure then to heed the Doctor's call preclude the possibility of its being reissued and implemented in the future? At this point the message of the book is of very great relevance to the BEC. As Murray points out there was something almost unreal about the atmosphere of euphoria that marked some of those early meetings of the re-invigorated BEC. Soon the realities of division surfaced and the call to pursue evangelical unity slid down the practical agenda. It ought not have been so. Regrettably it might have been the case that **the denominational groupings which then totally comprised the BEC were so entrenched in their positions that any call to a wider and deeper church fellowship and evangelical unity was viewed with inherent suspicion as constituting a challenge to their very distinct existences.** Whereas Lloyd-Jones, small though he was in stature, was a man large in vision, he was surrounded in the evangelicalism of that time by lesser men. Their limited vision could not rise to his when it came to the determination to work out in practice what the Doctor had summoned them to in principle. The challenge of this volume should be to stir us up once more to face facts and issues that ought to have been confronted fearlessly then and that have only intensified in their importance in the intervening years. Until we do so evangelicalism properly so called may well be a lost cause.

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