

EVANGELICAL CHURCH UNITY -

A SEPARATED VIEW

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INTRODUCTION

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Do you remember the incredible story of Mr Roy Tapping? His arm was dreadfully severed from his shoulder when working on agricultural machinery.

By a highly skilled operation his arm has been sewn back on and the surgeons are hopeful of a reasonable recovery of health. Even when one part is painfully separated from the whole body that severing need not be permanent. As Christians we recognise the work of God the creator in his restoring this man's torn tissues. Our concern in this article is the way in which God the redeemer is working for the unity of the body of his church after separations which are painful and long-standing.

The particular issue I want to consider is this - what should be the relationship of the local church to the universal church in the United Kingdom today?

Let me at the outset acknowledge some limitations to my consideration of this subject. I will not primarily be concerned to discuss the relationship of churches in the UK to churches overseas. This is a very important branch of the theology of missions and is not lightly dismissed; it is not, however, our subject here. Nor will I concern myself with our indebtedness in the 1980s to the church of Jesus Christ in past generations. Again, I recognise that a grasp of church history will make a significant contribution to our understanding of our problems today and in the future. This too, however, falls outside my remit. I propose to consider how the local church recognises its place within the whole church and expresses the ecumenical dimension of the universal church within our nation at this point in time.

I SURVEY OF CURRENT POSITIONS

I want to suggest that there are four attitudes adopted by evangelical Christians to the point at issue today. I will describe them under the general headings:

1. Non-ecumenical
2. Involved ecumenical
3. Para-church ecumenical
4. Separated ecumenical

1. Non-ecumenical

a) Pre-occupation with the local church alone

Recent years have seen a renewed emphasis on the local church. An undoubted awareness of the integrity of each local congregation not as part of the church but as a microcosm of the universal church has brought a thoroughly healthy concern for the ministry of the body at this level. Whenever there are pressures upon the local church however, voices are heard calling for the concentration of resources only on the immediate task 'We cannot afford to be concerned with other people outside our local church. This must be our priority', they insist. The practical result is a non-ecumenical stance.

b) Disillusionment with church politics

It is well known that discussions on ecclesiastical politics have mushroomed since the Edinburgh Conference of 1910. For the ordinary man in the pew some of these discussions will seem at best arid and at worst an unseemly power struggle in the body of Christ. Many of these discussions have been utterly sincere; most of them have been practically abortive. The more discerning might recognise that they bear little relation to the evangelistic thrust called for by a sin-sick world around us. Until recently most evangelicals have shown little enthusiasm for them. This would be particularly true of churches which have seceded from denominations on doctrinal grounds and who are then suspicious of any wider unity which might bring them under the same bondage from which they have so recently escaped. It might even be generous to call some of these churches non-ecumenical; they might better be described as anti-ecumenical.

c) Dangers

The effect of these attitudes is that if there is any concern for the 'church' at all it is concern only for an independent church or fellowship. Some of these churches have become isolationist. They have little or no meaningful contact with other Christian churches. This is not only a feature of theologically independent congregations or house fellowships. Some of these features may be displayed by churches which are theoretically associated with denominations. Some evangelical causes in the Church of Scotland, dismayed by some actions of their own denomination, only retain their link with the assembly of the Kirk in a nominal way. It could be said that they are strong enough to be isolationists in practice, whatever they are in principle.

2. Involved Ecumenical

a) Involvement

There are many local churches which have an evangelical ministry within denominations of a much broader range. They do not agree in everything with the other churches but for historic reasons, they are prepared to co-exist within that framework. The denominational authorities themselves often regard evangelicals as having a valuable contribution to make and put no pressure on such churches to sever their links with the parent body. For some evangelical churches convinced of the validity of the universal church, there seems little inconsistency in remaining true to their present loyalties. They become involved in co-operating with other denominational churches in joint ventures of an evangelistic or social kind. The mounting pressure for church unity is heralded as THE work of the Holy Spirit today and it is commonplace for Roman Catholics to talk of other denominations as 'separated brethren' and not as infidels beyond the pale. Falling church rolls and the competition from our materialistic society only enforce the call to unite against the real enemies of secularism and the cults.

b) Local patterns

The problems being faced by many ecumenical schemes at national level, such as the Anglican/Methodist conversations and the Covenant for Unity scheme, have made many Christians disappointed that their leaders are not capable of achieving the structural unity which is felt by Christians at the local level. Attention is now being concentrated on unity at the grass roots. Many have testified to the refreshing differences in worship patterns experienced by attending services at other churches. The fact that different traditions can exist alongside the same basic experience of Christ has been seen as an example of God's purpose of diversity. In a few cases Christians have found those of other denominations more tolerant than some from their own background!

c) Doctrine divides

There can be no doubt about one change which has taken place in evangelical Christianity over the last 30 years. It is summarised by the simplistic phrase 'Experience unites, doctrine divides'. This is not the place to explore the reasons for the trend away from doctrinal Christianity. What we can say, however, is that there are many young believers who do not devote much attention to the cerebral dimension of their faith. Alongside this trend has been the gradual erosion of the term 'evangelical' to describe a Christian. It can mean 'evan-

gelistic', 'low church', or even 'enthusiastic'. In some circles those who use the word 'evangelical' to refer to a particular attitude towards the authority of Scripture are regarded as dogmatic and unloving.

d) Dangers

Within the ecumenical movement those who welcome the contribution of evangelicals regard theirs as one viewpoint equally valid amongst many within the universal church. Evangelicals, however, do not regard their standpoint in this way. What is at stake is nothing less than an entirely different view of religious authority. This in turn means a different gospel. In the last analysis liberal and sacramental forms of churchmanship mean that one becomes a Christian either by a life of good works or by the use of the sacraments. The denomination to which such local churches belong is frequently a union of those who preach significantly different gospels. The Apostle Paul is clear in Galatians 1:6-7 that Christians must distinguish their Gospel from 'a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all'. The effect of such involvement in the ecumenical dimension can often be a confusion of Gospel testimony where it matters most, that is to the man in the street. He has every reason to conclude that the things on which we agree with those in our own church body are more important to us than the things on which we differ. This can hardly be true if the Gospel itself is at stake.

There is yet another dilemma for the involved ecumenical. Such evangelical churches are often anxious to express their oneness with evangelicals in other denominations and even speak of this as being their first loyalty. And yet they are divided from them at the church level whilst being at the same time united with those who are not one with them in the Gospel itself. This amounts to dividing the genuine body of Christ and is to be guilty of the sin of schism. We will have reason to return to this subject later.

3. Para-church ecumenical

a) Evangelical societies

For many individual Christians their fellowship with those who do share their experience of Christ in the Gospel is found in the wide range of trans-denominational societies in this country. (They are sometimes called 'inter-denominational' which suggests they operate as a joint activity between denominations. I have used the word 'trans-denominational' indicating that their activities are irrespective of denominational links). It is possible for Christians to work together in ways

which transcend the local church despite denominational differences. The Keswick Convention banner 'All One in Christ Jesus' is no mere slogan. Such enjoyable fellowship, however, may be only temporary. Many return to a church life after the convention which breathes quite a different atmosphere. Some are not in evangelical churches at all and find themselves isolated from the fellowship of Bible-believing Christians for the rest of the year.

b) Para-church bodies

The range of organisations with an evangelical basis of faith available for believers in this country is very wide indeed. Christians at school may belong to the Scripture Union, young people may be evangelised through Crusaders, when at college they will be helped by the structure of UCCF, their vacation evangelism may take place through OM. Their social involvement can be expressed through Tear Fund, their professional interests covered by one of the Shaftesbury Project groups and their overseas interests furthered by one of the many un-denominational missionary societies. I am not implying any negative criticism of these bodies nor anyone involved in them. They are not, however, churches. They do not claim to be churches and the fellowship which they offer is not strictly speaking church fellowship.

c) Dangers

I recognise that by the nature of the case some of these societies fulfil a function which could not readily be maintained by a church body as things stand at the moment. Their very success and number, however, does have the effect of weakening the practical application of the Bible's teaching on the universal church. The Bible's teaching on the church is not exhausted by what it says regarding the local congregation. The existence of these para-church bodies and the way in which they act as one expression of the wider fellowship of the body of Christ carries a danger. They have served to satisfy many of our brothers and sisters so that they are content to remain in churches or church bodies which are not evangelical. They are then exposed to the danger indicated earlier of the involved ecumenical position. At best this can ignore the church dimension of the New Testament teaching. At worst, it can lead to a refusal to heed the Biblical emphasis on separation from false teaching. In 2 John 11 the Apostle of love says that anyone who welcomes a deceiver who does not continue in the teaching of Christ 'shares in his wicked work'.

4. Separated ecumenical

a) A contradiction in terms?

There are evangelical churches which prefer to stand aside from the ecumenical movement as it is exemplified in the British Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. To that extent they are separated. They do not believe however, that they will be the only people in heaven and are seeking to express an ecumenicity which is more consistent with the Bible. They are seeking to take seriously various strands of Biblical teaching.

- (i) The integrity of the local church as the basic Biblical unit for Christian fellowship.
- (ii) The importance of the universal church. They do not believe that the prayer of the Lord Jesus in John 17:21 envisages an invisible abstraction but a body to be taken seriously and which is visible to the world around.
- (iii) The need to separate from the teaching of a false gospel.
- (iv) The need to express this kind of ecumenicity at church level.

b) Dangers

There is an understandable tension in this position which might cause some churches to polarize at one end or other of the extremes. Some will be more separated than others and even take pride in their separation. They can become isolationist in practice even though their church leaders may be enthusiasts for a wider fellowship. Others may be so concerned for joint activity with other churches that they become indifferent to the principles and insensitive to the traditions of their own congregation. Have you noticed that it is not so difficult to get along with another Christian if you do not actually have to live and sweat and pray together so that you are forced to work through your problems at the local level? No position is without its dangers - the devil will see to that!

II GROUND FOR THIS POSITION

1. The Primacy of the Gospel

There is genuine concern for the Gospel itself. The Apostle Paul in Galatians 1:6-10 has the most stringent things to say about those who preach another gospel. His language would be regarded as unacceptable in many ecumenical gatherings today. But he could see that what was at stake was the only saving message for our lost world. The ecumenical

movement is now merging into the syncretism of an inter-faith atmosphere embracing non-Christian religions. The eternal consequences of this must not escape us. We are responsible for the effect our testimony has upon people around us and that testimony is not simply in what we preach from our pulpit but what we indicate by our churchmanship.

We would want to be clear too, about the lessons from history. Spurgeon's concern during the 'down grade controversy' was not simply about the effects of the new theology on views of the Old Testament. He was perceptive enough to recognise that this would, and actually did, affect the Gospel itself. The social gospel of the early 20th Century was not a gospel at all because it was not able to save anyone for eternity. To contend for inerrancy is not fastidious nit-picking nor is this controversy merely a debate about words as some have suggested. History teaches us that only a Bible without error is a sufficient ground for a Gospel without error.

2. The sufficiency of Scripture

At first sight it might not be necessary for evangelicals to discuss the well known Scripture, 2 Timothy 3:16-17. The Apostle Paul refers to the fact that Scripture is God-breathed 'so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'. We do not need another authority derived from human reason or church tradition above Scripture to negate it, nor alongside Scripture to supplement it. The Bible is adequate. What Paul calls 'every good work' must certainly include the good work of establishing and building the temple of God, the body of Christ's church.

How can we apply this then to the doctrine of the church? Many leaders of church bodies admit that today's patterns of church government and ministry are not found in the New Testament. There are two responses to this lack of Biblical data. One is to say that history has proved that such arrangements, even that of 'the monarchical episcopate' (that is one bishop having authority over an area group of local churches) have proved beneficial to the church and should be retained. Another response however, is to say that these things are not found in the New Testament because they are not essential to the well-being of the church in any age. Any who insist upon them today create a separation from those churches which lack these officers. (Furthermore, the concept of

a national church owes more to the historical development after Constantine than to the New Testament.) When we come to apply the sufficiency of Scripture to the question of the church the separated ecumenical would say that 2 Corinthians 6:14 ('do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?') is one of many New Testament calls for separation from those who have no living experience of the Biblical Gospel. It is not a challenge we can ignore and keep a clear conscience.

Are we going to take Scripture seriously as our final authority about church issues, or are we going to accept a pragmatism of saying that since such and such a church pattern has worked for many centuries we may as well continue with it?

May I repeat something to which I referred earlier. Those who adopt a separated position are not in principle isolationists. I myself do not see how they can be. If we have the Spirit of Christ then we love the people of Christ wherever we find them. Nor is their concern only for the local church. They believe in the universal church and this belief gives them the right to speak of a passion for ecumenism even if they are defining the unity of the church in a way different from that of the ecumenical movement as it is commonly known. John Owen, writing in 'The True Nature of a Gospel Church' in 1689 sought to show that local churches cannot consistently remain isolationist. 'That particular church which extends not its duty beyond its own assemblies and members is fallen off from the principle end of its institution; and every principle, opinion, or persuasion, that inclines any church to confine its care and duty unto its own edification only, yea, or of those only which agree with it in some peculiar practice, making it neglectful of all due means of the edification of the church catholic, is schismatical.' Owen, by this time an independent, suggests a wider unity than merely that of a local congregation even though he stops short of arguing for the authority of synods in a presbyterian manner.

3. Not all truths are essential to salvation

If we are to show a consistent concern for the oneness of the body of Christ and a concern for the truth of the Gospel then each local church will have to know what it believes and say so. Many evangelical churches do have some kind of statement of what they believe concerning church order and practice on such matters as baptism and church government. Where so many of our difficulties arise however, is in attempting to

achieve a church unity which is based on a common acceptance of a detailed statement of belief and practice. To say that something is true and we ought to believe it is not the same as saying that it is true and every born-again Christian will be prepared to believe it.

There are two difficulties in the way of requiring every genuine Christian to believe the same thing about every detail of the Christian life. One is that there are some truths which are revealed as essential to salvation but some other truths which not every Christian who will be in heaven has learned and believed. The dying thief for example, did not learn anything about baptism, never became a church member, never gave a tithe of his income, and did not take part in the election of any church officers. And yet he went to be with his Lord in Paradise. Can we require of every believer everything which we ourselves believe? Then there are the difficulties of trying to derive an identical pattern of church life from the various New Testament churches. There are clear differences between the way in which the church at Corinth and the church at Philippi expressed their common life in Christ. The seven churches of Revelations were genuine churches although they differed greatly. How are we to respond to these differences? If something is true why do not all Christians led by the Spirit of Truth come to believe it?

It may be instructive to refer to the well-known passage about church unity in 1 Corinthians chapter 1. There were areas of disagreement amongst the Christians at Corinth over spiritual gifts, the Lord's Supper, and party loyalties. In 1 Corinthians 1:13 Paul asks these significant questions. 'Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul?' The first of these questions 'Is Christ divided?' is a rhetorical question. It is unthinkable that the person of Jesus Christ should be divided; there is only one Christ; there is only one body of Christ, that is the implication. This body is his church. Paul goes on to amplify this identity in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. It is interesting that here he does not ask, 'Is the body of Christ divided?' but 'Is Christ divided?' Using a figure of speech called synecdoche, the whole body is referred to by the name of its most important part, the head. By stressing its essential unity he challenges those who are causing divisions in the body. The word he uses means a tear in a garment and would be appropriate to the ripping of an arm from the shoulder. It is the undeniable oneness of the person of Christ which gives the question about the body of Christ its force.

Let us notice, however, the importance of the next two questions in the same verse. Having emphasised the person of Christ Paul goes on to ask 'Was Paul crucified for you?' Later in the chapter Paul insists on the centrality of the cross, without which no-one can be saved. Here then are two factors in Christian unity, the person of Christ and the cross of Christ. What are we to make however, of the third question 'Were you baptised into the name of Paul?' This must be linked with what he says in 1 Corinthians 12:13; 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body'. He is referring to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration granting us the living experience of union with Christ in his resurrection life. Without this, as the same Apostle reminds us in Romans 8:9, we do not belong to Christ.

It is suggestive that in 1 Corinthians 1:13, Paul is pointing to three things which are essential for the salvation of every Christian, a living faith in the person of Christ, the cross of Christ and the life of Christ brought to us by his Spirit. This is all the more fascinating when we go back to the beginning of the chapter and notice in verse 2 that Paul addresses his letter 'To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours.' In other words, the letter is addressing the universal church everywhere as well as the local church at Corinth. By sharing with those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ on these Gospel essentials we are not denying that there are other truths which we ought also to believe. But here are those truths without which we cannot be saved and are not incorporated into the living body of the church of Jesus Christ and will not go to heaven.

4. Respect for individual conscience

The question next has to be faced about handling the differences which exist in the understanding of the rest of Scripture among evangelical Christians. Such differences are inevitable in this world. It is a mark of the imperfection of the church which will only be perfect in eternity that 'here we see in a mirror indistinctly'. It may be helpful to refer to another exposition of the unity of the church in Ephesians chapter 4. The third verse shows the Apostle Paul urging Christian believers to 'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace'. This is a unity already created by the Holy Spirit by our being united to Jesus Christ in his body. This unity the devil will

attack and it is our duty, if we are to live a life worthy of the calling we have received, (verse 1) to make every effort to keep this unity. It might seem, from the statement in verse 5 about 'one faith', that we all have perfect understanding and share the same body of doctrine. This, however, is neither true to Scripture nor to experience. There were differences within the New Testament churches and it was the effect of these differences which occasioned the writing of the New Testament letters. The 'one faith' referred to in verse 5 must be that faith in the basic minimum of truth required for us to be members of the one body. It is when we come to verse 13 that we see the Apostle using altogether different language. He is speaking about God's gifts building up the body 'until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ'. This unity we do not yet enjoy, it is future. There are many things to be done until we reach it. It will be unity in a perfect understanding of the faith and in a perfect experimental knowledge of Christ. Such a statement of what the church will be is included in the New Testament in order to encourage us towards it and not to remain indifferent to those differences which we meet and not to despair of their ever being overcome. They may be differences in understanding on the way to a growing knowledge of the Bible, they may be differences brought about by the cultural background out of which we have been converted like that in Acts chapter 6 between the Grecian Jews and the Aramaic speaking community. These we will find within a nation like our own as tradition, education and even social class may affect the way in which we look at the Bible. It is our grasp of the fellowship of the universal church which must take account of these differences and help us to handle them.

Within the British Evangelical Council there are church groups from the Presbyterian tradition in Scotland and Ireland, the Strict Baptists of East Anglia, and the Apostolic Church Pentecostals from South Wales. Our fellowship is not based on ignoring those differences entirely and our study conferences have explored our various traditions in the light of Scripture. There have been conferences on attitudes to the church and the state, charismatic gifts, and Biblical interpretation. We are seeking to show respect for the conscience of our brothers and sisters on matters not essential to salvation. These things have not inhibited our positive fellowship and co-operation on a number of practical matters.

More questions arise in considering our differences with evangelical

brothers and sisters outside the BEC. It may be helpful to refer to Acts 18:24-26. You will remember that Apollos was a man mighty in the Scriptures but his grasp of truth was seen by Priscilla and Aquilla to be defective. 'He knew only the baptism of John.' What is significant is the way in which Priscilla and Aquilla invited him to their home. They accepted him as a person. They did not write him off as a hopeless case. They did not ignore him as being someone allowed to paddle his own canoe. They felt a duty to encourage him and to 'explain to him the way of God more adequately'. Respect for the consciences of other believers does not mean that we never talk to them!

Even when the New Testament Christians felt it necessary to separate from another Christian who was not living according to the teaching received from the Apostles, it is clear from 2 Thessalonians 3:14 and 15 that he was to be regarded 'not as an enemy but as a brother'.

5. Fundamental questions

In a generation as confused about religion as about many other basics of life, the BEC is seeking to ask the right questions. Only then can we begin to hope that we shall formulate the right answers. May I indicate four questions which seem to be at the root of many of our differences within the universal church today.

a) What is a Christian?

The fact that a person thinks himself to be a Christian, engages in Christian work, and even identifies with the Christian church, is no guarantee that our Lord will recognise him as a member of his body on the last day. We have this insistence from Christ's own lips. It is not being judgemental, as some would suggest, for us to seek to understand from the Bible what constitutes a man who was born a son of Adam, now to be a son of God. Many of our problems in this area have derived from the tendency in this generation to emphasise the manward and subjective aspects of conversion; what we have done in committing ourselves, turning to Christ, deciding for Christ, accepting the Lord Jesus, taking him as our Saviour. It is no disregard for the subjective aspect of the new birth to notice that the Biblical emphasis is not on what we do but on what God does. How does God save sinners and whom does he save? Who are those whom he recognises as the subjects of regeneration and whom he has grafted into the new vine? Such a question is not merely academic. It tells us whom we must regard as brothers and sisters in the Christian family. Just as there is only one Saviour there is only

one way of being saved. Even though the Bible uses a variety of terms to describe the people of God the Bible is specific about how they are defined. Once we acknowledge someone as a Christian, simply because they have started to live a moral or a religious life, because they have been baptised or confirmed or because they want to be known as a Christian we have begun to do what the Bible never does. And yet these are precisely the terms the ecumenical movement imposes on us! Any unity of the Christian body must begin by asking, 'Who are the members of that body?'

b) What is a church?

Whatever we may have learned about the nature of the universal church, there are other questions to be faced. What does the Bible mean by the word 'church' when it is used to describe a local congregation? Does the Bible ever use the word to describe a territorial church like the Church of England? Baptists and Presbyterians would differ about whether the children of believers would be included in the covenant body of the church. They would, however, be united in questioning the validity of the territorial church concept. Separated ecumenicals who persist in asking this question 'what is a church?' are sometimes charged with seeking an ideal or a pure church, an impossible task in this fallen world. This is a mis-conceived charge. What we are looking for is not a church which is ideal, but a church which is genuine, one which bears the essential marks of the church found in the New Testament Scriptures. Opponents of any consideration of the genuine separated church have appealed to our Lord's parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13. They have suggested that we should leave it to the Lord at the Judgement day to decide from the mixed body of his church who are his own. No-one would wish to dispute the solemnity of the day when the Son of Man will weed out of his Kingdom 'everything that causes sin and all who do evil'. It is not without significance, however, that in Matthew 13 verse 38 the Lord explains that 'the field is the world'. It is hard to see how this parable can be so directly applied to the church when our Lord specifically says that the field is not the church but the world. The basic question to be asked is whether the church whose unity we seek is a mixed body, indifferent to the genuineness of its members' experience of the new birth, or whether it is made up of those giving a credible profession of being justified through faith alone, by grace alone.

c) What is the Bible?

This has been the subject of increasing debate over the last 100 years or so, not least among professing evangelical Christians in our own generation. The nature of Scripture authority, the extent of its infallibility, the relationship of Scripture to the authority of the Holy Spirit today, all are still hot potatoes. It must be one of our tasks as evangelicals to look at these matters seriously, to discuss them thoroughly and to come to conclusions which are consistent with our loyalty to the Christ of Scripture. It does seem strange that the Christians who are asking this question today are branded as divisive and charged with attempting to fight the battles of yesterday. Can we seriously suggest that this basic question has been satisfactorily answered for all generations and does not need to be asked again today? Anyone with the most elementary acquaintance with theological discussion in our universities and bible colleges will know that the answers we give to this question are hotly contested by those who wish to regard themselves as Christians. No doubt some of them are truly born-again but their growth and usefulness will be affected by the way they view the Bible itself and its authority.

d) What is our present duty?

For so many of us the question of our church affiliation hardly arises. Where the Lord has saved us, who our friends are, what our family background has been, all this seems to determine which church we belong to. And yet the question does assert itself. The rise of the ecumenical movement has made many look at the issues again in the last 30 years. Donations from the WCC to terrorist groups has made some denominations question their previous loyalties. Then there is the mobility of population which is an increasing feature of our society. Our young people move away to study in universities at the other end of the land. Finding a job during the recession has uprooted many Christians from the town where they were brought up. Which church should I attend? What are the essentials? If we are not to be bound by merely traditional loyalties has God given to us in his Word any guidance on this important issue? I have a pressing duty to find out what God is saying to me. The question has to be faced by the individual Christian. It is also faced by the local church looking for a way of expressing its fellowship with the whole body of Christ. Under the constraint of conscience some churches have seceded from their previous commitments and have realigned with wholly evangelical bodies. Congregations have left their buildings and started afresh in a school hall, ministers have given up their pension rights after years in a mixed denomination. These things

have happened because they could no longer regard the church issue as insignificant and have been compelled to ask what the Lord requires of them here and now. Who of us could suggest that the question can be avoided altogether in our own generation?

CONCLUSION

The Executive Council of the BEC is anxious that we should express as widely as is consistent with our separated principles the fellowship of the body of Christ today. It must be obvious that there is danger of the fragmentation of the body in a way that is neither healthy for the body nor attractive to the world. We are seeking to retain personal fellowship with evangelicals in other parts of the universal church both in the United Kingdom and overseas. We are actively concerned to keep the lines of communication open. No-one is able to predict exactly how the next decades will affect existing church structures. What is imperative is that we should know our own biblical principles and seek to live in a way which is sensitive to what the Holy Spirit is saying and doing in our own generation. The whole body of Christ is facing two inescapable challenges. The church stands in need of constant reformation, and for this we must work together. The church also stands in need of revival, and for this we must plead, together.

HERMENEUTICS

Rev John Legg

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About thirty ministers belonging to the churches affiliated to the BEC assembled in Northampton on March 13th for two days of concentrated study on the topic of 'Hermeneutics', the principles on which we interpret scripture. The five papers had been prepared and circulated beforehand, and a great debt is owed to all the speakers in preparing for the conference.

Pastor Peter Misselbrook presented the first paper, on 'Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology' and this was a stimulating beginning opening remarks charted the course of our later discussions with uncanny accuracy as he insisted that our study was not a mere academic exercise, but was relevant to our preaching: to the biblical authority behind our words, to the practical application and to the man in the pew, who