
World Evangelical Issues

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Some theological issues emerging from the 9th General Assembly of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF), held in Manila from 21st - 26th June 1992.

The idea of an international fellowship of evangelical Christians can be traced to the same origins as the UK Evangelical Alliance in 1846. Although still largely funded from Western nations, two significant steps have recently been taken to recognise the greater numerical strength of non-Western churches in WEF. The International Headquarters are now located in Singapore and the post of International Director has been filled by a Filipino, Dr Agustin Vencer.

Some 68 nations were represented at the 1992 Assembly, which was preceded by a week of Consultations by the various WEF Commissions. There are Commissions on *Missions, Theology, Prayer and Church Renewal, Women's Concerns, Youth* and on *Religious Liberty*. Two bodies affiliated to WEF have grown out of its initiatives, the *Inter-church Relief and Development Alliance* and the *International Christian Media Commission*. A feature of this General Assembly was the consideration given to the 120 page Report of a Long-Term Planning Team. Evangelical leaders across the globe had been consulted to produce a fascinating survey of World Trends and their probable impact on the church.

1 WEF and Theology

The Theological Commission is very active, having established Study Units on Faith and the Church, Ethics and Society, Pastoral Ministry, New Forms of the Church, and the Theology of Evangelisation, with two Task Forces working on Jewish Evangelism and New Age Theology. The Unit on Ecumenical Issues, under its convener, Dr Paul Schrottenboer, have published some critical responses to WCC projects and we await with interest their promised symposium, *BEYOND CANBERRA, Evangelical Responses to Contemporary Ecumenical Issues*. Not all the contributors are unsympathetic to evangelical participation in the WCC.

An exhausting consultation of the Commission was held in the week before the WEF assembly. 24 papers were devoted to the urgent and relevant subject of *Pluralism* but one member complained that the format gave too little time for proper discussion. It is feared that the future publication of the papers will not have the benefit of the level of critical appraisal which the subject warrants. We look forward to seeing the Evangelical Declaration concerning 'The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World' which was agreed during this conference.

A spin-off from the Commission is the *International Council of Accrediting Agencies for Theological Education* (ICAA) which promotes higher standards and wider academic recognition of the growing number of theological schools around the world. This is a strategic goal as students well trained locally are more likely to retain a ministry relevant to their own culture. A modest Scholarship Fund is

administered by WEF, making grants of £30,000 a year. Requests greatly exceed funds available and this is one area in which WEF would like to see more being done by stronger, western churches to support the work of churches with gifted men but inadequate resources.

During the week proposals were considered for making the theological gifts of those in the Commission available to the work of the other commissions. The need for this became obvious during some of the Assembly contributions, which could have benefited from the advice of those with a better grasp of biblical principles. One matter of interest to UK readers is that Rev Peter Lewis of Nottingham is a member of this Commission and heads a WEF project to train expository preachers in developing countries. Since our return from Manila he has been encouraged to co-ordinate this with other bodies having similar aims.

The Commission has two regular publications. THE EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY (96 pages) is published quarterly for WEF by Paternoster Press, 3 Mount Radford Crescent, Exeter EX2 4JW, UK at £12.00 pa, and reprints articles of interest which have appeared elsewhere in the world. THEOLOGICAL NEWS (8 pages) is a quarterly leaflet giving information of importance to those in seminaries. This is available from the WEF Theological Commission, PO Box 94, Choong Jong No, Seoul, Korea, 120-650 at \$7.00 pa. Much of the study output of this Commission has been published and a full list can be obtained from Paternoster Press. Plans are in hand to publish more material in the Third World where lower costs will make the books more easily affordable where they are most needed.

2 WEF and The Church

Like the UK EA, WEF began life as a fellowship of individual Christians. During this Assembly some attention was given to the constitution of WEF, with particular attention to the diversity of the member bodies in the various countries. Some national bodies, like the newly-formed Romanian EA, are much closer to the BEC pattern, with only church groups (denominations) in membership and no overlap with those in ecumenical associations. Some reflect the pattern of denominational missions which gave the churches birth. In an international body of this kind, however, it is hard to trace a uniform understanding of how evangelicals should relate to each other. Cultural and historical factors have profoundly affected the shape of relationships.

In a few countries, notably Germany, there has been a long-standing difficulty over the scope of membership. Germany is one of the EAs which has only personal membership and up till now charismatic Christians have not been accepted. This has affected relationships in the European EA, which have not been helped by other international bodies having more appeal to the younger generation, leaving the EEA with a fear of being by-passed. Discussions are in motion which propose a solution to this problem but the issues it raises cannot be ignored. Can WEF provide a working definition of an 'evangelical' which will be sufficiently distinctive to sieve out the liberals and yet flexible enough to suit the wide range of cultures in which it seeks to minister? Those whose theological experience is limited to one continent will no doubt propose a simplistic answer to this question but no-one present at this WEF Assembly would be so naive.

The 'membership' question also arose when WEF officers were considering how they might speak in the name of the world-wide constituency of evangelicals. In more and more situations the strength of such an international body can be of genuine support to brothers and sisters in trouble. What is harder to achieve is a sufficient system of accountability by which any WEF spokesperson can be sure they are really speaking on behalf of the whole constituency.

The nub of the issue is that **WEF itself does not operate with a clearly defined Doctrine of the Church.** Its members are not all accountable to their churches, some work in para-church organisations overseen by self-appointed committees, others are active in WEF representing only themselves. This does, however, give rise to problems when seeking to apply biblical principles, which assume a 'church' background to personal relationships, in a body made up of those with such diverse views of the church herself.

3 WEF and Politics

Strictly speaking, WEF does not have a political profile but it does have a theological Study Unit on 'Ethics in Society'. It has promoted international support for the body in South Africa known as 'Concerned Evangelicals' identified with Caesar Molebatsi in Soweto and some British Christians have gained enormous benefit from sharing in multi-racial youth camps there. A coloured brother from this group was present in Manila and there was understandable sympathy for those whose interests he represented. There was, however, no contribution from a white evangelical with different perspectives on the issues. Without belittling these problems, it does seem that WEF must be careful not to imply that all evangelicals in a given country are committed to the same political solution and the same timetable for its implementation.

An innovation at this Assembly was the presentation of the first biennial *Civil Liberties Award*. It is not a grant of money but an opportunity to draw attention to evangelical solidarity with suffering Christians in various parts of the world. The recipient this year was the colourful Rómulo Sauñe, an Indian from Peru and sometime translation assistant to the Wycliffe missionaries who had laboured to produce the Quechua Bible. He calmly recounted how his grandfather, a community leader in Ayacucho, had been tortured and murdered by the 'Shining Path' terrorists because of his effective evangelical ministry among young people. He was one of 400 evangelicals already killed and, tragically, Rómulo has himself since become a victim of Maoists when he was randomly gunned down at a road block in September. The award will provide a regular reminder that the Theology of Suffering is no theoretical discipline for many evangelicals today.

During the week of the WEF meetings we were honoured by a visit from Fidel Ramos who was about to be installed as the newly-elected President of the Republic of the Philippines. He is a Methodist and the first non-Catholic to hold this office in the country's history. It was significant that he allowed the WEF Chairman, Tukunboh Adeyemo, a Nigerian Pentecostal to commend him to God in prayer before the WEF gathering. Not all present would have been as free in referring to the President as 'brother' and one delegate told me the whole scenario compromised his view of the separation of Church and State. What it did illustrate, however, is our need to be open to opportunities to act as salt in a

corrupt world. This was also vividly underlined by the last minute absence from Manila of Peter Kuzmić. He had been asked by the secular authorities in Croatia to assist in urgent peace talks in his home country.

Having a personal interest in the affairs of believers in Malawi, I had been concerned about the effects upon them of recent political unrest there. In conversation with the two delegates from that African nation it was encouraging to learn how the wider structure of the *Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar* and of WEF itself are providing resources to prepare their national leaders for testing times ahead. Already pressed by severe famine, their courage and vision call for our sympathetic prayer fellowship.

4 WEF and Culture

For all of us, the WEF Assembly was a classic 'cross-cultural experience' as we shared fellowship with brothers and sisters very different from ourselves. It may be useful to give one or two examples of the questions this raised for me.

One morning a Western delegate presided over the election of the International Committee. He was an experienced chairman and he knew what he was doing. Unfortunately he did not explain to everyone else what he was doing. As the election went ahead some of the African delegates were disturbed to realise the implications of the procedure being adopted. They had not understood it and justifiably felt they had been out-manoeuvred. Although the chairman was (I think!) within his constitutional rights, 'the exercise of his freedom had been a stumbling block' to his brothers (1 Cor 8:9). His Western culture had collided with those who are used to doing things differently. And it hurt.

Being the warm and efficient hosts for the Assembly, the Filipinos were largely responsible for the format of the evening sessions. Apart from the lack of time discipline, which most of us from the West found disappointing, another cultural feature became increasingly difficult for us. Our Asian brothers are used to honouring each other in public and this involves elaborate explanations of who everyone is. The chairman would spend some time telling us how privileged we were to have 'Dr So-and-so' on the platform, and then we discovered that his only function was to give a lengthy introduction to the speaker! They felt they had to do this for everyone. It was important for their culture.

A Scottish visitor with considerable international experience explained to me that this is all connected to the eastern concept of *face*. A speaker loses face if he is not adequately honoured and so we are obliged to make sure that he is. This may be a cultural expectation but is it a Christian obligation? We are not to be bound by the world's standards. The Bible uses the expression 'my face is covered with shame' (Ps 44:15) and even speaks of God being the 'Saviour of my face' (Ps 43:5 Hebrew). The Greek word 'to receive face' (*prosopolambano*), however, means 'favouritism' and just as God does not show this (Rom 2:11) so Christians are commanded not to show it either (Jas 2:1). The NT church faced serious problems in bridging the gaps between believers from different cultural backgrounds (Acts 6:1) and every other international Christian community faces the same task. On our experience, the WEF leadership may still have some way to go.

5 WEF and The Future

The Church in every age is affected by the thought forms of her day. The task of the WEF *Long Range Planning Team* was to identify some of the factors which will provide the background against which our future evangelistic task is to be performed. For example:

- a) Economic. There is a growing disparity between rich and poor. Every 2 seconds in the non-Western world a child dies of hunger and disease.
- b) Socio-Political. Nationalist fragmentation is exerting inexorable pressure the world over. How will the Church cope with militant ethnic loyalty?
- c) Technological. Perplexing ethical issues are arising from bio-ethics. Will the intrusion of technology into nature transform people's perception of life itself? Where does this leave the Doctrine of Creation in the popular mind?
- d) Demographic. By the year 2000 almost 80% of all those in East Asia will live in cities. Yet few churches have any plans to project the effects of urbanisation on their evangelistic strategies. What will be the effect on communities which lose an entire working population through Aids?
- e) Environmental. Others are responding to the challenge of the wasteful consumerist Western lifestyles. Theological study is needed to present a distinctively Biblical contribution to this issue.
- f) Religious. This was the most comprehensive section, reminding us that even secular commentators are noting a spiritual resurgence in the post-Marxist age. The challenge of Pluralism is highlighted as one effect of social fragmentation. Mention is also made of the Megachurch, with 10 of the world's largest churches ranging from 35,000 to 180,000 members.

Dr Vencer, the new International Director, provided his own 16 page Executive Charter and his key objective was for WEF to:

... enable local churches to fulfil their scriptural mandate to disciple nations by providing them with a global identity and presence, a structure for fellowship and co-operation, an international forum and a representative voice, and a network of information and resources for holistic ministries. This shall be accomplished primarily through the strategy of establishing and strengthening regional and national evangelistic fellowships and alliances.

One priority already evident at Manila was for WEF to improve its relationship with other international evangelical movements, all of which seem to compete for the support of the same church leaders on the ground. The presence at Manila of Dr Tom Houston, the International Director of the Lausanne Movement was seen as a positive gesture but it will be no easy task to find a basis for synergism between these bodies with such different roots.

The next WEF assembly will be held in 1996, probably somewhere in Britain, to celebrate the 150th anniversary. It will be interesting to see how much progress has been made by then in tackling these theological issues.

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