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# Focus

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*The purpose of Focus articles is to elucidate Scriptural doctrines and report on the way they are handled in our contemporary situation. There is an urgent need for Christians to think more theologically and biblically about these major doctrines and also for preachers to expound and contend for these truths. The first article by Dr. Eryl Davies focused on Eternal Punishment and the second article by the Rev. Hywel Jones on the doctrine of Holy Scripture. In this issue we consider aspects of the doctrine of the Church, namely, Union and Separation — aspects which vitally concern Evangelicals at the present time.*

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## **Focus: 3    Union and Separation** **a Report on the 1985 BEC Study Conference**

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*Neil Richards*

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The conference met at Cloverley Hall and took the form of five two-hour sessions given over almost entirely to discussion by the seventy men present. The sessions were excellently chaired by Rev. Hywel Jones, with the exception of that at which he presented his own paper. The papers had been distributed to conference members several weeks beforehand and so were only briefly introduced in the sessions. A short prepared response was given to each paper and the rest of the time was given over to discussion. Where I have felt it necessary for a better understanding of both the papers and the discussion I have extended the speaker's introduction in the light of his paper or in some cases I have summarised the paper itself. As the discussions were, in a large measure, a response to the papers, I felt readers ought to be given an outline of their contents. The conference represented a wide range of views both on church polity, from Presbyterians to Baptist separatists, and on church unity, from those happy to work with evangelical Anglicans to others advocating second degree separation. Although the conference did not resolve all the issues — it would have been unrealistic to have expected it to have done so — many issues were clarified; differences were examined and reassessed; new ways of looking at church issues were opened up; prejudices were broken down; superficial views and over-simplistic solutions were exposed, and all in all the conference was worthwhile and, we trust by God's good grace, some small progress was made towards the unity of the Body of Christ.

### **The Visibility of the Church Catholic**

The first paper was given by Pastor Peter Misselbrook. The opening paragraph summed up what he wanted to say: 'I have been concerned to show

that the Gospel is God's power in the world creating visible saints, and visible communities of saints. The Christian is visibly a Christian because he possesses a life given him by the Spirit which cannot be hidden. The local church is a community of men and women who share a common life given them by the Holy Spirit, a common life which is made visible in the relationship of the members one towards another. The catholic church is a body of Christians or of Christian churches (how it is conceived will be discussed below) which possesses a common life, which common life is made visible in the many varied relationships between the various members. The visibility of the church catholic is the visibility of an organism which can never be captured within the confines of a single organisation.'

### **The Gospel, the Christian and the Church**

The Gospel is the power of God which changes lives and produces visible saints — the Church is then made up of these visible, recognisable Christians.

### **The Nature of the Church**

Mr. Misselbrook felt that the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, had failed to stick to the New Testament definition of the Church as a visible company of the faithful; both men had tended to define the Church in such a way as to include unregenerate men and women. Luther's idea of a territorial Church led inevitably to this. Their view of baptism made it impossible to define the Church as a visible company of saints. It was left to the Anabaptists to define the Church as the creation of the Gospel in the form of a gathered community of disciples. 'Invisibility' with regard to the Church is not a New Testament concept.

The matter of schism was then examined. The New Testament deals with schism primarily as a breaking of fellowship with the local church rather than between separate churches. Mr. Misselbrook believed that where churches differed over such things as baptism, divine sovereignty in salvation, and charismatic issues, they were better meeting separately and that this was not schism.

### **The Relationship between Particular Churches and the Church Universal**

The speaker challenged the widely-held view that the word 'church' is used in two senses in the New Testament: of the church universal (the innumerable company of God's elect), and of particular local churches. He referred to a book by Robert Banks on 'Paul's Idea of Community', in which Banks argues that the term '*ekklesia*' is always used in the New Testament for a gathered community or congregation and that it either refers to the heavenly church — gathered around the throne — or to particular local churches. In view of this we ought not to think of the local church as part of a larger structure, i.e. 'the church universal'. Local churches are to relate to each other because they live under the same rule.

### **The Visibility of the Church Catholic**

The New Testament demands that we seek visible expressions of church unity — but what form ought they to take? Mr. Misselbrook believed they ought not to take an institutional form. To pursue the dream of 'a single and all-

embracing organisation which expresses and makes visible the spiritual unity of evangelical churches' can lead only to further fragmentation and distract us from 'pursuit of those means by which the unity of evangelical churches may truly be expressed ...' Churches are to relate to each other, by mutual encouragement, exhortation and conference, as those who live under the rule of Scripture. There is room, the speaker felt, for a wide variety of associations, complementing, rather than competing with, each other. The more substantial our doctrinal agreement the greater the possibility of co-operating together in the work of the Kingdom. We are guilty of schism when we 'cut off relationships with other companies of the Lord's people who, though they may be defective in many things, yet do genuinely desire to live under Christ's rule and are still ready to receive His Word.'

The respondent, Rev. Sidney Garland, affirmed the invisibility of the church and defended the Reformers at this point. Our knowledge of who are the regenerate is frail, but 'the Lord knows those who are His.' Invisibility affirms the church as God sees it; visibility, the church as we see it. However, Mr. Garland was happy with the emphasis on the visibility of the church but not with the two-fold view of the church as the local church and the church in heaven. Is there not a third usage of the word 'church' to describe churches in an area, and did not this usage imply a shared leadership and common oversight? He argued that the common life of the church surely implied common government. It was present in the New Testament, for example Acts 15; has it ceased? The matter of baptism had been raised — was Mr. Misselbrook unchurching paedo-baptists? And so the old — yet not irrelevant — debate between Presbyterians and Independents continues. We may hope that iron will sharpen iron.

### **Discussion**

The discussion focused on the third view of the church raised by Sidney Garland. Reference was made to the historic meeting at which Dr. Lloyd-Jones made his appeal to evangelicals to leave the doctrinally-mixed denominations and come together in a fellowship of evangelical churches. What sort of unity did the Doctor have in mind? A loose federation of churches and not a single united church, seemed to be the general view. This was followed by some discussion on the significance of the Council of Jerusalem. Were its decisions mandatory for the churches? Surely they were, but did the presence of the apostles make that kind of council unique to the apostolic age? Obviously the Independents felt it did but the Presbyterians differed. The Chairman, seeing the danger of the conference grinding to a halt over the presbyterian/independent controversy, posed the question, 'If we accept the third view of the church would it provide us with a greater impetus and challenge to achieve visible unity or is there enough common ground to work at without this?' He went on to express the view that 'given the common life in Christ which we possess, there do have to be certain 'forms' to channel that life, to safeguard it and express it.' Or as someone else put it, 'How can the world witness our unity if we have no organisation?' The presbyterian view deserves more serious consideration than English separatists are prepared to give it, and yet even without organisation and structure, oneness in truth, in

love and in mutual care does have an inevitable visibility. We must not make our lack of agreement on church polity an excuse for our failures in these areas.

## **The Basis of Union**

Introducing the second paper Professor Donald Macleod explained that the foundation of all unity is membership of the body of Christ. 'We are not one because of a common polity or a common belief but because we are all Christians.' This spiritual unity is an undoubted fact and places us under an unconditional obligation to one another.

## **The Marks of the Church**

How are we to recognise a Christian church? What are the marks? Calvin saw two marks: the preaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. The Scottish confession of 1560 added a third — church discipline — and the Westminster divines added a fourth — public worship. Finally the 'Second Book of Discipline' added a fifth — distribution, that is, the ministry of mercy and compassion.

## **Doctrines**

The doctrinal basis of union consists in those doctrines which all Christians hold in common and which are fundamental to the Christian faith. We need a sense of theological proportion — all that God has revealed is to be believed and taught by the Church but all is not equally essential to the existence of true Christianity. The Scripture itself makes this very distinction — for example, in 1 Cor. 15:3 Paul speaks of those truths 'of first importance' or 'among the first things'. In Gal. 1:8 Paul is clearly saying that there are certain elements of the Gospel message which, if tampered with, nullify the Gospel. Again, in 2 Tim. 2:17,18 Paul speaks of those who subverted the doctrine of the believer's resurrection and says that it was tantamount to turning away from the truth itself. Reference is made to Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi; and to John's words in 1 John 4:1; and to 'those doctrines which the Church has sought to define and safeguard in its great creeds'. Using this criterion, Prof. Macleod drew up a list of 18 fundamental doctrines and said that 'The plea for a minimal confession (for example, 'Jesus Christ is Lord') clearly cannot claim the support of Scripture.' It is interesting to note that baptism, church government, election and the gifts were all absent from that list. One other matter was raised here, and that was the doctrines peculiar to Pentecostalism — tongues speaking, Spirit baptism, and prophecy. 'The question is not', says Prof. Macleod in his paper, 'whether the Pentecostal view on prophecy and Spirit baptism constitutes the grounds for separation, but whether these views are fundamental and should be safeguarded in any basis of union. Pentecostals would insist that they are and that they should.' This presented the speaker with serious problems as he regarded the doctrine of a subsequent Spirit baptism 'as unacceptable as the doctrine of purgatory, and the ministry of a prophet as repellent as that of a priest'.

Divisions, for the most part, have not been doctrinal. Other factors have been far more influential — matters of church order, views on the Millennium, per-

sonality clashes and relatively obscure doctrinal matters. Our main concern ought to be our grievous separation from orthodox Christians and not with the problems of the doctrinally-mixed denominations.

There is no such thing as a pure church. As the Westminster Confession reminds us, 'the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and to error'. There is the danger of polarisation on church polity. We must press for unity in action and ask ourselves upon what foundation can we get together to evangelise our land, to train men for the ministry and to find placements for them.

The paper also contained sections dealing with the sacraments, discipline, worship and distribution. Some brief comments must suffice though there is much food for thought.

**The Sacraments:** Where there are no sacraments, there is no church. Prof. Macleod commented on the Lord's Supper and on baptism, but it is the latter that presents most problems with regard to unity. Differences over the mode and subjects of baptism were long-standing and deep-seated, but surely not entirely without hope of resolution, as the speaker said. As well as a plea for mutual respect, frequent consultation, co-operation in witness and fellowship in prayer between Baptists and Paedo-baptists, the speaker made two special pleas. First, for Baptists to think carefully about the implications of re-baptism. 'I would find it impossible to have fellowship with a church which insisted on re-baptising members of my own.' Second, a plea that Paedo-baptists abandon the practice of indiscriminate baptism.

**Discipline and Worship:** In a comment at the end of the section Prof. Macleod warned against making the absence of church discipline an excuse for leaving the church. He pointed to the church in Corinth and to the seven churches of Asia, where discipline was very loose but there is not a suggestion of secession.

The New Testament suggests three criteria of worship: Is it in the truth? Is it in the Spirit? Is it conducted decently and in order?

Rev. Elwyn Davies, General Secretary of the Evangelical Movement of Wales, responded. He commented briefly on what he felt was the soft treatment of Roman Catholics (Prof. Macleod had pointed out that men like Don Cupitt were further away from us than the Roman Catholicism of Vatican II), and the heavy-handed treatment of modern Pentecostalism — more of that later. Turning then to his main comments he spoke first of the need to give far greater prominence to regeneration by which the heart is enlightened and disposed to the truth. Mr. Davies drew great encouragement from this to persevere in grappling with our difficulties. He then quoted with approval Prof. Macleod's statement that 'the marks of the church are all essential and all equally essential', but that there was room for a 'hierarchy within the marks'. This approach, if right, would allow us to conceive of the possibility of churches adopting differing levels of credal statement, expressing degrees of comprehensiveness, applicable to different levels of fellowship.

### **Discussion**

The discussion focused initially on Prof. Macleod's contention that most divi-

sions were not doctrinal in nature. It was pointed out, in response to this, that recent secessions had clearly arisen over doctrinal issues, e.g. the churches which separated from the Baptist Union over Michael Taylor's denial of the deity of Christ. Donald Macleod then quoted Athanasius who stayed in and fought. On being asked under what circumstances he would secede, he replied that that was like asking, 'When do you kill your father?' The answer is 'Never' — but then there are terrible circumstances when it may be necessary. We should stay in and fight until driven out or forced to go against conscience.

Those who are not regular readers of the Free Church Record (of which Prof. Macleod is editor) — and I suppose that includes the majority of the conference — were somewhat shaken by these views. How far do they reflect Prof. Macleod's own secure Free Church background and his lack of experience of the doctrinally-mixed denominations? Nonetheless it does us no harm to have our convictions questioned by so able and highly esteemed a man as Prof. Macleod.

The discussion then moved on to Prof. Macleod's comments on Pentecostalism. The problem lies, as he sees it, with Holy Spirit baptism and prophesying. Union with Pentecostal churches would mean 'having these doctrines imposed upon us as fundamentals of the faith'. This he felt was unacceptable. Pentecostal teaching on the Baptism of the Spirit meant that a man could be 'in Christ' and yet still lack the very promise of God. Moreover, Prof. Macleod felt there was a latent legalism in saying that anything more than mere faith was needed to obtain the gift of the Holy Spirit. This provoked a strong response from Pentecostals present and indeed from many others not in the Pentecostal church but who hold some form of Spirit baptism and were sympathetic to the possibility of prophecy in the church. The debate went along familiar lines with each side feeling misunderstood and misjudged. Perhaps part of the difficulty lies in how much prominence Christians give to the Baptism of the Spirit and prophecy. So long as they are treated as secondary matters not belonging to the fundamentals of the faith they need not present a barrier to relationships between evangelical churches. Prof. Macleod's concern to safeguard the teaching of the church at this point is understandable, just as it is in the case of baptism. However, it was a sad discussion and highlighted our weakness and need of divine light and power.

Several issues were then taken up. The Chairman raised the sacramental issue — would some kind of hierarchy within the marks of the church cope with differences over baptism? He warned against enlarging divisions here. The sensitive issue of paedo-baptists being unable to become members of Baptist churches (not all Baptist churches take this position, of course) was referred to briefly — is this not a failure to grasp the larger issue of the common life we have in Christ? Others referred to the BEC position of not proselytising on our distinctives or using the BEC platform to press our distinctive positions. The need of association for mission was stressed. Unite to **do** something. We were reminded that evangelicals already work together in missions, for example in work amongst students, but we are concerned to express our unity on a church level. Prof. Macleod strongly advocated co-operation in training men for the

ministry and for the BEC to look at the problem of the placement in churches of men called and trained. Could we not identify areas where there is no Gospel witness in Britain and on the Continent and support men to work there?

## **The Basis of Separation**

This paper was given by the conference chairman, Rev. Hywel Jones with the Rev. Hector Cameron taking over the chair. He began by emphasising that he viewed separation only in relation to union and unity. The life of the Church must be expressed in some outward form — quoting in his paper from Professor John Murray, ‘Ideally, there ought to be only one Christian Church throughout the world, the Church of Christ, one in doctrine, one in worship, one in government, one in discipline ...’ (Corporate Responsibility — Collected Writings Vol. I). We have to face the fact that there are no contradictory church politics in the Scripture, the fault lies with us. How far we are from the ideal, and yet the ideal is important. We must not become so engrossed with contemporary problems that we lose sight of the goal. Nor can we hide behind some concept of the unity of the invisible church; the New Testament speaks of a visible oneness. ‘Concrete as well as discrete visibility is involved’, says Professor Murray.

## **The Gospel**

Mr. Jones raised the question, ‘With which churches can we unite?’ The Gospel is the arbiter. There should be no difficulty in finding **the** Gospel in **the** church. The Church owes its existence to the Gospel; it lives **by** the Gospel and it is to live for the Gospel. Where the fundamentals of the Gospel are believed and preached there is the Church of Jesus Christ, and with that church we ought to express our union and unity. Where the Gospel is overthrown and Christ is hidden, from such a situation we ought to withdraw. As Calvin puts it, ‘It is enough for me that it behoved us to withdraw **that we might come to Christ**’. To be involved in a doctrinally mixed denomination in which a plurality of gospels is openly countenanced is an unholy association. How then should we relate to evangelical churches in that kind of association? Where such churches not only proclaim the Gospel but plainly reject and repudiate what contradicts it then there is a place for church relationships.

## **Mixed Denominations**

The more difficult and thorny question is how should we relate to churches who do have fellowship with evangelical churches in mixed denominations. Mr. Jones felt the phrase ‘second degree separation’ was not a helpful one. In his paper he dealt in detail with Paul’s teaching in 2 Thess. 3:6-18. In v.6 we are commanded to withdraw from Christians who do not live according to the apostolic teaching — they are still ‘brethren’ but we are to distance ourselves from them. Then in vv. 14 and 15 he tells us not to associate with — or to have close fellowship with — anyone who refuses to obey the instructions of this letter. In other words, those who continue to associate with Christians who do not live according to the apostolic teaching are themselves the objects of a discipline and are to feel the pain of a withdrawal of close fellowship.

The response was prepared by Rev. Brian Edwards but read in his absence. He challenged the idea that the Church ought to be one throughout the world, and argued for 'unity not uniformity' in worship or even in church government. The Gospel as the test of a church was acceptable, but might we simply ask, 'Can a man come to faith in Christ in this church?' Is that an acceptable test? (See Phil. 1:15-18). Mr. Edwards felt that separation could be carried too far. In church discipline we are to discipline those who offend but does the New Testament ever speak of disciplining those who consort with offenders? Can we apply that principle to churches? Referring to 2 Thess. 3 Mr. Edwards pointed out that commentators like Calvin and Hendriksen differed with Mr. Jones on the meaning of the passage. Does this uncertainty over its meaning point to the need for caution here? Mr. Edwards felt that to speak of 'separation' from evangelical churches in mixed denominations indicated too strong an attitude. We might be 'unhappy' with them but he saw no warrant for going further than that.

### **Discussion**

Discussion moved along several lines. The distinction was made between an 'amiable' separation between evangelical churches on grounds of, say, baptism or church government, and separation in which we refuse recognition which is a far more serious thing. Again, if the Gospel is the arbiter, how much content would we want to put into it? Would we include a particular view of baptism? What about the inerrancy of Scripture? In the discussion, questions and issues were not always pursued to a conclusion.

In the discussion one speaker commented on the need to recognise what was the prevailing spirit of the age, namely, a feeling that truth cannot be defined and that all must be finally seen as 'a matter of interpretation'. There is a general dislike of plain statements of Christian doctrine. Church standards have been reduced, ordination bonds loosened. Subscription to the 39 Articles in the Church of England has been greatly weakened. In this climate diverse and even contradictory theologies can, and do, exist together. The implications are very serious and the uniqueness of the Gospel can be obscured. We cannot ignore these trends when thinking of church relationships.

The question was asked whether it was consistent with BEC principles to associate with Evangelicals in mixed denominations on an evangelical doctrinal basis. One speaker replied that great care was needed in inter-church co-operation and that the connection between the Gospel and the Church meant that nothing should be said or countenanced by the Church which would weaken the uniqueness of the Gospel. People sign bases of faith all too easily, for example, even Roman Catholics and Liberals signed an evangelical statement of faith for the London Crusade. Continuing this line, another speaker asked how our relationship with a Gospel church in a mixed denomination — and Mr. Jones had made it clear in his paper that such churches exist — would differ from the way we relate to an apostate church in the same denomination. In reply it was suggested that limited fellowship would be possible depending on the strength of the church's evangelical position and the degree to which the church sought to repudiate error in the denomination. Some felt that co-

operation in evangelism was surely possible but others felt happier with extra-church matters such as co-operation in the Evangelical Library. There had to be a difference between the level of fellowship possible between evangelical churches separated from the mixed denominations and evangelical churches involved in compromising alliances. A plea was made for people in the mixed denominations needing Gospel preachers and there was deep sympathy for them. Moreover, people were at different stages of their thinking regarding these issues and therefore there was a need for tolerance.

The exegesis of 2 Thess. 3:6-18 was discussed. Does Paul's word in v.14 on not associating with any who refuse to obey his instructions 'in order that he may feel ashamed' apply only to matters mentioned in v.12, or to the wider issues of v.6? However, even if the more restricted view is accepted surely the same principle applies in the more serious case of those who continue in fellowship with heretics?

The discussion was long and complex but again and again the same basic questions arose. What kind of unity ought we to be striving for? Is the unity of the Church like the spokes of a wheel without the rim — united because joined to Christ but no visible organisational links with each other? Can an evangelical church in association with apostate churches expect to have unlimited fellowship with evangelical churches separated from mixed denominations? Can we face both ways? What obligations do we have in the BEC to show our concern for the holiness of the church and our love for brethren in compromised associations by placing painful limitations (painful to both sides) on our fellowship with such brethren? How is the Church to guard the Gospel — by preaching it, yes, but what about the keys of discipline?

## **Dealing with False Teaching**

Rev. R.J. Sheehan's paper began by making two points. First, that the touchstone of truth is Apostolicity. 'The apostles were very conscious of their authority (2 Cor. 13:10). They had received revelations from God (Gal. 1:11,12; Eph. 3:5); they spoke God's Word (1 Thess. 2:13) and they wrote God's words (1 Cor. 14:37). It was in the light of the fact that the apostles knew themselves to have received revelation from God, that they made their teaching the touchstone of truth and error. No ordinary Christian could have spoken as the Apostle John did when he made the distinguishing mark of those who teach the truth, their submission to the teaching of the apostles (1 John 4:1-6).' Second, error is always dealt with pastorally, asking why the error has occurred.

### **Categories**

Mr. Sheehan went on to speak of several categories of error:

The sincerely ignorant, who simply need teaching e.g. Apollos (Acts 18:26).

Those who unintentionally misinterpret Scripture — e.g. 1 Cor. 5:9-11.

The temporarily inconsistent — the supreme example of this is the ever impulsive Peter (Gal. 2:11-13). Such people must be confronted with their error and corrected.

Those who are themselves deceived and who need to be dealt with faithful-

ly, pastorally and with a clear denunciation of the error involved (Gal. 1:6-9), and — perhaps most difficult for us to accept — with a forthright attack on the teachers of error as well as on the error itself (Gal. 2:4; 5:12; 2 Cor. 11:13; Phil. 3:18; 2 Peter 2:1,12).

The deceivers themselves: for example, the Judaisers (Acts 15). ‘The whole incident reveals a responsible and orderly way of dealing with error. A united stance was taken on the whole matter. The very title given to the decisions reached at Jerusalem — *dogmata* (Acts 16:4) — implies that they were authoritative.’

### **Application**

There followed ten points of practical application:

We must know the truth in a thorough and clear way.

We must know ourselves. Mr. Sheehan warned against having a party spirit and being concerned only to defend our own group and traditions without being willing to expose those traditions to the authority of Scripture.

We need to recognise an interdependence between churches, where each congregation has responsibility to each other congregation. Formal structures in church relationships are, Mr. Sheehan felt, not in line with the New Testament pattern.

There is great need of discernment in distinguishing between those who are in error in some matters but basically in submission to apostolic authority, and those who show no evidence of submission to apostolic authority.

There is need of strong leadership in local churches. ‘One of the most noticeable features of modern evangelicalism is the failure of its leaders, who are often very hesitant to defend the truth and to speak out against error.’

There is need to regularise those who go out preaching.

The danger of allowing personal loyalties to override our concern for the truth.

The need of consultation between churches.

The need to be aware of the subtlety and deceptive nature of error.

The danger of superficial and sentimental judgments — e.g. many evangelicals were sympathetic to the Pope simply because he seems to be a ‘nice man’.

Responding to the paper, the Rev. John Rosser had few criticisms to make and in the main endorsed what Mr. Sheehan had said. He did suggest an 11th application to the church (or denomination) situation in which error is in the ascendancy and cannot be dealt with by way of discipline and when separation seems to be the only option.

### **Discussion**

Discussion focused on apostolic authority, which, it was said, is the key issue in 2 Thess. 3 where Paul deals with Christian brethren who defied apostolic authority over certain areas of their lives. We need to distinguish between the regenerate heretic and the unregenerate heretic whom Paul speaks of elsewhere as ‘the enemies of the cross’. The key issue is Scripture rather than any one particular doctrine. The question to be asked is, ‘Is this man seeking to be

faithful to Scripture?’ This is surely the criterion for deciding where fellowship is possible, and not simply whether a man is involved in a mixed denomination. The question was then asked, ‘When does a man cease to be in error by ignorance and become much more seriously and closely involved?’ When this does happen it surely calls for a different response.

There was a call for more to be written to persuade Evangelicals in the mixed denominations to re-think their position; too much of our writing is entirely for our own constituency. Is there need for some kind of forum where there can be dialogue? The matter of differences of interpretation of Scripture was raised — what do we say to a Christian brother who says ‘I understand the Scripture differently from you on this matter’? This is not a rejection of the authority of Scripture, so how can we discipline such a person? And yet we must be careful not to make sincerity itself a criterion for judging matters; a Christian may be sincere in his interpretation of Scripture and yet wrong, and so stand in need of correction. The absence of the apostles to explain their teaching is no answer here for Scripture carries within itself adequate principles of interpretation.

One speaker made the point that we are often dealing with Christians who have a very different view of the Church from ourselves and this greatly added to the difficulty of confronting them with the compromise in which they appear so clearly to us to be involved. Others felt that this could not relieve us of our responsibility to every Christian.

The discussion served to press home upon us the seriousness of false teaching in the Church and our need of wisdom and discernment in distinguishing between erring Christian brethren and those who are ‘the enemies of the cross’, and the different approaches required for each.

## **Biblical Principles and Freedom of Conscience**

The fifth paper, presented by Rev. Alan Gibson, General Secretary of the BEC, began with the inevitability of differences over church issues arising, not from any deficiency in Scripture, but from our own frailty and sinfulness. Although God has good ends in view in permitting these differences, we must seek to understand the nature of our divisions and work for increasing unity.

### **Scripture**

The second section dealt with differences over the use of Scripture, beginning with areas of agreement, such as the authority and perspicuity of Scripture. Evangelicals differ over the sufficiency of Scripture. The historic Anglican position is that Scripture is sufficient in the matter of personal salvation but not in the realm of ecclesiology, and therefore the episcopal system is to be justified not on Scriptural grounds but on the grounds of its antiquity and usefulness. This position, generally accepted by evangelical Anglicans, clearly has a bearing on the whole matter of the unity of the Church. Mr. Gibson brought the matter nearer home by asking whether we believed the Scripture to be sufficient to resolve those matters on which the churches of the BEC are still divided. The harmony of Scripture is a further area of difference. Some Evangelicals maintain that the New Testament contains not a single view of

church order, but a developing picture in which there is a variety of church patterns. This led on to a consideration of differences over principles of interpretation. Two examples were given: first, the way in which we relate Old Testament church order and worship to the New Testament church in matters such as baptism, and the concept of a national church. Second, the matter of the regulative principle by which nothing of spiritual significance is to be introduced into the Church except by the warrant of Scripture. This was, of course, very much an issue during the English Reformation. Do we require a positive Scriptural warrant for our church order or is it sufficient to say that whatever is not forbidden by Scripture is allowable if it appears to us good and helpful? Anglicans have taken the latter position; many of us would take the former — both equally sincerely. Hermeneutical principles lie at the heart of the issue.

### **Principles**

The third section focused on differences over perceived priorities. As Evangelicals look out upon the church scene they see more or less the same picture and they read the same Bible, and yet come to very different conclusions about, for example, what is most needful at the present time. The fact is that we all have different pre-suppositions. Mr. Gibson developed this idea along the following lines:

**Models of the Church:** the way in which we perceive the Church will control our priorities. So those who give to the institutional aspects of the Church the major controlling significance may well consider support of their denomination and its ecclesiastical structure to be of prime importance even though they acknowledge the existence of serious doctrinal error and compromise in its witness. The question is, how should one church relate to another if their perceived priorities are different?

**Biblical Principles and Graded Absolutes:** as Evangelicals we recognise that biblical principles have absolute authority because they express the will of a sovereign God. Our difficulty arises when more than one biblical principle is relevant to us at any one time and when obedience to one principle appears to conflict with obedience to another. This situation may be resolved by recognising that biblical absolutes may be graded and that some are more weighty than others and have a higher claim upon us. This principle, surely not new, can be helpful in dealing with church issues.

**Pastoral Pragmatism:** for example, a church might be convinced of the need to sever its links with a mixed denomination and yet feel that for serious practical reasons it must delay that step.

### **Conscience**

The fourth section dealt with differences over liberty of conscience. That conscience is to be captive to the Word of God, all Evangelicals would agree. (This is always a somewhat dangerous assumption, but it is difficult to see how any man can claim to accept the authority of Scripture and yet refuse submission to it.) However, the New Testament does allow liberty of conscience in matters not sinful in themselves, e.g. food offered to idols (Rom. 14 and 15; 1 Cor.

8—11). Does this principle help us in church matters? We have to recognise that the view of the Church taken by some Evangelicals allows them to remain in the mixed denominations without a troubled conscience. If our being true to our conscience means that in the light of 2 Thess. 3:6,14 we must withdraw from public fellowship with a brother who associates with those who deny the faith (the mixed denomination situation), how far ought we to consider 'the other man's conscience' (1 Cor. 10:29)?

The paper concluded with some guiding principles for handling our differences, drawing some very helpful material at this point from Michael Harper's book, 'That we may be one' — though the main thesis of this book is entirely opposed to the BEC position.

In his response Rev. Gordon Murray spoke of our being inhibited by two kinds of fear — good and bad. The fear of distrusting God's truth, and the fear of denying the Christianity of those who are our brethren in Christ, were proper fears. But the fear of man ('which bringeth a snare') was also liable to inhibit us from speaking as plainly as we might. He warned against the danger of an over-simplistic approach, of seeing everything in black and white. We need to recognise the Anglican approach to the Scriptural teaching on the Church. There were historical differences here. The basic approach was different for they held a different view of the regulative principle. On the matter of 'graded absolutes', Mr. Murray felt our duty was to obey conscience and leave the consequences to God. Yet we need to recognise other men's conscientious actions in staying in or coming out. Finally he urged us to be aware of our own liability to declension and our need of watchfulness and prayer.

### **Discussion**

The Chairman directed our attention to two aspects of the subject which ought to be further considered: the place of conscience with regard to our own differences and the position of Evangelicals in the mixed denominations. What are the roots of our differences? The question was then asked, to what extent does our doctrinal basis (in the local church situation) bind men's consciences? In reply it was said that there must be a core of truth about which we are sure — the Church's doctrinal basis is not a personal private interpretation of Scripture but the result of the progress and conviction of the Church over a period of time (the legitimate role of tradition). The matter of how Christians with paedobaptist convictions ought to be received by baptist churches was raised. Strict Baptists felt that it was impossible to receive them into membership whilst others saw no difficulty in respecting their consciences in this matter and receiving them in good faith. But how is it, one speaker asked, that we can accept the conscience of the Paedobaptist but not of the evangelical Anglican? In answer to this it was said that evangelical Anglicans must demonstrate that the Anglican Church can be justified and there must be a repudiation of doctrinal pluralism. The former speaker then asked if we could conceive of an evangelical Anglican in good standing — acting conscientiously in his situation, and if so then surely it ought to be possible to cooperate with him on extra-church issues. It was felt by some that this was a whole area in which we could not legislate for each other. A plea was made for

more contact between ourselves and evangelical Anglicans; we need to be prepared to sit down and talk with them.

## **Contemporary Challenges**

Rev. Peter Seccombe of St. Albans began the final paper by pointing out the peculiar difficulties of presenting the concluding paper — of having to ‘scratch where it itches most and probe where it hurts most’; and of having to build on what has gone before without the advantage of having read the previous papers. He then gave a brief summary of biblical principles governing unity and separation — I repeat them here as they do represent common ground for the whole conference.

### **Unity**

All true believers are one in Christ.

This unity is given by God, being the result of the new life given by the Spirit in the new birth, accompanied and manifested by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This unity is to be guarded, maintained and expressed by Christians. Its leading characteristic is to be a Christlike love.

Though this unity is, at root, inward and spiritual, its expression is to be visible even to the unbelieving world.

Whilst the primary expression and enjoyment of this unity is to be found in the local church it should also be manifested in the relationships between churches.

In this world such unity will be far from perfect and will be strained and attacked frequently.

### **Separation**

Christians are called to be separate from the world although retaining contact with it.

Christians are called to separate themselves from professing believers who deny the Gospel either by what they profess to believe (or not believe) or by their manner of life.

Such separation from other professing believers is designed to safeguard the purity of the Church and the clarity of its testimony but also to correct and win back the erring.

Whilst churches are to be fellowships of regenerate people, none but the smallest are likely to be so in their entirety. There is almost certainly to be an admixture of false professors and temporary believers.

### **History**

In his second section, Mr. Seccombe considered some of the lessons we can learn from history, arguing ‘that we are by no means the first generation to face the challenge of honouring our God by united and yet uncompromising testimony to the Gospel and that at church level. We may therefore expect that there are lessons to be learnt from the past.’

He noted, first of all, the difficulty of the problem. ‘For nearly nineteen centuries the problem has defied any real and lasting resolution despite a succession of able and godly minds being applied to it. We recognise that our

evangelical fathers a century ago, generally speaking, ducked the church issue and went instead for an evangelical unity outside the churches, setting up para-church bodies for the purposes of fellowship, joint social action, evangelism and overseas missions ... We ought to be able to understand fairly readily why they chose what appeared, and ... proved to be, a far easier route to some kind of evangelical unity than that which seeks it at church level. We will be in a better position to criticise them when we have got something better.'

Secondly, warned Mr. Seccombe, disintegration and apostasy must always be expected. The imperfect sanctification of true believers, the influence of unregenerate professors as well as the activity of the devil himself have always ensured that it has been so. Were we, then, 'in our generation able to attain to some significant degree of unity amongst evangelical churches, how long would it last? Without continuous reformation compromise would quickly set in. With continuous reformation, division and fragmentation would almost certainly result.'

Thirdly, an increase of spiritual life and light tends to increase the problem. 'I suppose that the professing church was never more united than it was in the dark ages. Peace and quietness are commonplace in a grave yard but not in a house full of lively minds, active bodies and differing temperaments! The Reformation brought not only separation from Rome but division amongst those who were seeing new light and tasting new life. Some men saw things more quickly than others. Different men had different, but no less conscientiously held, priorities. A new awareness of individual liberty, founded upon a recognition of every Christian's direct access and accountability to God, brought the seeds of individualism and disintegration into the Protestant churches ... Is it not true to say that the increased doctrinal awareness within some sectors of evangelicalism in the post-war era has been a major factor in bringing to a head the issues we are now discussing?'

Fourthly, there are dangers which we must be careful to avoid. 'Where there has been a serious concern for the working out of the biblical doctrine of the Church, there has been a tendency towards (a) Authoritarianism (strong spiritual leadership can easily over-reach itself so as to deny liberty of conscience to the individual believer/church), (b) Narrow Exclusivism (e.g. Romanism, Taylorite Brethrenism and some Gospel Standard Baptists), (c) Isolationism (little or no concern for any relationship with other true churches), (d) Comprehensiveness (Romanism; also some evangelical Anglicans seem to have accepted their church's comprehensiveness as being right and inevitable rather than as something at best to be tolerated with regret).'

### **Confusion and Complexity**

Turning to a survey of the present scene, Peter Seccombe believed that two words — confusion and complexity — describe fairly accurately the contemporary church scene. In more detail, he listed (a) the state of the nation, (b) distortions and denials of the Gospel (the Bishop of Durham is only the tip of an iceberg), (c) ecumenical trends, (d) Charismatic influences, which some see as offering an alternative focus for Christian unity to that of doctrinal agree-

ment. Mr. Seccombe felt this was 'one of the most alarming and dangerous trends in the Charismatic movement.' Then, (e) there is the matter of evangelical divisions which appear to be more extensive than ever before. The widening breach of fellowship between Evangelicals within the doctrinally-mixed denominations and many of those outside was, on the whole, to be regretted. 'Undoubtedly 1966 and the opening rally of the National Assembly of Evangelicals, organised by the Evangelical Alliance and addressed by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, was a watershed for evangelical relationships but not entirely the watershed desired by the speaker. The appeal that night was for Evangelicals to leave the mixed denominations and to come together in fellowship, working together for the same aims and objects. In the following months and years, a good many churches and ministers have seceded but there has been no mass exodus. The more obvious aspect of the watershed proved to be a greater separation between those Evangelicals within the mixed denominations and those outside them. The latter have seen the former as compromisers; the former have seen the latter as extremists.'

Then there are divisions between BEC aligned evangelical churches and others like the Brethren and Pentecostal churches, etc. which are not ecumenically involved. Furthermore, there are divisions between aligned churches (e.g. Reformed/Arminian, Charismatic/non-Charismatic, Baptism and Church government issues) and within each group there may be sub-divisions! For many of our people concern over these issues seems largely ministerial, theoretical and remote; what finally matters to many is whether the local church has a biblical ministry and a warm fellowship rather than its association with other churches. We were challenged and humbled by the issue of evangelism; not only by our frequent lack of success but by the fact that many of those who were seeing a real measure of blessing in true conversions differ from us over church issues.

### **Contemporary Challenges**

What should be our response to the situation in which we find ourselves, in the light of biblical principles and bearing in mind the lessons of church history?

(a) We must strive for a right balance between truth and love, separation and unity. 'Most of us would agree', Mr. Seccombe added, 'that Evangelicals in the 'mixed denominations' have got the balance wrong. They are too heavy on unity, too light on separation. Might not our danger be to swing too far in the opposite direction?'

(b) We must put our own house in order. Mr. Seccombe suggested that the fragmented state of independency was a powerful disincentive to separation. We must aim for independency without anarchy, disagreement without division, and unity without compromise. We do need to be much clearer about what the BEC stands for as people have different ideas of the aims and priorities of the BEC. The fact is that Christians are often far more committed to their particular church grouping (FIEC, EFCC, Free Church, etc.) than to the BEC. So what does that say about our supposed commitment to as large as possible unity amongst Evangelicals outside the mixed denominations?

(c) We must seek a wider evangelical unity. Is BEC unity, at its best, an adequate goal? 'We may say', warned Mr. Seccombe, 'that this is where we have

to start; present indications are that it is where, at the very best, we will have to end — unless we are prepared to re-think certain issues.’ In application of this point, he urged upon us five points:

We must exercise and demonstrate love to Evangelicals in the mixed denominations. ‘Private fellowship does not manifest to the world our unity in Christ!’

We must respect Evangelicals who sincerely differ from us in their doctrine of the Church.

We should judge ministers and churches by their words and actions rather than by their labels and associations.

We must be realistic.

We must make sure that the cause of the Gospel remains our priority.

While we must ask, “Is not the refusal of our fellow Evangelicals to separate from liberals, radicals and sacramentalists hindering the cause of the Gospel?”, we must also pose the question, “How far is our separation from such Evangelicals furthering the cause of the Gospel?” Mr. Seccombe continued: ‘The situation in our land is desperate. At the very least we cannot be complacent about confronting the enemies of the Gospel divided among ourselves. Has not Luke 11:17 some application to us? ... Is it conceivable that in some situations at least we could work towards a fellowship of all avowedly evangelical churches in which we would pledge that in things that affected one another in the local situation we would not act without consultation and seek to avoid anything which would embarrass or create difficulties for one another? A fellowship in which we would seek to act in concert with regard to outside initiatives that would by-pass or hinder the responsibilities of our churches?’

In his final section of the paper, we were reminded of our duty to pray for revival.

Dr. Eryl Davies, in his response, pin-pointed three important biblical principles in Peter Seccombe’s paper.

First of all, we must take heed to ourselves and to our doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). No amount of attention to doctrinal orthodoxy will compensate for failure to examine ourselves and set our own house in order.

Secondly, we have a responsibility to the wider Church. But how are we to show that concern for believers in the doctrinally-mixed denominations? Dr. Davies suggested some pointers:

(a) We must be persuaded of this principle ourselves; we ought to make our BEC fellowship as wide as possible and avoid despair or cynicism and work at the problems.

(b) We need to recognise our special responsibility as pastors to instruct and encourage our churches in these matters, and to do all that we can on a local level to foster unity. Dr. Davies shared his own experience of personal contacts with ministers outside the BEC constituency resulting in increased mutual understanding, greater prayerfulness, and respect which had not been present before.

(c) The living Lord revives His true Church. Dr. Davies welcomed the references to revival in the paper but regretted that they had not been developed more. How deeply persuaded are we in this matter? And yet we must not be passive and simply wait for revival but pray and work for it.

### **Discussion**

The Chairman guided the discussion in a practical direction along the lines of Dr. Davies' three principles. Differences over our response to Evangelicals in mixed denominations surfaced immediately. One speaker could not see what purpose remained for the BEC in the light of this paper. Unlike the Evangelical Alliance, the BEC is clear in its opposition to the ecumenical movement while seeking a more visible unity between evangelical churches.

The discussion drew to a close on the issue of theological pluralism. Anglicanism, it was said, meant the acceptance of several gospels in one church or denomination and many evangelical Anglicans appear happy to accept this position. The controversy in recent months over the Bishop of Durham, for example, has served to confirm theological pluralism. While we must not betray the Gospel in this way, others felt that the triumphalism pervading evangelical Anglican churches in the 1960's has largely passed and there is an opportunity now to build bridges.

The Chairman drew the meeting to a close. He reminded the conference that our primary loyalty was to the Gospel and that this was the essence of the BEC position, that is, church unity on the basis of the Gospel. We ought not to contemplate doing anything that would go against the BEC stand, but we do have a responsibility towards Evangelicals in mixed denominations and ought not to write them off. However, we need to ask them what they are doing to oppose error and to demonstrate their belief in a unique Gospel. We recognise them as brethren and as those who belong to us and yet their alignment with those who deny the Faith causes us problems.

*The Rev. Neil Richards is minister of a Baptist church in Winterley, Sandbach, Cheshire, and an Associate Editor of this journal.*

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### **Conference Summary**

*When the BEC Executive Council met in May they approved for circulation the following Summary of the major conclusions of the Study Conference. It indicates their considered reflection on the discussions as well as the papers and serves as a valuable supplement to Neil Richards' helpful report.*

The Study Conference performed a most useful purpose in providing a context for brotherly study and discussion of a subject which is close to the raison d'être of the BEC's origins and continuing ministry. While much was not exhaustively discussed and even more not satisfactorily resolved, the various positions did emerge more distinctively. Many expressed appreciation for the way their own thinking was developed by the discussion. Though we did not come away in unanimity we did leave knowing better where each other stood.

## **Union**

There was a common concern for evangelical unity to be furthered as it related to our churches but there was not agreement as to how this should be expressed, e.g. whether formal union could even be considered and in what ways unity among churches should be expressed. We are one and know we need to be more at one and to be seen as such.

## **Separation**

Various positions emerged regarding separation at church level from those in doctrinally-mixed denominations:

Anti-separation in principle and/or in practice:

This was a minority view. Objection was raised to separation both in principle and in practice. Others, though not reneging on it as a principle, yet believed that in the current situation (no longer that of 1967) separation should not restrict all our public relationships and co-operative links with individuals and churches in the doctrinally-mixed denominations.

Pro-separation in principle and in practice:

This view though supported by several was nevertheless a minority view within the conference. These brothers upheld the principle that the need to maintain a clear witness to the Gospel requires a reluctant but necessary church separation from evangelical churches in mixed denominations. There was no wish, however, to prohibit private fellowship with individual Christians in those denominations.

Pro-separation in principle but not total church practice:

This was the majority view. Separation was recognised and upheld in principle but it was not regarded as alone regulating all inter-church relationships and activities. These were to be determined in the light of conscience and local conditions.

## **Conclusions Drawn**

The continuing need for us to work for ways to express genuine evangelical church unity.

The continuing need for us to remain separate from doctrinally-mixed denominations.

The continuing need for us to grant each other liberty to pursue what each believes to be right within our common commitment to the aims of the BEC and to each other within the BEC family.

*For my part, until by a fresh pouring out of the Spirit of God from on high, I see Christians in profession agreeing in pursuing the end of Christianity, endeavouring to be followers of Jesus Christ in a conversation becoming the gospel, without trusting to the parties wherein they are engaged; I shall have very little hopes to see any unity amongst us, that shall be one jot better than our present differences.*

John Owen  
Animadversions on Fiat Lux, IX.I.