

# **SERVING GOD IN HIS CHURCH IN OUR GENERATION: LEARNING FROM THE PAST WHILE LIVING IN THE PRESENT**

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## **SUMMARY**

This is a *greatly abridged* version of a paper by Stephen Clark bearing the above title. The abridgement was *not* carried out by the author but has been approved by him. The full paper – which contains numerous sections which have been edited out of this abridged version and extensive footnotes – is concerned with the nature of gospel fellowship and co-operation amongst evangelical churches, as practised by Affinity. These issues are explored biblically, theologically, and historically. Lessons are applied to the situation in which gospel churches find themselves at present in the UK. In the area of gospel fellowship and co-operation amongst churches the Bible has a negative and a positive emphasis. False teaching must be resisted. On the other hand the true gospel is wonderfully *inclusive*, in that it proclaims a salvation which is open to everyone. Along the way I interact with and point out the serious mistakes and misleading information found in a booklet by Ruth Palgrave that was published in 2012 entitled *They Have Forgotten* (hereafter THF), which charged Affinity with compromise in these matters. The author has failed to understand how a principle consistently held may have a different application in one generation compared to that of another. She has also failed to understand the principles and practice of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

### **Biblical teaching**

The Bible achieves a remarkable balance in its twin emphases upon the unity of God's people and their consequent separation from that which is false. OT Israel was to be separate and distinct from the surrounding nations, but she was also to remember that she was *one people* in covenant with the LORD. In the NT the people of God are no longer identified, in an external way, with any one nation but, rather, as those who have faith in Jesus Christ. The spiritual unity which exists amongst the Lord's people derives from the fact that they have all been given to Christ by the Father and have all been adopted into the family of God. This is why disunity amongst the Lord's people is such a scandalous thing. The unity already exists and is a 'given': it is created by the Spirit and no effort is to be spared to maintain it. We should not, however, pit the Spirit against truth: unity is always unity in the truth. This means that God's people are to be concerned to distance themselves from that which is false as much as they are to maintain unity with those who believe the truth.

The Bible's teaching on unity and separation does not, of course, exist in a vacuum: gospel work, while requiring a fidelity to the truth, also demands that we be culturally flexible. If one refuses to be flexible on merely cultural issues which are not required by God's law or by the gospel, then one is effectively elevating those cultural norms to the level of, and thereby *adding to*, God's law or the gospel. One of the great weaknesses of Ruth Palgrave's booklet is that she does not address this.

### **History**

The historical background to all this concerns the rise of the Ecumenical Movement and the World Council of Churches in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How were evangelicals to respond? American fundamentalism espoused a separatist mentality that often went hand-in-hand with theological eccentricities and a mindset that was excessively negative towards culture and learning; they divided from liberals but then also from fellow evangelicals. In the 1960s in the UK many evangelicals began to react against this hardline attitude, believing that they might be able to win their denominations back to the truth.

Although a laudable aim, many adopted the tactic of acknowledging that non-evangelicals had as much right to be in the denominations as did evangelicals, especially within the Church of England.

Although the British Evangelical Council, which was formed in 1952, was an anti-ecumenical body, many of those in churches or church bodies which were part of BEC were happy to be publicly involved with those who remained in 'mixed' denominations. This included Dr Lloyd-Jones himself, who was minister of Westminster Chapel, a church which was for many years in a 'mixed denomination' which was part of the World Council of Churches. (These facts are expanded in detail in the full paper.)

The fact is that a range of positions on these issues was held within BEC. This was evident at a BEC Study Conference in 1985, on the subject of 'Union and Separation' where a clear division was seen to exist between those who were committed to principles of 'secondary separation' and those who were not. This was not a departure from earlier BEC principles on 'secondary separation' for the simple reason, as we have already noted, that at a time when Dr Lloyd-Jones was minister of a church which was still part of a 'mixed denomination' and also part of WCC, BEC churches were happy to have him preach and no objections were made to this. Ruth Palgrave has given us a 'snapshot' of a certain period in the history and life of the BEC and wishes to set this in stone, as if it ever was and ever should be the position that BEC stands for. But it was not ever thus, and the full paper seeks to prove that it does not always have to be thus for those who are faithful to the principles which lay behind the formation of the BEC.

Many who have written on Dr Lloyd-Jones's teaching concerning the issue of the gospel and separation have concentrated attention particularly upon his celebrated address in October 1966 to the National Assembly of Evangelicals and to his subsequent messages at BEC Conferences. However, if one is able properly to appreciate what Lloyd-Jones was saying in those years it is essential to place his teaching within the context, not only of the spiritual and ecclesiastical scene of that time, but also within the context of his total ministry. The world of 2013 is, in certain respects, very different from that of the 60s and 70s. If there was one thing which remained true of Lloyd-Jones throughout his long and remarkable ministry it is the fact that he stayed abreast of all that was happening and of the changes that were taking place.

While some were leaving the liberal denominations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Lloyd-Jones opted to 'stay in' when he became minister of a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist church in 1927. This did not reveal any weakening of his commitment to the gospel; unlike those who had come out, he believed that there was a great opportunity for him to influence the denomination. Everything was seen by Lloyd-Jones through the lens of 'opportunity' for the gospel. This led him, on at least one occasion, to counsel a man to enter the Church of England ministry (see the full paper for details.) In 1969, three years after his 1966 address, Lloyd-Jones wrote to Eric Alexander, who was a minister of the 'mixed' Church of Scotland, urging him to accept the invitation to become pastor of Westminster Chapel after him. For him, the need to maintain a biblical ministry at the Chapel outweighed all other considerations. It is this gospel emphasis which animated Lloyd-Jones, rather than finer points about secondary separation.

The BEC was formed in 1952 yet it was not until 1967 that Lloyd-Jones became identified with it, almost certainly because he feared that it might be too negative. But the perceived threat posed by the Ecumenical Movement in the 1960s was very real indeed. The denominations, which had become largely liberal, were being pushed to join this movement. In this situation Lloyd-Jones saw a unique opportunity for the gospel: it was that evangelical congregations within should separate from their liberal denominations (and thereby sever links with those who denied the gospel) and come together

in some loose fellowship of churches, even though on secondary matters they might still maintain their own distinctives – a true, evangelical ecumenicity. The vital point to grasp is this: *it was the primacy of the gospel which was the issue*. The burden of Lloyd-Jones' 1966 message was the positive duty of true believers to come together. It was not an 'anti-Anglican' or 'anti-Baptist' message. The 'tone' of his teaching was thus very different from 'the tone' of THF. He was calling for those who were agreed on the great truths of the gospel to join together on the basis of those truths and make them, in practice, non-negotiable. Although in the context of the 60s and 70s this inevitably involved a call for separation from mixed denominations, in a different context those same principles might well work out in a different way.

Lloyd-Jones' position on secondary separation was far more nuanced than THF suggests. He was prepared to have public fellowship with men who stayed in their denominations and to have public fellowship with men who continued to have public fellowship with those who not only stayed in but who were fully committed to their denominations. The evidence for this claim is laid out in the full paper, referencing men such as Sinclair Ferguson (Church of Scotland), Gareth Davies, John Thomas & Eurfyl Jones (Presbyterian Church of Wales), John Caiger (Westminster Fellowship) and such organisations as IFES, Operation Mobilisation and Keswick. Lloyd-Jones was not a denominational man, in the sense that he put that before or on a par with the gospel. But neither was he a 'separatist' in the sense that Ruth Palgrave means. There is the world of difference between separating, with a sad heart, after great and patient efforts, and having an ugly 'separatist mentality'.

### **'They have forgotten'**

Various men who have written commendations for THF or whose views are quoted in support of its thesis are inconsistent; they are known to have been involved in public meetings addressed by Anglicans and others in mixed denominations (details are given in the full paper). For example, those who opposed Dick Lucas speaking at FIEC gatherings were happy to have men from nonconformist, mixed denominations speak at their own events. The reason given was that these were 'gospel men', despite being in their denominations. But is Dick Lucas not also a 'gospel man'? Was the difference perhaps simply that we 'knew' the one man but had built such walls that we did not 'know' the same sort of men in the Anglican Church?

Ruth Palgrave acknowledges that in 1987 the BEC welcomed an Anglican Church into membership and she justifies this on the basis of the view of its vicar that they could not remain in the Anglican Church at all costs (seven years later it left the Church of England). Yet she criticises Affinity for welcoming into membership, in 2006, a church which was part of the United Reformed Church and a church belonging to the Baptist Union as they were not intending to leave their denominations, but she produces no evidence to support her statement about their supposed intentions.

The situation to which gospel principles are to be applied has changed significantly over the decades. For the forty one years of which he was the pastor of a church Lloyd-Jones was in a mixed denomination for all but one of those years. But he who could see nothing against a man entering the Church of England ministry in the 1940s would not have been thus counselling men in the 1960s or 1970s. The situation had been deteriorating throughout the years with the rise of the Ecumenical Movement. *But the situation has changed again since the 1970s*. Suggestions that 'Unity with Anglicans is in the end unity with Rome' are typical of THF: it is still locked into the situation which obtained in the 60s and 70s. But the world is very different today from what it was then.

Since the 1967 Keele Congress of Anglicans clearly indicated that many evangelical Anglicans were heading in a very different direction to their forebears, the Proclamation Trust has been formed.

Typical of the Trust's stance were the comments at its annual Evangelical Ministry Assembly in the 1990s by Philip Jensen who asserted that Keele had been a huge mistake, that Anglo-Catholicism was pagan, and that the gospel was to be proclaimed not mimed or enacted in drama. Also linked to the Proclamation Trust, Richard Coekin is an Anglican vicar whose strenuous advocacy of evangelical principles led to the Bishop of Southwark withdrawing his licence to preach. This is surely the same sort of thing which was happening to the evangelical Anglicans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In September 2012 the Rector of St Helen's Bishopsgate addressed the Affinity Council on the state of evangelical Anglicanism today. It was clear that his affinities were with those great leaders of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Heresy and heretics are opposed by him and men like him. He spoke of younger men who cannot get a church and who are, therefore, prepared to plant churches in parishes where the vicar is not evangelical. This is light years removed from the kind of 'denominational men' who were so prominent in the 1960s and 70s. He made clear that he and men like him take the biblical call for separation from those who teach fundamental error very seriously indeed. Within their churches they seek to implement this teaching. At this point Calvin's observation that the Roman Catholic Church was not a true church but that there were true churches within it is of huge importance. I may personally believe that a fair application of some of the passages quoted by THF require me not to be part of a denomination which intentionally and consciously allows heretics within its ranks. Indeed, that is my position. But is it not to be spiritually and theologically myopic to fail to see that another brother may take those verses with the same seriousness with which I take them but, in his situation, apply them somewhat differently from the way I do?

Just as I in all conscience could not baptise the child of a believer but respect brothers whose convictions on this differ from mine, so I could not imagine how I could function as an Anglican vicar but can respect those who, in good conscience, understand how certain passages are to be applied in a different way from the way in which I would apply them. This was surely how a man like Poole-Connor of the FIEC could fellowship and co-operate with Lloyd-Jones when Lloyd-Jones was still in a 'mixed denomination', just as Lloyd-Jones could have encouraged a man to consider entering the Anglican ministry. In other words, we must distinguish between those who really are involved in massive compromise from those who are like Whitefield in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

While the false unity advocated by the ecumenical movement is always a threat, one surely needs to realise that we are facing possibly greater threats today from secularism, materialism, militant atheism, Islam, and utter ignorance of, or indifference to, the gospel.

It was these changed circumstances which gave rise to the Director of Affinity seeking to 'develop the Anglican agenda'. This is also why Oak Hill College has been accepted as an Associate Partner of Affinity, something else to which Ruth Palgrave objects. But it is a fact that the fullest defence of the doctrine of penal substitution in recent years has come from Oak Hill. In the past it was not unknown for students to attend a BEC church where the minister did not treat the text of Scripture as carefully as did the vicar in a nearby Anglican church. What do you do if you live or study in an area where the non-denominational church engages in theatricals and superficial nonsense, when down the road in a church still in a denomination the Word is truly preached and applied thoughtfully, helpfully, and powerfully? For example, there are evangelical churches within the Church of England which are spiritually vibrant, demonstrating practical godliness, and whose ministers are earnest in reaching the lost and faithful in building up the saints. Life is a lot more complicated than THF would suggest.

When one biblical command comes into conflict with another, one must then 'grade' the principles which lie behind the commandments to ascertain which command must prevail. This is something to which Lloyd-Jones himself referred. In this connection the complex subject of culture becomes hugely

important. It is possible for a church, in a right concern to distance itself from 'the world', to confuse aspects of culture which are 'neutral' and not at all 'worldly' in the biblical sense with what the Bible means when it refers to the evil of the world. The upshot of this is that the church then isolates itself in an unbiblical way and unbelievers are presented with a 'Christ plus' message, which is, of course, as much a denial of the gospel as the Roman Catholic 'Christ plus' message: one has to embrace certain cultural distinctives, which have no biblical warrant, if one is to become a Christian or a zealous Christian. This is a denial of the gospel. Yet I have had enough experience of 'separatist' churches where such has been the case. Of course the reverse is also true: some in a concern to be 'culturally relevant' may well accept things which Scripture does condemn. Both approaches are wrong.

Hywel Jones has said that 'After the Westminster Fellowship was re-formed, we were often required by the Doctor to do two things. The first was to look at the situation to see if there was any material change in it. Nothing was further removed from the truth than the claim that having seceded we retreated into an isolationist ghetto, continuing to persuade ourselves that we needed to stay there to give credibility, in one's own eyes at least, to the step already taken'.

These are important words. Why did they need to look at the situation to see if there was any material change to it? The obvious answer is that Lloyd-Jones did not regard the situation as 'static' but as one which could change. This would then inevitably mean that, while biblical principles do not change, their application does, depending upon the circumstances to which they are to be applied. The natural question to raise at this point, therefore, is this: Is the situation different today from what it was then? The answer which I have sought to argue is that it *has* changed and has changed significantly. Affinity has recognised this and, while still holding to the principles maintained by the BEC, seeks to address the situation as it is today, not as it was forty years ago. It is not at all because 'they have forgotten', as Ruth Palgrave claims. Quite the contrary! They have remembered: in particular, they have remembered that the New Testament Church has existed for over two thousand years, and they have remembered that it really is impossibly foolish to try to freeze the church of Jesus Christ into an era of no more than fourteen years – 1967 to 1981 – in one very small part of the world where the church can hardly have been called spiritually vibrant. But they have also remembered something else, something which, alas, Ruth Palgrave seems to have all but forgotten. It is the second thing which, according to Hywel Jones, Lloyd-Jones urged those in the re-formed Westminster Fellowship to do:

"The second requirement presented to us was to look at ourselves and to face the question, "Were we closer – and closer to each other as churches?" Was there a church fellowship in existence outside the church groupings to which we belonged? Were we committed to the British Evangelical Council? Secession was the road to unity, the Doctor taught us, and not the path to isolationism and exclusivism. We saw that we could not go back without denying principles of truth which could not be more closely bound up with the Gospel, but I wonder whether we saw as clearly that we must go on. The Doctor impressed on us that we had been brought out in order to be brought in. Unless we went on to show the glory of the gospel in the churches, how could we expect any to join us?"

Well, the sad reality is that some of those who have commended Ruth Palgrave's booklet have become extraordinarily exclusive. When churches will have little or nothing to do with other churches unless they tow the same line on issues such as which Bible version or hymnbook they use, then 'they have forgotten' what Lloyd-Jones was all about and what he sought to ensure the BEC became.

### **Epilogue: an admonitory story**

William (his name has been changed) was a young man in a strong and large independent evangelical church. When he went to university he was advised to attend a church in a town some miles from his

university. The first week the bulk of the morning sermon consisted of a tirade against the errors of Roman Catholicism, though this had little to do with the text. Nobody engaged him in conversation at the end of the meeting, nor was he invited to lunch. He took the train back to his campus, repeated the journey in the evening, when the sermon again consisted of a tirade against something else, the congregation vigorously and audibly expressing their approval. Again, nobody engaged him in conversation.

This pattern was repeated for three weeks, and the young student was puzzled: since everyone so vigorously agreed with these negative tirades, it seemed to him that the people did not need such an emphasis upon these things but, rather, needed more positive exposition that stuck to what God was saying in his Word with relevant application to their lives. After three weeks the young student had had enough. The following Sunday he attended a large, evangelical Anglican church in the city, which a lot of students attended. He was welcomed; he heard faithful exposition of God's Word; afterwards people spoke to him and he was invited to lunch. He had been taught in his home church that every Anglican congregation was apostate or hopelessly compromised. But his own experience told him that it was the independent evangelical church which was not 'rightly dividing the Word of truth' or being faithful in welcoming and offering hospitality to Christ's people.

I know of others who have had similar experiences. Ruth Palgrave's booklet will not help any young person in such a position because it simply repeats the mantra of 'taking a faithful stand' against error and standing apart from mixed denominations, though it says nothing about being faithful in showing hospitality, welcoming the stranger, etc. While I am not a member or minister of a church which is part of a mixed denomination, I must distinguish between those in such denominations who are wholeheartedly gospel men and those evangelicals who 'fudge'. And if I could not do what such faithful gospel men are doing by staying in their denomination, I must surely acknowledge the many pastoral considerations which weigh with them and, most importantly of all, if I still think them to be mistaken, I must surely show them a more excellent way. In the second decade of the twenty-first century that more excellent way is not to retreat into the seventh and eighth decades of the twentieth century. This is where Ruth Palgrave would have us go. Thankfully, Affinity is of a different mind.