
Then and Now: 1966-1996

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Thirty years ago at the Second National Assembly of Evangelicals organized by the Evangelical Alliance in London on October 19th, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones spoke for the last time for the EA on the theme of *Evangelical Unity* in the course of which address he asked his audience: "What reasons have we for not coming together?...My friends, we are not only the guardians and custodians of the faith of the Bible, we are the modern representatives and successors of the glorious men who fought this same fight, the good fight of faith, in centuries past...I believe that God is calling upon us to maintain this ancient witness, not occasionally, not haphazardly, but always, and to put it to the people of this country".¹

Have Christians grown closer and more co-operative in these past three decades? What is the social and spiritual situation in the United Kingdom at the end of the 20th century?

Social conditions in the land

There are many improvements in the world which have taken place over the past thirty years which make us glad that we are living at this time. Treatment of cancer and other diseases has vastly improved. Britain has become a more cohesive middle-class nation and the continual strikes and class divisions of the 60s are a bad dream. There is a general political consensus with little messianic hopes in the effectiveness of the Whitehall and Brussels decision-makers. Apartheid has ended in South Africa, Communism has been largely discredited and the West has won the cold war. A world war or even a European conflict seems the most distant of possibilities. Britain has become a more prosperous nation. Chicken and turkey are the cheapest meats: supermarkets the size of aeroplane hangers are filled with the highest quality and range of foods. Communications not controlled by Caesar are accessible to every man. It is cheap to call the USA and even Australia. Missionaries have access to the Internet. It has never been so inexpensive and convenient to travel internationally.

However, other social factors make us long for thirty years ago. There has taken place an unimaginable moral decline. Family life has taken a battering. One repeated statistic is that Britain has the highest divorce rate in Europe, while crime statistics are at an all time peak: we have more men in prison per head of population than any country in the European Community. There is a widespread fear of and familiarity with violence and burglary. The National Lottery has made 75% of the nation gamblers. Great Britain is awash with drugs. Alcoholism is a cruel widespread problem. Education has become a football kicked about by trendy politicians of both parties of government, and illiteracy has become an all-time high. Never was there such ignorance of the Bible and the Christian religion. Abortion on demand has resulted in the deaths of millions of healthy unborn children. The Northern Ireland situation is as unsolvable as ever. Militant homosexuals are tireless in their demands for the state's recognition of their so-called marriages. Feminism encourages the gender destruction of male and female *rôles*. Sport is harsher through commercialism, and sportsmen more superficial people. Christians

are being persecuted and murdered in Cuba, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Laos, Vietnam, China and North Korea.

The strengths of Reformed evangelicalism

Where do true evangelical churches stand today? Consider their strengths: a steadiness in their congregational lives. One knows of some hundreds of churches throughout the British Isles and if one entered their meeting-places on a Sunday morning, one could be at peace and be led in worship by ministers who fear God and have led congregations to honour their Lord. One would hear the Word of God opened up and dealt with responsibly. Most university towns have a free grace pulpit for students to hear the whole Counsel of God. There also has been an extraordinary explosion of publishing so that no Christian bookshop can find room on its shelves to stock all the fine commentaries, biographies, literature on the world and life view, family life, evangelism, and children's books that are now available. Consider those writers, all of whose books one would love to purchase and read, Sproul, MacArthur, Packer, Boice, Stott, Ferguson, Morris, Adams, Carson, Clowney, Chantry and Lloyd-Jones. Systematic theologies like those written by à Brakel, Turretin, Grudem (and soon the four volumes of Bavinck) have recently appeared. Definitive books like Iain Murray's two volumes of Dr Lloyd-Jones and *Revival & Revivalism* have filled a hole in the Church's understanding of men and movements. Soli Deo Gloria are reprinting Puritan works as if there were a competition to print them with a dozen other publishers, and sometimes there is. There is a fascinating range of monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly periodicals. About twenty good conservative magazines and papers are being published in Britain. Cassettes of the best preaching are available from many sources.

There is a choice of Reformed theological seminaries in which to study. For example, the Evangelical Theological College of Wales in Bryntirion has more students than the sum of all the "theologs" in every other seminary in Wales. The single Roman Catholic Seminary in Wales in Aberystwyth has closed down from lack of vocations. America, especially, displays such vigorous growth of conservative seminaries. There is also a network of conferences, stable and well attended – The Carey Ministers' Conference (January), The Banner of Truth Conference (March), The Caister FIEC (April), The Grace Assembly (May), The Bala Conference of the EMW Ministers (June), The Metropolitan School of Theology (June), The Aberystwyth EMW Conferences (August), and the Westminster Conference for Historical Studies (December). Ministers especially know one another, and with some of them on an international conference circuit the work of God world-wide is better known today than at any period.

About all the above there is a proper modesty and unassumedness. These churches all realise that (apart from some congregations in the Hebrides) a commitment to the Reformed Faith does not generate large numbers. Deciding whether they would have many members and much money and read about themselves in the newspaper those churches have decided to promote a growing love for the preaching and application of the whole Counsel of God. They know they could not have both, and faithfulness is valued as more important than influence. Calvinistic piety is not flashy or obvious.

The weaknesses of Reformed evangelicalism

One obvious difference between 1966 and 1996 is the figure of Dr Lloyd-Jones, or some equivalent preacher of preachers. Our greatest weakness is a lack of an awakening ministry in the nation. Where we deem ourselves strongest there, as ever, our impotence lies. This shows itself in the narrow choice of inspirational speakers for the big occasions, in the enterprise of church-planters here and abroad. The whole missionary enterprise has been hi-jacked by missionary societies so that men who go overseas never do what they do in this country, that is, preach in one local congregation in the language of the people and build up a church in loving the whole Counsel of God. Rather, virtually every missionary today administers or teaches local men how to pastor and preach. One consequence is the absence of expository preachers from the entire continent of Africa. They have been given no rôle models.

Then there has been in the British Isles in our circles the bringing low of congregations, Christian institutions and leaders. Churches have split, notable men have fallen into flagrant sin, congregations which once loved the whole Counsel of God have collapsed under false teaching.

The charismaticization of churches

There are three types of churches men can make choice of today – if one dares to set aside the vigour of many Roman Catholic congregations. There are the charismatic congregations with their fascination with supposedly spontaneous and body-led ministries. Then, secondly, there is the Willow Creek model of focusing worship on unchurched Harry and Sally as so using singing groups and drama spots to make the man in the street feel unthreatened. Thirdly, there is unadorned and faithful Reformed worship.

Both the charismatic and the Willow Creek models have influenced Reformed congregations. David Tomlinson writes, “There is little doubt that Spring Harvest is one of the most influential factors in the charismaticization of evangelicalism...it would be difficult to overstate its significance in the present positive climate”.² He adds that the March of Jesus “contributes to the overall sense of growing self-confidence among Evangelicals”.³ The umbrella under which all such things happen is the Evangelical Alliance. Clive Calver’s appointment to its leadership in 1983 “symbolized powerfully the way that the centre ground of evangelicalism was moving, for Calver is an unashamed Charismatic with New Church connections”.⁴

Even those churches which have not adopted pentecostal theology in the past thirty years have been affected liturgically. Nowhere more than in hymnody and conduct in worship is the gulf between Evangelicals of 1966 and 1996 displayed. In 1966 we were longing for some new hymn-books, and we had to wait a further ten years for *Grace & Christian Hymns* to appear. There was an inadequacy in the smaller evangelical collections such as *Christian Praise* and *Hymns of Faith*. There was a conviction that the treasures of hymnody found in past writers of deeply experiential piety would have an abiding pastoral, theological and doxological contribution to the Church of our age, and pervasive liberalism alone had been responsible for expunging them from denominational hymnbooks. So *Grace Hymns* appeared saying in its Preface: “The book contains many hymns which have fallen out of use but are worthy of a restored place in the Church’s praise”. And in the Preface of *Christian Hymns* the editors wrote: “There is the need for the rediscovery

and restoration of a considerable number of hymns from times of revival and evangelical awakening...From this treasure-house it has been our privilege to draw extensively, for many of the greatest hymns of the Church come from this period". The motivation in the choice of the hymns in these books was pervasive God-centredness. These two fine hymn books had barely appeared when a totally new mood entered evangelicalism, claiming that what was needed was not such hymns at all but rather *contemporary hymns*, necessarily wed to upbeat tunes, which the man in the street could identify with. And as almost every church seems to have more hymn-writers than preachers there was no stemming the flood of new hymns, tunes, and collections that swamped us. Spring Harvest became the proselytising agency for the new style of songs. If *Grace & Christian Hymns* had not appeared when they did what greater liturgical chaos would world-wide evangelicalism have been in, all in the name of "creativity" and contemporaneity in worship.

The new Christian

Ian Cotton has a new book entitled *The Hallelujah Revolution: The Rise of the New Christians*.⁵ He characterises the new Christian of 1996 as religiously Evangelical, instinctively irrational, politically liberal, economically socialist, theologically feminine (preferring a "gentle feminine Jesus over a macho, stern Jehovah"), vocationally "post-industrial", experientially "relational", and socially egalitarian (the new Christian is into mutual accountability groups).

Cotton describes this charismatic mindset thus: "We have the go-with-the flow attitude which De Bono characterized as 'water logic'. Instead of reason and order, we have instinct, vision, the Holy Ghost. Instead of step-by-step linear progression, we have the all-at-once, the miraculous. Instead of the verbal architecture of the sermon, we have the preverbal instinctiveness of 'tongues'. This is the distinctively modern end of the movement, where change, fluidity, uncertainty, and flexible boundaries are paramount".⁶

Most such "new Christian" churches are outside of the WCC and official ecumenical structures, despising that movement for its political agenda and cerebral ethos. Certainly something more than opposition to schemes of unity dominated by modernists is needed to unite Evangelicals in contending for the faith. Perhaps that was one weakness of evangelical beliefs in 1966 – they gave more credence to the power of the Ecumenical Movement than it merited. For true unity there must be a passionate love for the whole Counsel of God, not just a fear of the counterfeit.

The British Evangelical Council grew with a desire to strengthen its culturally and theologically marginalised member denominations, to take conservative churches out of their isolation and absorption with their own problems and perspectives and give them an opportunity to contemplate the nation-wide mission of the Church of Jesus Christ. Its member churches are separatists but not isolationists.

Men most sympathetic with the BEC feel that the Evangelical Alliance is inconsistent on modernism. How could a body that is opposed to liberalism allow its officers and member churches to retain their membership in denominations dominated by modernism? How can preachers remain in a unity of fellowship in the EA? Do they not realise that such equivocation creates deep problems of friendship and trust to other preachers? That issue has not gone away in the past thirty years. It is not likely to do so in the next millenium.

John Stott famously opposed Dr Lloyd-Jones' exhortation for churches to come together on the basis of historic Christianity, telling that EA conference, "Scripture is

against him, the remnant was within the Church not outside it". As he walked out of the meeting with Dr Lloyd-Jones he murmured apologetically that he was afraid that some of the Anglican clergy might have left their churches the next morning had he said nothing more. Stott spoke on behalf of the vast majority of Anglicans. They were staying in the Church of England. Yet when the issue of the ordination of women arose the Evangelicals were mute, even though that would mean 300 ministers would resign over the issue.⁷ The greatest difference in the Church of England in 1996 as compared to 1966 is the presence of 1,400 women priests, and a huge irretrievable lurch to liberalism.

Other evangelical Anglicans such as those centred on St Helen's Bishopsgate, considered that "only human traditions were holding brothers and sisters [i.e. Anglicans and Free Churchmen] at arm's length".⁸ So Dick Lucas's answer was to start yet another conference, the Evangelical Ministry Assembly "to repair some bridges of fellowship". So, Anglicans who never met in fellowship with their non-conformist brethren (except when they were invited to speak) at any of the well-established conferences at Leicester, Bala, BEC, Carey, Metropolitan Tabernacle, Aberystwyth, Westminster, etc. (even when they live in close proximity to those places), began yet another conference "to tackle the sad division between Anglican and Free Church Ministers".⁹ In other words, non-attendance at that conference indicated one was promoting division, and the extravagant claims were made: "God's hand was on Dick's brainchild and the conference has proved a major part of the evangelical year".¹⁰

The British Evangelical Council

The critics of the BEC will point to its alleged diminished influence in 1996 compared to the late 60s. They may grumble that it has assumed the position of an "isolationist porcupine", small, circumscribed and obscure instead of a vigorous and militant group calling Britain back to the old paths. Surely its pervasively Reformed identity has meant it has become marginal to what some might envy as the mold-breakers and trend-setters of ecclesiastical life in Britain. But the Word teaches us that God does not use the magnificent and mighty to achieve its ends, rather, as the apostle Paul wrote, God uses "jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power" is from Him only. In 1996 the evidence weakness of our human efforts and the all-sufficiency of God's grace means that the Reformed churches have a precious message and a unique task testifying to everything God has revealed. We may not judge the next thirty years in the light of our present experience.

References

- ¹ D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*, The Banner of Truth, p. 256
- ² Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical*, Triangle, 1995, p. 20
- ³ Idem, p 21
- ⁴ Idem, p. 18
- ⁵ Ian Cotton, *The Hallelujah Revolution: The Rise of the New Christians*, Prometheus Books, New York
- ⁶ Idem, p. 25
- ⁷ *The Times*, August 10th, 1996
- ⁸ *When God's Voice is Heard*, ed. Christopher Green and David Jackman, IVP, 1995, p. 18
- ⁹ Idem, p. 18
- ¹⁰ Ibid.

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