
I Was There

Three personal Reflections on the 1996 National Assembly of Evangelicals

Are evangelicals merely one wing of the Church?

John Edmonds

The 11th-13th November 1996 saw over three thousand Christians, mostly delegates from churches committed to the Evangelical Alliance's statement of faith, gathering together in conference to "set an agenda for our church as it goes into the new millennium". One tangible result of their efforts was the production of "The Bournemouth Declaration", two sides of A4 setting out an "Evangelical Agenda" which was accepted overwhelmingly by the delegates on the final day. The agenda has three main headings: "Christ, Scripture and Unity"; "Church and Mission"; and "Church and Society". It is a document worth studying by anyone who wants to understand EA's current position.

I was encouraged by the central place given to the Cross, the Bible, and Evangelism throughout the Assembly. The worship was largely contemporary, but place was given to older hymns, times of silence for reflection, small group as well as platform-led public prayers and public Bible reading.

The Assembly began well with a meeting which gave pride of place to preaching. If this was agenda-setting for a conference which would set an agenda it was good planning. Steve Gaukroger, a Baptist minister from the Home Counties, preached from John 3:16. His preaching was faithful to the text of scripture and heartwarming. He drew our attention to God's heart of love for a lost world, a unique Saviour, the indispensability, unrepeatability and centrality of the atonement, the lostness of the lost and the priority of evangelism.

The first day ended on a high note with the contribution of Joni Eareckson Tada. Her message was full of scripture, honed in the fires of experience and affliction. Here was no triumphalism, but pure theodicy. Her theme; God's love for us, and our love for him come what may; the Christian life a love relationship with the Saviour. Not for Joni the flights of mystical fantasy, but experience rooted in devotion to the word of God in scripture.

The evening meeting on the second day set before us the opportunities for evangelism opening up as a result of greater European integration. It was refreshing to hear Christian leaders speaking about the God-given opportunities presented by a barrier-free Europe. Stanko Jambrek, General Secretary of the Protestant Evangelical Council of Croatia, told us about God's faithfulness to the tiny minority of evangelical Christians in his country through times of trial and persecution and the freedom that has come in recent years during which time there has been a definite move of the Holy Spirit leading to the planting of new churches and the conversion of hundreds of people.

I have given a brief snapshot of some of the main sessions to give some reasons for my overall encouragement but I must now refer to **two matters of concern**.

The main speaker in the seminar on the Bible was Alister McGrath. His paper was a reworking of material from his book *A Passion for Truth*. He said much that was helpful about the absolute authority of scripture, the way that submission to scripture sets us free from the tyranny of worldly/contemporary philosophy and the sufficiency of scripture for Christian belief and behaviour. That said, as in his book, he insisted on drawing a distinction between scripture and revelation, saying that “we must not identify the text of scripture itself with revelation. Scripture is a channel through which God’s revelation is encountered”. Derek Tidball, principal of the London Bible College, responding to Dr McGrath, also argued that “we must make a distinction between scripture and revelation... If we don’t we will make the mistake of identifying the very words of scripture with the revelation itself.” During the discussion period it became clear that many delegates, including some leading evangelical theologians and church leaders, were unhappy with the views expressed from the platform. It was encouraging to discover that the Bournemouth Declaration issued on the last day read “we recognise scripture as God’s word written, the definitive, normative and sufficient revelation of God’s truth.”

The main speaker in the seminar “Where Evangelicals Differ” was Robert Amess, a Baptist minister from Richmond and EA Executive and Council member. During the course of his paper, which included some very practical and helpful suggestions for dealing with differences of opinion and breaks of fellowship, I understood him to say that evangelicals needed to realise that they were just part of the church with a distinctive emphasis and contribution to make. His comment was picked up with enthusiasm by a number of contributors to the discussion time who spoke with passion about ecumenical projects, joint evangelism and prayer meetings with Roman Catholics and so on. This session set me thinking and reflecting. Throughout the Assembly evangelicals had been regarded as a wing of the church – possibly, probably, heirs to the most authentic expression of the faith, but still only fellow travellers. This was reinforced by a careful reading of the “1846 Practical Resolutions” which were reaffirmed at the Assembly. These resolutions “are as important to our evangelical identity as our Basis of Faith”, runs the introductory material. The resolutions make reference to three groups of Christians. Firstly there are the members of the Alliance (resolutions 1-4) who are urged to unity and love. Secondly there are those who “seek to know and serve Christ as Saviour and Lord” who will not wish to be members of the Alliance. “Such persons are not to be regarded as being out of Christian fellowship” (resolution 5), which I take to be a reference to bodies such as the BEC and other evangelicals not in the Alliance. Thirdly under resolution 6; “We urge all Christian leaders of Trinitarian churches to promote peace, unity and fellowship within the body of Christ.” Which I take to mean that the Evangelical Alliance regards all Trinitarian churches as being authentically Christian, part of the body of Christ on earth, making evangelicals just one wing of that church. As the Assembly drew to a close I kept asking myself a question. Am I happy for evangelicals to be described merely as a subset of the church?

How significant are these concerns in the overall scheme of things? Are they a reason to separate from the Alliance and churches within it? Or are they legitimate

issues for debate and discussion to be pursued from within? Taking the Assembly as a whole, I am happy to say “I was there”, but I shall watch developments with concerned interest.

Rev. John Edmonds is minister of Grove Hill Evangelical Church, Woodford

What do evangelicals believe about the Bible

Gary Benfold

The previous National Assembly of Evangelicals was held in 1966 and ended in controversy when Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, at the request of the Evangelical Alliance council, urged evangelicals to reconsider the implications of the doctrine of the church. John Stott, at the request of nobody in particular, urged them to ignore him. Readers of *Foundations* are undoubtedly familiar with the events of that Assembly; though the Evangelical Alliance, apparently, is still not. Joel Edwards (UK Director of EA) wrote in the Programme Booklet “The last National Assembly of Evangelicals in 1966 went tragically wrong, when disagreement over forming *an alternative evangelical denomination* led to a split” (emphasis mine). The results of the 1966 Assembly were very great indeed; two kinds of evangelicalism emerged with one branch (represented by the BEC and others) arguing that evangelicalism is the gospel itself and the other branch – finding shape and force at Keele the following year – seeming to believe that evangelicals were only one wing of the church and pledging itself to get more involved in denominations and structures. In view of the controversy which began then, it was perhaps rather brave of the Evangelical Alliance to call another Assembly, even if they did need to wait thirty years. But call one they did, and it met for three days at the Bournemouth International Centre in November of 1996.

There were some good points; I will never forget Joni Eareckson Tada speaking so movingly from her own experience on our attitudes to others. Joni is the greatest miracle I have ever seen: a woman of such grace and faith that the Lord shines from her. She is surely one of the greatest Christian heroines of our time. Steve Gaukroger preached very warmly and helpfully on the first day from John 3:16, and Roy Clements’ ministry from Matthew 22:29 (“You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God”) was very powerful indeed; I sensed a seriousness and a sober spirit after he had preached which suggested much of what he had said had gone home. But the worship leader for that session, whether deliberately or not, took us straight into the kind of singing which undermined the effect completely.

In spite of this though, I am sorry to say that my lasting impressions of the conference are negative, for various reasons. Where, O where, did the idea come from that Christianity is *fun*? I don’t mean joyous, I mean fun verging on funny. For the most part there was very little of a serious spirit about the main gatherings; I’m not sure we worshipped much, we just sang a lot.

Then too, some serious issues were on the agenda, and were treated seriously enough by the speakers; and yet, their serious treatment was often disappointing. Because the seminars were run concurrently I obviously cannot comment on all of them; but the one I attended on Scripture’s authority was very worrying indeed. None

of the three speakers were real inerrantists. The main paper was given by Alister McGrath, with responses from Derek Tidball and Judith Rossall. Evangelicalism has no solid ground to stand on unless the Scriptures are infallible and inerrant. While McGrath quoted Packer helpfully here it was hard to be sure that he agreed with what Packer meant, not just with what he said. McGrath's recent article in *Evangelicals Now*, where he speaks of rescuing the doctrine of Scripture from Rationalism, again affirms Packer's words but goes on to say about the position of Hodge and Warfield, "I respect that position, although I have misgivings about certain specific aspects of it", suggests that he may not. The third speaker clearly did not. Judith Rossall, had the distinction of being the most clear and forthright. She did not believe in inerrancy (although Packer's definition seemed to be a surprise to her) and felt that we needed to face up to the reality of errors in Scripture. As I say, at least it had the benefit of being clear! But evangelicalism has gone down a long way when the principal of London Bible College (Derek Tidball) can say publicly that we need to avoid the mistake of equating the words of Scripture with the revelation of God. In its context this sounded suspiciously like Barthianism to me; and apparently it did to others also. Dr Steve Brady from Lansdowne Baptist Church in Bournemouth challenged Dr Tidball at just this point and was told, "I sign an anti-Barthian clause every year". Be that as it may; were I a Trustee of LBC – or even contemplating one of my church members studying there – I would want to know rather more precisely what Tidball meant. This issue needs to be tackled and I hope that someone with more theological acumen and clout than I may take it up speedily.

Even more serious, though, was the whole approach of the Assembly. I hope I am not caricaturing it when I say the approach was: "Here we are; we are the evangelicals. Now – what do we believe? Let us form a statement that we can all agree on". Such an approach allows anyone who wants (for whatever reason) to call himself an evangelical to have a voice in shaping what the word means. But the proper way – surely – is to seek an agreement about what the Bible says in certain vital areas and let *that* stand as a definition of evangelical; then those who cannot accept it are inevitably excluded. That seems to be the problem; EA is deliberately an inclusivist organisation, which seems to be very gracious of them. But it is that very inclusivism which inevitably excludes many who cannot bear a fudge.

Rev. Gary Benfold is currently pastor of Limes Avenue Baptist Church, Aylesbury

What role should the Church have in our unity?

Alan Gibson

Where *Evangelicals Differ* was the title of a well-attended seminar at the NAE when the main presenter was my friend Robert Amess, pastor of Duke Street Baptist Church, Richmond. His warm and irenic manner reflected his genuine concern that differences should be faced with integrity about biblical principles and sensitivity in the face of diversity.

At the risk of highlighting yet another evangelical difference, however, I believe that the speaker threw the baby out with the bathwater!

In his presentation Robert Amess surprised me by beginning with the New Testament teaching concerning the Church, ignoring altogether the Old Testament material relating to God's covenant with Israel. [Is it a genuine evangelical methodology to begin any doctrinal survey, however brief, with only the NT material?] He properly deduced that the NT establishes the basic unity of the Church and that "multiplicity of belief is a denial of every tenet that is taught and implied in scripture".

His analysis of the present problem of "a fractured Church" is that evangelicals have taken refuge in the "transcendent" and "hidden" character of the Church. They have failed to deal with the problem of a Church that is both visible and also divided, suggesting that only in heaven will its unity become apparent. Content to interact on a pragmatic basis, too many evangelicals treat the unity of the Church only as a local church discipline. Now the Bible takes the universal dimension of the Church seriously but, Robert Amess insisted, evangelicals are ignoring it. Which is precisely what he then proceeded to do!

A helpful procedure from that point on would have been to take up the significance of the Universal Church concept for divided evangelicalism. Is there a biblical precedent for the use of the word *ekklesia* to denote a denomination? Does the common belief of the Church provide a pattern for local church relationships today? What constitutes a proper church? Is it a valid deduction from the Bible that a local church can hold evangelical doctrines and yet belong to a denomination which does not require that same belief of all its congregations? Which doctrines are non-negotiable and on which doctrines can we validly allow a diversity of interpretation? In which category does the doctrine of the Church come?

None of these lines, however, was followed by this presentation. Instead it was assumed that the relationships across denominational boundaries made possible by the Evangelical Alliance were already in place and that all we need to do is to ensure that we keep in contact with each other and behave with courtesy. While it was assumed that all evangelicals somehow belong to the Universal Church there was no consideration of the fact that other people also claim to be members but deny the biblical doctrine of salvation. There is a major evangelical difference about how these people are to be regarded but that crucial issue was not addressed. The "baby" of the Church was alive in the analysis of the problem but it had been fatally thrown out with the "bathwater" of supposed transcendence by the time we reached the solution.

Now all this is not merely an academic question. Evangelicals who try to relate to other bible-believing Christians outside their own denomination while seeking at the same time to work with non-evangelicals in their own denomination face difficulties of their own making. They have divided loyalties. Which is to take precedence and when? They have an image problem. Is the gospel they preach from the pulpit the same as that they proclaim from their notice board? They have to take refuge in pragmatism. "Well, it seems to work as well as any other option, doesn't it?"

It was always expecting too much for the 1966 NAE to be well spoken of in the 1996 event and no one did. Yet Dr Lloyd Jones' plea was for the significance of the Church as the guardian of the gospel. While local evangelical churches remain separated among different denominations they are inevitably weakened. He contended that our short-term co-operation in evangelical movements only to return to mixed churches for long-term commitment is not a biblical pattern of priorities. It is the

doctrine of the Universal Church which urges that. And it is this same doctrine which is relegated to insignificance in the generation unaware of 1966.

One important difference between the Evangelical Alliance and the British Evangelical Council is the place given to the Church. Although local churches may belong to the EA, so also may individual Christians, societies, agencies and para-church bodies. Although an attempt is made to reflect the denominational scope of its churches' membership, the EA Council remains a self-appointed body. The EA is essentially a movement, not a church body. By contrast the BEC is a council of churches, only churches may belong to it and its executive members are appointed by their churches.

Support for this position arose recently from an unexpected quarter. Earlier this year an American journal reviewed *Here We Stand*, a collection of essays from the Association of Confessing Evangelicals, a body some in the UK are now viewing as a possible model for co-operation between non-charismatic, serious-minded evangelicals.

The Achilles heel of evangelicalism is its very nature as a movement and not a church – defined by the pragmatic means of grace of mailing lists, personal networks and self-appointed committees as opposed to a rightly ordered ecclesiastical communion made visible by the Reformation “marks” of the Word, sacrament and discipline. Evangelicals ought to consider fully the contention that Christians cannot effectively engage the realities of the modern world without, or apart from, a real church. The Reformers would surely agree with that (Robert W Patterson, *Christianity Today*, 6 January 1997, p. 52).

Evangelical relationships are again under discussion, as they ought always to be. Some today, however, are proposing that personal initiatives and para-church umbrellas are inherently superior to church-based solutions. Whatever be the future shape of essentially evangelical co-operation should not one formative element in it be the Bible doctrine of the Universal Church?

Rev. Alan Gibson BD, General Secretary, British Evangelical Council.

Christian evangelism does not consist merely in a man going about the world saying, “Look at me, what a wonderful experience I have, how happy I am, what wonderful Christian virtues I exhibit; you can all be as good and as happy as I am if you will just make a complete surrender of your wills in obedience to what I say.” ... Men are not saved by the exhibition of our glorious Christian virtues; they are not saved by the contagion of our experiences ... Nay, we must preach to them the Lord Jesus Christ; for it is only through the gospel which sets him forth that they can be saved. If you want health for your souls, and if you want to be the instruments of bringing health to others, do not turn your gaze forever within, as though you could find Christ there. Nay, turn your gaze away from your own miserable experiences, away from your own sin, to the Lord Jesus Christ as he is offered in the gospel.

J Gresham Machen, *Education, Christianity and the State*, 1987
