
Focus

In each issue Focus aims to examine one biblical doctrine in a contemporary setting. Readers will recall that Issue 15 carried an extensive report of the 1985 BEC Study Conference on the topic of the Church, entitled 'Union and Separation'. There are particular reasons for returning to the matter of the Church again this time. In February 1986 the BEC Executive Council responded to the request of the British Council of Churches for submissions from bodies both within and beyond their own ecumenical constituency about the nature of the Church. We publish here the full text of their statement because we believe it is both an unashamed testimony to our evangelical principles and a stimulus to our own further theological reflection.

Focus: 4 What is the Church?

This response on the topic 'What is the Church and what is it for?' is offered to the British Council of Churches INTER CHURCH PROGRAMME. Its paragraphs represent our views on three aspects of the question, 'In your tradition and experience how do you understand the nature and purpose of your church (or churches) in relation to other Christian denominations and as together we share in God's mission to the world?'

Introduction

The British Evangelical Council (BEC) represents evangelical churches outside the usual range of ecumenical life. The fact that we are making this submission does not reflect any change in our conviction that ecumenicity that is not based on vital Christian truth is actually a danger to Christian people as it obscures the distinctives of the Gospel. We regret that many ecumenical statements do not recognise the conscientious separation of a significant number of evangelical churches when they imprecisely refer to a particular project involving 'all the churches'. We do, however, value this opportunity to bear witness to a positive experience of unity which does exist within authentic evangelicalism.

The Nature and Purpose of the Church

a) The Nature of the Church

It is our understanding that the Church belongs to God: in conception, creation and purpose it is His. The Church belongs to the Triune God: it is the Father who elects its members, the Son who redeems them and the Spirit who sanctifies them. As to its fundamental nature the Church is not an institution. It is above all else a spiritual company of redeemed people. This fact needs to be remembered when many seem to be preoccupied with institutional re-organisation and re-alignment. It is therefore in the following theological terms that we would see the nature of the Church delineated.

(i) The Church and Scripture

The authority for the very existence of the Church is the Lord Jesus Christ and Scripture is the witness to Christ in words. The revelation of God in the person of Christ must not be seen as inconsistent with the revelation of God in propositional form in the Bible. Scripture's God-breathed origin ensures its authority, infallibility and inerrancy. We affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, that nothing is to be required as essential to the Church which is not found there. The Bible stands above all Church tradition, human reason and contemporary prophetic utterance as the final arbiter of truth. Its timeless principles do need to be expressed in each appropriate cultural context as the Church is called to confess and expound the truth. In so doing we seek to be ruled by Scripture's own principles of interpretation.

(ii) The Church and the Mediator

In the mystery of the eternal Trinity God covenanted to save the Church. The incarnate Christ became the Mediator of God's covenant people. The Church is a New Testament reality resulting from the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The pictures of the Church are related to Him; e.g. His flock, His temple, His body. He fulfilled covenant obligations, underwent the penalty of a broken covenant and secured covenant blessings for the people of God and for them only. This fact must close the door to all notions about universal salvation.

(iii) The Church and the Gospel

The Saviour calls sinners to repentance and faith by His Spirit through the Gospel. The Good News is Christ Himself, the objective facts of history concerning Him, e.g. His virgin birth and bodily resurrection, and the significance of these revealed in the Bible. His atoning sacrifice was essential for the propitiation of God and the reconciling of fallen man. 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3). When God regenerates the spiritually dead, that new life is expressed by their confessing faith in Christ and giving evidence of holiness. Justification is God's forensic act of declaring righteous those who trust in Christ and is not a process conditional upon the sanctified life.

(iv) The Corporate Life of the Church

All those united to Christ inwardly by the regenerating work of the Spirit are joined to His Body, the Church. Its corporate life will reflect the diversity of ministries and gifts of those who have experienced God's grace in Christ. Christ, who alone is the head of the Church, instituted only two sacraments or ordinances, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The observance of those cannot automatically convey grace but calls for their reception in faith with the blessing of Christ. The Lord's Supper is never to be considered a sacrifice for sin, nor is there ever any change in the substance of the bread and wine. Christ also ordained offices for the ministry of His Word and the oversight of His flock. We recognise there are differences in understanding the present structure of those ministries but cannot accept that the 'historic episcopate' with its claim to apostolic succession and its hierarchical structure is essential to the nature or unity of the visible Church.

(v) The Historical Continuity of the Church

The Church is the central focus of God's purpose in history. Christ is appointed 'to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills everything in every way' (Ephesians 1:22-23). Throughout history and in a wide range of cultures the true Church of Christ has been sustained by His grace. All local fellowships of His Church display a reality which everyone born of the Spirit rejoices to see. Regrettably there are churches retaining outward forms of order and confession which are apostate as to truth and life and have ceased to be churches in the New Testament sense of the word. To use Scriptural standards to discern whether a particular church bears the marks of genuine spiritual reality is not a search for an unrealisable perfection in this age. Consequently every church needs constantly to be reforming itself according to God's word in the Bible. Nevertheless, we do recognise an urgent need for the whole Church today to seek God's face for that recovery of His manifested presence and power which characterised periods of Revival in former times.

b) The Purpose of the Church

Since the Church is 'a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit' (Ephesians 2:22) and 'the pillar and foundation of the truth' (1 Timothy 3:15) we believe it is altogether inappropriate to accept secular categories of what the world expects of the Church and adapt her programmes to meet man-made goals. God has made the Church what she is because of His purposes for her, purposes which extend into eternity. These are firstly Godward in worship and then manward in edification, mission and social concern.

(i) Worship

The Church is the new creation of God, 'that you may declare the praise of Him' (1 Peter 2:9). The vertical purpose of doing everything for the glory of God is primary. The gratitude of the redeemed motivates their dedication of life to Him for whom no sacrifice is too great. That which is imperfectly offered in this life will be gloriously expressed in heaven.

(ii) Edification

The ascended Lord has given gifts to every member 'to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up' (Ephesians 4:12). Maturity in holiness means developing in usefulness. One aspect of this progressive sanctification is that unfolding oneness which the Spirit of God creates. 'May they be brought to complete unity' (John 17:23).

(iii) Mission

That worship which consists in obedience of God's commands and the purpose for which she is built up prepares the Church to be sent out into the world. (A fuller treatment is given under Section 3).

(iv) Social Concern

We welcome renewed interest among Christians in reflecting God's righteousness and Christ's compassion in the face of man's desperate temporal needs. Whilst recognising the Church's calling to bring in Christ's

Kingdom we deny that this can be done by changing social structures because 'unless a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God' (John 3:3). However, given a change in human nature the structures in which men are involved will be affected for good. We view with deep concern the adoption of humanist, even Marxist, pre-suppositions by some Christians today in their giving priority to social rather than eternal issues.

Church Relationships

We cannot conceive that any church is so independent that it has no need of support and help from the gifts displayed in others outside that church but equally part of the universal body of Christ. The New Testament assumes that relationships between churches will exist and directs us to the principles by which their mutual fellowship is to be fostered.

a) Unity

Christians are charged to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit' (Ephesians 4:3). What God has created we are to express and preserve. There is a valid ecumenicity in the communion of saints. Wherever possible this unity must be exemplified in personal, parachurch, denominational and inter-denominational co-operation. The BEC is not an anti-ecumenical body but it represents the kind of ecumenicity which takes evangelical principles seriously. We understand 'evangelical' to denote that Christianity which affirms the historicity of the New Testament accounts of the life and work of Christ, the inerrancy of the Scriptures and the necessity of a supernatural, personal experience of the living Christ today. These are the unifying factors and church relationships need to be governed by the authority of Scripture and its constraints.

b) Separation

However reluctantly expressed, there is need for separation from error in the world, false teaching in the Church and those supporting either. This would include for us separation from that form of ecumenicity which embraces those who deny Gospel essentials. This duty is commanded in Scripture and is necessary in order to bear positive witness to the truth. This necessarily limits realistic co-operation to those sharing the same convictions on Gospel essentials and precludes those substituting subjective or pragmatic re-interpretations of the clear teaching of Christ, the Bible and orthodox Christians throughout church history.

c) Contacts

Separation does not imply monastic isolation without any human contact with other Christians or churches. We respect the sincerity of those holding other convictions in professing churches as we respect the consciences of those of other faiths in a pluralist society. Only by retaining personal friendships can we fulfil our calling to share any light God has given us and do any good to our fellows. We rejoice that there are many Christians outside the BEC who speak His truth in the spirit of His love. We regret what separates us from them and especially those alliances some evangelicals retain with those in error which limit their closer association with us.

The Church's Mission

We understand the task for which God has called His Church into being to be consonant with its spiritual nature. Essentially it is to glorify God and to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ by proclaiming to the whole world the Gospel of Salvation through faith in Him.

a) The Great Commission

Our Lord's charge to the Church (Matthew 28:18-20) retains an abiding relevance even in this age of religious pluralism. Its world-wide scope is grounded in Christ's universal Lordship; it commits us to the primacy of preaching; it involves incorporation into the visible church; it requires practical Christian living and it is reliant on the continuing presence of Christ in a work which will not be complete until His return at the end of this age. His future Kingdom is the goal of our mission, with the awesome challenge that every child of Adam must spend eternity, either in heaven with Christ or in hell without Him.

b) Co-operation

The assumption in the specific question being addressed that 'together we share in God's mission' needs to be queried. Co-operation is only possible where the same Gospel is preached and the same priorities observed. It would be unrealistic to assume otherwise. There are so-called churches which have embraced such a syncretistic ideology and others which give such priority to a political programme that we cannot identify with them.

For thirty years the BEC has sought to exemplify co-operation between churches and church-bodies differing on matters not essential to salvation but united in evangelical principles and priorities.

c) Humanitarian Projects

The same Gospel which requires us to 'render to God' requires us also to 'render to Caesar'. We are committed to civic responsibility, to seeking the good of our fellow men and to the stewardship of natural resources for the relief of material needs. It is right to recognise that other agencies are involved in similar humanitarian projects on grounds different from our own. Although there may be times when it is possible to co-operate with them, for us to be officially identified with such could confuse our testimony to spiritual distinctives.

Conclusion

The Executive Council of the British Evangelical Council cannot recommend that constituent churches should have any involvement in the Local Level of the Inter-Church Programme either at Phase I or Phase II. Neither would there seem to be any value in our being involved at National Level in Phase II. We would, however, be willing to amplify, clarify or justify any of the points in this submission if BCC consultants so desired.