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# The Next Five Years

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**F**uturology is an inexact science. Any uninspired prophecy can leave the unwary with egg on his face. No wonder the Book of Proverbs counsels that, *Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent* (17:28). Outside a general treatment of unfulfilled Biblical promises our only possibility of providing some insight into the future is to notice the present trends and to speculate about how they might develop.

In an earlier issue of *Foundations* (No 36, pp 43-47) I reviewed the Evangelical Alliance book, *Together We Stand*, and commented briefly on chapter 10, *The Futures of Evangelicalism*. The very fact that the two authors, Clive Calver and Rob Warner, felt it necessary to use the plural, *Futures*, shows how tentative all such speculation must be. I will now note more fully the (alliterated) sub-headings of their chapter. *Retaining the status quo*, is what they regard as an increasingly unlikely prospect. *Reassimilation* is considered a danger if senior evangelicals become increasingly distanced from one another as their energies are poured into their denominational duties. *Reform* is the hope that evangelicals will act to reform the existing and historic denominations. *Refragmentation* is a real but disastrous prospect, should evangelicals choose the easy and yet palpably absurd option of devoting their energies to warring with one another. *Remnant* is how the writers speculate that the corrosion of evangelical convictions of the majority would leave a remnant of the faithful and orthodox. *Realignment*, however, is what they expect to happen to the church scene under the pressures of accelerating compromise with the moral standards of the day. They suggest that there will be four main sectors, a resurgent Catholicism, a disestablished Church of England of mainly evangelical Anglicans, a theologically liberal Free Church and a network of believer baptising, charismatic streams. *Renewal* they see as being at a cross roads, the future depending on the readiness of older leaders to provide opportunities for their successors to emerge. *Revival* is recognised to be beyond our control, although if it comes British evangelicals are seen to have a potentially pivotal contribution to make.

There is already plenty of evidence that evangelicalism today is not a unified movement and we have to speak of a spectrum of evangelical opinion, covering a range of views and having very fuzzy edges. No one, then is talking about the future of an already stable movement. Quite the opposite. A paper to be presented at the National Assembly of Evangelicals in November 1996 expresses concern that contemporary attitudes to Statements of Faith are either to use them as flags of convenience which are not enforced too seriously, or to exploit them by an appeal to hermeneutics which justifies different, yet contrasting interpretations and mental reservations.

Neither will many disagree with the assumption that the next five years will not be the same as the last five. The church does not stand still. Times change and people, who comprise the church, also change. Events in society around us inevitably impact upon the church. What we are also unable to forecast are the unexpected novelties of the devils schemes or the extraordinary works of the sovereign Spirit of God.

Let me suggest, however, five of the more significant theological factors which I believe will influence evangelicalism, and particularly evangelical relationships, in the foreseeable future.

## 1. Confusion over justification

Recent scholarship professing to be Biblical has profoundly affected evangelical perceptions of the doctrine of justification. The 1992 Anglican-Lutheran Porvoo Common Statement uses the concepts and the language made familiar in the reports of ARCIC II in failing to treat justification as a distinct and forensic act. Instead it is conflated with sanctification and reduced to being only one, and not the most important, model of salvation found in Scripture. Any reader of the epistles to the Romans and the Galatians will recognise that this is not the way the Bible treats justification and it is highly dangerous. It opens the way for a wholesale review of the Protestant Reformation. While many evangelicals had previously been ready to co-operate with the Roman Catholic Church as co-belligerents in social witness they are now being told that formal church separation from it is no longer necessary. From being the objects of evangelism Roman Catholics are being portrayed as our partners in mission. In some quarters this has already become the orthodox evangelical view and those who dissent from it are patronisingly dismissed as being stuck in a sixteenth century time-warp.

This re-appraisal of relationships with the Church of Rome is being fed by the vitality of the charismatic movement within that church and the emergence of the Evangelical Catholic Initiative in Dublin. The acceptance of the RC Church into the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland and the enthusiasm for evangelical involvement shown by Anglican and Baptist evangelicals are likely to further soften the former lines of separation. Added to this is the unresolved political dilemma in Northern Ireland, still being blamed on religious fundamentalists who insist on perpetuating what are perceived in the popular mind as out-of-date theological distinctives. Furthermore the British media frequently portray the Anglican establishment as woolly over ethical issues while RC morality is given an unrealistically ideal press for being so uncompromised! All of which suggests that the next five years are likely to see growing social and spiritual influence for the Roman Catholic Church and more problems for those of us who question that trend.

## 2. The open evangelical

Correspondents in the Church of England Newspaper in the early part of 1995 reflected on the Evangelical Leaders Conference held in January of that year, when the definition of evangelical was raised once again. Those committed to the inerrancy of Scripture were criticised and it was insisted that the true evangelical must leave room for the humanity of the Biblical writers. It was a controversy sadly reminiscent of the separation of the Inter Varsity Fellowship from the Student Christian Movement in the 1920s. The so called open evangelical is apparently ready to accept not only errors in the Bible but contradictions between Jesus and Paul, together with serious ambiguities about moral guidance. 1996 saw the publication of *Strangers and Friends*, written by a professing evangelical so open that he is able to grant biblical validity for homosexual practice.

Another recent and formative book has given focus to a whole movement. Since Dave Tomlinson wrote *The Post-Evangelical* in 1995 the concept has gained popularity and a conference was held in July 1996 on *Is there life after evangelicalism?* It is hard not to see here a baptised version of post-modernism, with its cultural relativism and plural concept of truths instead of truth. Mark Johnston's review of this book (*Foundations*, No 36, pp 40-43) shows how the hermeneutical principles it advocates are increasingly common in evangelical

institutions. This is not a domestic controversy among Anglicans for it goes to the very heart of our gospel authority. To say the least, co-operation between those wearing the same evangelical label but at loggerheads about their basic source of authority will become increasingly hard to achieve. Some suggest that these strains will prove too strong for some Anglicans, resulting in a reluctant evangelical secession. The more likely outcome, however, will be an evangelical church within the church similar to the two Anglican bodies in South Africa. Moves towards alternative episcopal oversight in the shape of Regional Advisers in the *Reform* group of Anglicans certainly point in this direction.

### **3. Uncertainty over the lost**

Hell is an emotive subject. Its character is real and awesome. Our Lord himself repeatedly spoke of it in the most solemn terms. The eternal punishment of the wicked used to be a common element in evangelical statements of faith. Today's evangelicals, however, are not so sure about hell, as more and more question hell's unending duration and prefer to speak of some kind of annihilationism. Even highly respected evangelicals like John Stott hesitate to be dogmatic about this. The 1996 General Synod commended a report called, *The Mystery of Salvation* which the popular media saw as reducing hell to *nothingness*, leaving evangelical critics of the report in a minority.

Then there is the question of those who have never heard the gospel. Can those in other religions be saved without having heard the name of Jesus and consciously believed on him? The principals of two leading independent Bible Colleges, Peter Cotterell (now retired from LBC) and Christopher Wright (ANCC), think that they can and have published work to promote these beliefs. The mixed reaction to these views in mission circles is interesting, since both have themselves served honourably as overseas missionaries. Quite apart from the genuine fears about the implications of their arguments for the exegesis of Scripture, many of their mission colleagues foresee that the next generation of candidates must inevitably look outside the eternal consequences of unbelief for their motivation. The growing popularity of these views has yet to be felt in some evangelical missionary organisations. But it will come.

### **4. Worship styles**

Evangelical worship culture has gone through considerable change in the last three decades. Since they reflect the context of contemporary society these changes are unlikely to slow down. What is called post-modernism refuses to adopt one overall style. The implications of this are especially painful for the serious-minded evangelical church committed to the centrality of preaching and refusing to dispense with what has stood the test of time. Even those committed to a liturgical pattern are now permitted so many alternatives that pick and mix services are almost universal. The understandable concern to be contemporary has easily degenerated into the tyranny of novelty. Christians return from major national events with songs, tapes and ideas which they cannot wait to share with their home church. What is nothing less than an almost total breakdown in respect for ministerial leadership has created space for these innovations to take root, with all the subsequent disruptions this can feed. No wonder local church unity is everywhere under strain.

Few features of evangelical life are more likely to cause separation between local churches than forms of worship. The exercise of charismatic gifts and the accompaniment of physical phenomena are almost universal in some sectors of evangelicalism. Many

regard them as the new orthodoxy and, given a little time, all but the evangelical Luddites will catch up. But where does that leave those with serious biblical questions about these worship styles? Can two walk together unless they are agreed? If we cannot pray together how can we work together, since prayer is itself the essence of our work? Co-operating in evangelism, in youth work, in leadership training, all these happen in the context of corporate worship. Without a sense of proportion about these very fundamental questions, further separation between gospel churches at different points on this spectrum seems inescapable.

## 5. Ecumenism and world faiths

Canberra was the setting for the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1991 and the evangelical responses were decidedly cool. What disappointed them was not only an absence of a real theology of the Holy Spirit at an Assembly devoted to that theme but the presence of so much overt syncretism, denying the uniqueness of Christ (*Beyond Canberra*, Regnum Books, 1993). As ecumenism becomes more free from its Biblical moorings we must not be surprised that the ship is sailing closer to these rocks. Domestically, Methodist discussions with the Church of England are said to be on course for a gradual integrating of ministries but full inter-communion may have to wait until Anglicans admit women bishops, since Methodists already have women in their equivalent of the episcopate. The Anglicans will vote first in 1997 and, if they agree to proceed, the Methodists will consider their options in 1998. The United Reformed Church already has 200 joint congregations with Methodists and has an observer at these talks.

Contemporary theology in the secular universities reflects the dominant world-view of humanist subjectivism, where every person's god is as good as the other and every person's truth is as valid as the other. Ironically, that very threat to Bible absolutes has driven some evangelicals to co-operate with any who stand for an objective Christian theology and has led them into a new rapprochement with Roman Catholics in the United States. The RC Church is, however, far from the monolithic body it once was and some of its academics, like Paul Knitter, are as close to universalism as the Hindus. Herbert Pollitt has amply documented the influence of this New Age thinking on the church (*The Inter-Faith Movement*, Banner of Truth, 1996). If the spirit of the age remains as strong an influence on the church as it has previously been then we can expect to hear a lot more of Creation Theology, well beyond sandal-wearing seminars at the Greenbelt Festival.

May I close by disclaiming any prophetic gift. I shall feel under no obligation to answer the bell to anyone arriving at my door in November 2001 with a copy of this article in one hand and carrying a large stone in the other.

*(This article expands material the author earlier contributed to For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future, eds. Steve Brady & Harold Rowdon, Scripture Union, 1996, chapter 24)*

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