
Applied Theology

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Some reflections on the relevance of the BEC Study Conference

In the previous issue of this journal the papers given at the Theological Study Conference in March of this year were summarised (The Gospel and the World, FOUNDATIONS Issue 22, pp 12-23). This article aims to highlight the importance of the general theme we examined and the effect of doing so — in so far as that was registered during the conference itself.

Since the early seventies the BEC has held a Study Conference, usually every two years. Originally, these were devoted to subjects on which there was some disagreement among the various traditions represented within the Council. The aim of doing this was twofold. First, it was hoped that a clearer understanding of each other's positions could be gained so as to avoid misrepresenting each other. Secondly, it was hoped that we could obtain a better understanding of Scripture itself on some matters and that our divisions might be narrowed. Whether this latter goal has been realised is a moot point but there has been a real measure of success with regard to the former as published comments on these conferences have indicated. **A deepening of fellowship has resulted** which one hopes will have contributed to the strengthening of the life and work of the BEC.

Without losing sight of the need to work for greater church unity, a change occurred with regard to the subjects considered at these conferences. In a word, **we began to look outwards**. What happens in the theological world outside evangelicalism and the BEC (they are not identical in the UK, though one wishes they were) affects the whole evangelical world, broader and narrower. We became aware of this and that not all our problems were inherited from the past, some were being added to in the present. Therefore, the conferences, which began by considering 'Church and State' took up the larger subject of 'Social Ethics'. There was a similar progression from 'Charismatic Issues' to the matter of 'Hermeneutics'. Without a deliberate decision to alter course being made we found ourselves being led on from one subject to an associated one. In this way we proceeded to inter-act with this wider theological scene, not only to respond to it individually but to help each other respond to it *together*. In this way, unity has been furthered and perhaps more usefully than by our confronting a subject head on, eg 'Unity and Separation'. That, however, remains to be seen.

In my opinion, the last two conferences have been of particular help in this regard. As we have looked outwards together **we have found ourselves being drawn closer together**. In both we have had the gospel as our main theme and if that does not bring us closer together then nothing can or will. In the first of these we were concentrating on the content of the gospel and its proclamation (see

FOUNDATIONS 18 for a summary of those papers. In this year's conference we focussed on the universal bearing of the gospel.

Some have felt that the BEC Study Conference has been intellectually highbrow and detached from the real problems of daily ministering and witnessing. It cannot be denied that it has made strenuous demands on those who have prepared papers and attended over the years. But if it did not do this then all justification for its existence would be lost. At the risk of claiming too much I genuinely wonder whether there is any other *theological* conference in the UK which sets itself the aim as here outlined and brings together men from such a wide background of traditions to pursue it. Whether that is so or not, what must be refuted is the charge that the Study Conference has been unrelated to the problems and pressures of being an evangelical minister/church/churches in today's world at home and overseas.

Our last conference proves this point admirably. Its connection with the realities of our contemporary environment was stated in its publicised aim. This was: "To establish the parameters of an authentic biblical universalism for the gospel which will exclude pluralism **and stimulate evangelism.**"

In the church at large pluralism is rampant; evangelism by contrast is rare. While the former is not to be entirely blamed for the latter, there is no doubt that pluralism hastens evangelism's decline and would cheerfully conduct its funeral service. Pluralism and (biblical) evangelism are like oil and water. We believe that the gospel in its universal dimensions does have the double-edged effect of rejecting pluralism and resurrecting evangelism. We therefore saw authentic, evangelistic Christianity threatened by denial on the one hand and demise on the other, and both from within the professing church. Could any subject be more relevant?

Pluralism does not have the same meaning as plurality. *Plurality* means the existence of more than one — it refers to a few or to many. It reckons not only with singleness but also with variety and variety to the point of differences even disagreement. We can think of the plurality of races, cultures, languages, ideologies etc etc. Plurality corresponds to the realities of the human situation. By contrast, *Pluralism* is a notion (not to say a fiction and a delusive one as well) which says that the many, even the all are but part of the one and the same greater whole. It begins by blurring or ignoring distinctions, continues by minimising or relativising difficulties and disagreements and ends up proclaiming a mysterious (not to say mystifying) oneness in which everything merges. It is not borne out by the facts. It therefore does not correspond to reality. It is not scientific but pantheistic. Pluralism says that black and white are not mutual opposites; they are shades of grey. Who could call a true blue Tory a red Socialist? Only someone who would call a Hindu a Christian. Such thinking amounts to the same kind of nonsense, even though it claims to be theology.

This year's Study Conference sought to understand and respond to this kind of philosophising because it perceived it to be a threat not only against evangelising but also against authentic Christianity. This can be easily shown by extending the analogy of the close of the previous paragraph. If a Hindu is really a Christian, where does that leave God? If a Muslim or Jew is a Christian where does that

leave Jesus the Christ? And what do we as Christians have to say to Hindus, Muslims and Jews? Where does that leave not only the Christian church but Christianity itself? The distance between the ivory tower of academic theology and the door knocker of an inner city flat is dissolved at a stroke by such questions.

Most of the papers given at the Conference focussed on particular aspects of this thinking (cf the article by Mr Walker in FOUNDATIONS 22). All I will do is to underline the relevance of the issues dealt with in each paper. Put in popular form, the questions we grappled with were — “How many gods are there — really? Are all right-minded, socially active people in the Kingdom? Does the greatness of Christ mean that he is personally present in all other religions? Is any and every sincere devotee of another religion the equivalent of a Christian already?” All of these questions call for an exclusive/negative reply from Bible believing people and churches but all of them are receiving positive, open-ended replies in today’s church with some Bible texts being used in support of the argument. The papers given therefore dealt with those actual passages of the Old and New Testaments as well as providing a rejection of pluralism in general.

The aim of the Conference, however, was not just to provide a rejoinder to religious pluralism. That was done and we believe our rebuttal will on inspection be found to understand the grounds on which pluralism rests and to provide a credible response to it. **The aim was also to stimulate evangelism.**

What stands in opposition to religious pluralism is really the Christian gospel. It is because there is only one God, and only one Saviour and Lord, and only one way to him for anyone and for everyone that Evangelicalism and Religious Pluralism have locked horns. Sad to say, some pluralists recognise this more clearly than some evangelicals do.

To be an evangelical therefore is to be anti-pluralist. But it is not to be anti-world. The gospel defined in the Bible is connected with the world in all its variety, complexity and need — nationally, culturally and religiously. Therefore evangelism is universal. Not *universalist*, claiming that all the world will be saved but *universal*, insisting that the gospel is urgently relevant to the whole world.

Without God’s love there would be no gospel and God does love the world. Without Christ’s death there would be no gospel and Christ died for the world. Without the Spirit’s work no one would know God’s love or benefit from Christ’s death and the world is the field in which the Spirit works. The church is gathered from all over the world and is told to go all over the world with the gospel. **To be an evangelical is to be for the whole wide world** — election and particular redemption notwithstanding. Our ‘small corner’ and ‘faithful few’ exclusivism is a denial of this universal dimension.

We were therefore constrained by the Bible and the gospel to say ‘No’ to pluralism. But we were also constrained to hear the Bible and the gospel say an equally authoritative ‘No’ to any world-ignoring mentality.

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