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# Evangelical Learning in the Decade of Evangelism

ROBERT WARREN

## ABSTRACT

At the mid-point of the Decade, the Church of England's National Officer for Evangelism, Canon Robert Warren asks if Evangelicals have not become trapped by their own tradition, unable to offer a truly prophetic, and therefore lifegiving word to the nation. He sees one possible reason for Evangelical growth in recent times as the correlation between the gospel we have proclaimed and the privatised consumer culture of the late twentieth century. To encourage well-rooted spiritual life, he urges Evangelicals to contribute fully their traditional strengths; the stress on a life-changing encounter with Christ and the Scriptures, resulting in transformed lives.

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**W**E have just passed the midpoint of the Decade of Evangelism — Epiphany Sunday 1996. It is a good moment to stop and reflect on what Evangelicals can rejoice about and what we can learn from what has happened so far. It is also the point at which to consider what we can contribute to what has yet to happen.

For any who are old enough to have been part of the Church of England for the last quarter to half century, it must seem striking that the Church of England would commit itself to engage in a Decade of Evangelism. Few whose memory goes back that far can fail to reflect on the transformation that has taken place to bring about such a move.

Frankly the idea of the Church of England committing itself to *do anything as one body*, is a real novelty — and seemingly thoroughly un-Anglican. *Faith in the City* was, arguably, the first occasion when such a corporate response was attempted. That initiative has just celebrated ten years of work. Its first-decade report, *Staying in the City* (Church House Publishing, 1995), is full of relevance to the work of the Decade of Evangelism, in its honest reflection on what has been achieved, and on how the situation has changed.

The further idea of the Church of England committing itself to do something as a body, *about evangelism*, is a greater novelty and indeed evidence of life. Not that the Decade is without antecedents. Indeed, it is the third such initiative in the last fifty years. It is important to set our reflection on the Decade in that context.

### Third time lucky?

*Towards the Conversion of England* (Church Assembly Publications Board, 1945 — price one shilling!), had put the matter of evangelism onto the church's agenda — in some measure — fifty years ago. However, it went the way of most reports. It was noted but not acted upon, other than the specific proposals about industrial chaplains. No thought appears to have been given as to how to implement the challenge represented by the report despite the strongly worded expression of the state of the church, and the need for action. For example:

There can be no doubt that there is a wide and deep gulf between the Church and the people.... The evidence, therefore, of chaplains and others in close touch with all three Services, and with munitions factories, may be accepted as conclusive. They testify with one voice to the fact of a wholesale drift from organised religion. The present irrelevance of the Church in the life and thought of the community in general is apparent from two symptoms which admit of no dispute. They are (1) the widespread decline in churchgoing; and (2) the collapse of Christian moral standards (pp. 2f).

We can understand such an assessment of the situation today, but are perhaps surprised that the church saw it so clearly fifty years ago, yet did so little about it. Before we criticise our predecessors too strongly, it is important to note that the Decade has been forwarded much more by local initiatives, by the Voluntary Agencies (*Signs of Life*, p. 37-39), and by the Archbishop of Canterbury, than by the 'Church' as represented by General Synod. Having voted in favour of such a Decade, back in 1989, it failed to vote any new money to forward this work. My, and other Decade posts at Church House, plus the major Springboard initiative, are largely funded by a combination of creative accounting, rewriting existing job descriptions, and generous external funding from Lambeth. Now, as then, the church remains reluctant to take evangelism seriously enough to actually invest in it.

Moreover, other ameliorating factors can explain the reluctance of the church in 1945 to invest in any major new initiative. The immediate postwar years were largely years of reconstruction, of putting things back in place that had become disrupted or destroyed by war; though the development of the modern Welfare state is evidence that society was capable of profound new initiatives. The fact remains that by the mid 1950s the church was doing quite well, and was perhaps confirming in thinking it was right to do nothing radical, or specific, about evangelism. Grace Davie, in *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Blackwell, 1994), quotes A. Hastings, in his book *A History of English Christianity, 1929-1985* (Collins, 1986) as observing:

By the middle of the 1950s it may well have seemed that the Church was right after all to dodge any more radical measure of postwar reform. It had not been needed (p. 447).

The mentality of 'more of the same', allied often to the associated vision of the enthusiasts, 'one last heaven', has so often seemed the wise course when in fact it is simply the safest for the present because it avoids change. Yet a

church committed to not changing can hardly work with integrity to communicate a message of conversion, *metanoia*, change.

The second modern initiative in the area of evangelism was the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism (NIE). It was conceived in 1976 and laid to rest in 1983. Indeed, the title of the perceptive report on NIE by Roger Whitehead and Amy Sneddon, *An Unwanted Child?* (BCC / CCBI, 1990) suggests, it may not have died a natural death, but may have been stillborn, allowed to die of malnutrition, or even suffered an abortion. That report lists a number of things that were achieved through NIE, whilst acknowledging that the work of evangelism had not been forwarded significantly. Bishop Charles Henderson's assessment quoted in the report was that:

NIE's achievement was ecumenical convergence in discussion rather than evangelisation itself (p. 97).

The conclusion was, as the title of the Report suggests, that the church was not ready or willing to engage in such an initiative. The leaders failed to take people with them. In some of the literature associated with NIE there is a fascinating interchange of the phrases 'the time is ripe' and 'the time is ripening'. The latter phrase clearly suggests that cold feet were being felt about the receptivity of the church. Events seem to have shown that, even if the time was ripening, it was not, at that stage, ripe enough for such an initiative to flourish. It is interesting also to note that, as Canon Martin Readon points out in a final chapter of *An Unwanted Child?*:

It is not widely known that an attempt was made to declare the 1980s as such a decade but this failed to capture the imagination at the time (p. 102).

This presents a rather sanguine picture of NIE. In speaking around the country over the past two years I have often asked for a show of hands of those who know what the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism was. Responses range from five percent to twenty five percent of those present. Those relatively low numbers may reflect the fact that a significant number of people whom I address were not born, adults, or members of the church, fifteen to twenty years ago. It may well also reflect the fact that NIE often failed to penetrate below the higher echelons of power within the church.

However, it would be wrong to 'compare and contrast' NIE and the Decade. A number of people in senior leadership in NIE were able to help the Decade learn from the experience of NIE. Furthermore, NIE seems to have been a catalyst for ecumenical cooperation which has led to the Swanwick declaration, the development of Churches Together in England, and which has doubtless had an influence for good on the ecumenical dimension of the Decade to date.

Indeed, the relation between the two reports *An Unwanted Child?* and *Signs of Life* is worth reflecting on. The former has a negative feel to it, whilst the latter is positive. This may be because the latter report, written in the middle of the Decade project, is intended to encourage and stimulate. Maybe a report in the early 2000s will take a harder look at the Decade as a whole. However, there is another way of seeing the *connection*, rather than *contrast*, between those two titles. Could it be that there are 'signs of life' in the

'unwanted child'? In other words, has such success in 'catching the imagination of the church' as the Decade has had, arisen out of the seeming 'failure' of NIE? Certainly, as the deliberately untheological title of this section suggests ('third time lucky'), it is best to see that the Decade has built on two specific previous initiatives in the last fifty years.

### God's moment

That being so, we need to consider why the Decade has caught on in a way that the previous two initiatives did not. My conviction is that the Decade of Evangelism, with all its faults, limits and missed opportunities, has essentially been an idea whose time has come.

Like NIE it seems to have started from the top — this time from the Lambeth Conference of Bishops (1988) and then endorsed by General Synod (1989). Yet it does seem to have percolated down, or been picked up, by the church at the local level. So what has changed, and why, if the eighties were not the right time for a Decade of Evangelism, should the nineties be different?

A number of factors can be pointed to as contributing to this change.

*The millennium* has appeared to concentrate minds, and the thought of offering to God a church committed to active participation in His mission in the world has connected with church people from the Salvation Army to the Pope.

*The mood and mind of the Church* has been more in tune with such a call. The hugely successful Alpha course well illustrates this point. Alpha was happening before a Decade was called for. It has not been a 'Decade initiative'. Almost certainly Alpha would have been 'marketed' in the early nineties whether a Decade had been in place or not. However, it is very likely that the Decade itself has created a Church looking out for just such resources as Alpha has supplied. In other words, the Decade is an idea whose time has come. One reason, therefore, why the Decade has caught on more than NIE is that the leaders of the Church (Lambeth and General Synod) were articulating the mind of the Church.

*The strength of Evangelicals* in the Church, and among the bishops, has had a significant effect on this call, making it more likely to be well received. Not, of course, that Evangelicals have a monopoly on evangelism. Indeed one of the most perceptive papers on the subject submitted to the Lambeth '88 Conference of Bishops was that written by David Jenkins, the then Bishop of Durham. It is not without significance that both the Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism and the Decade of Evangelism have taken place when there has been an evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury. Although George Carey was not Archbishop when Lambeth committed itself to the Decade, his persistent affirmation of the Decade, and repeated reminders of it as the true priority for the Church, together with his strategic initiatives such as Springboard, and the appointment of Pete Ward as his youth adviser, have played a key part in keeping the momentum going.

However, Evangelicals would be wise to be modest about their own contribution to the bringing into being of the Decade. Our own theology teaches us to think, not in terms of congratulating ourselves on our influence, but rather of rejoicing in the way that the Spirit of Christ has led his Church to embrace such a venture. Such humility puts us in a vulnerable position. If 'we' have 'achieved' the Decade then we set the agenda and dictate the terms. If, however, we see it as a move of God's Spirit, and an answer to our prayers, then we have to take the next step of listening to what the Spirit is saying to the church in this. We are put into learning mode once we recognise a move of God's Spirit.

Thinking primarily in political terms we might be tempted to think 'we Evangelicals made the Decade possible/happen'. Such an attitude leads quickly to the closed mind which sees all life as vindicating its own certainties. It is one of the dangers for us who believe that there are fundamental truths we can stand on, rejoice in, and proclaim to others. That danger is the closed mind of too much certainty. Rather we need to heed John Bradshaw's warning that:

When we think we are absolutely right, we stop seeking new information. To be right is to be certain, and to be certain stops us from being curious. Curiosity and wonder are at the heart of all learning.<sup>1</sup>

A more biblical response is rather to rejoice in what God has done, and is doing. Such an attitude is a more open-minded and uncertain approach, for it invites — indeed, requires of us — that we listen to God and His purposes in this venture. It is to this listening to what the Spirit is saying to the church at large, and to Evangelicals in particular, that we now turn. In doing so we need to have the faith and courage to address a number of important and searching questions. They are as follows.

### **Are we trapped by our tradition?**

Putting ourselves on the receiving end of God's purposes, rather than in the driving seat of the Kingdom of God, faces us with some searching light from Scripture. In particular, Scripture and the major deep-seated changes in contemporary culture, face us with the need to discern between the two means of tradition as expressed in Scripture.

In the New Testament, tradition is spoken of as fundamental to the faith, and a major obstacle to it. It can be the gift of God that gives us the gospel, and yet it can also be the work of mankind in subverting the purposes of God. So Jesus says:

Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?  
Matt. 15:3.

And yet Paul, using the same root word of tradition as 'handing down' says:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. I Cor. 15:3-4.

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1 J. Bradshaw, *Healing the shame that binds you*, Health Communications, Florida 1988, p 9.

Our danger as conservative Christians, those wishing to conserve the fundamentals of orthodox Christianity, is that we conserve too much, or the wrong things. In other words, we end up conserving *our understanding* of the gospel and *our way of communicating* the gospel, rather than the gospel itself. We become thereby defensive, judgemental and cautious. Those are characteristics which sit ill with the nature of the One whom we seek to proclaim by our gospel.

In a profoundly changing culture, it is vital that the church, like all good missionaries, finds new 'culturally appropriate' ways of making Christ known. Too easily those who claim they know what the gospel is, seem also to assume that they have a monopoly on how it is to be proclaimed. Some of the ways in which God's Spirit is leading the Church into such changes are identified on pages 64 to 77 of *Signs of Life* under the title of 'enriching trends in evangelism'. I have to report that when speaking on that subject, it has been Evangelicals who have seemed most often to feel threatened by what I am saying, and defensive not just of 'the eternal gospel', but of the inherited ways of communicating it. Where we should be at the cutting edge of new ways of evangelising, we can all too easily find ourselves at the rear.

Sometimes this is so because we, of all the traditions within the Church, are captive to Enlightenment culture and its focus on the rational and the verbal. We therefore struggle to know how to communicate through signs and symbols and in nonverbal ways in a culture which is increasingly communicating through visual means in a 'non-book culture'. We are in need of hearing the words of one great non-evangelical evangelist, Francis of Assisi, who said:

Preach the gospel wherever you go, by all means possible; if absolutely necessary, use words.

### **Can we recover the prophetic dimension of evangelism?**

Another area where our commitment to the orthodox fundamentals of the faith can lead us to find security in a closed and inflexible mind, is in our understanding of prophecy. Evangelicals, themselves labelled historically as 'enthusiasts', have been fearful and wary of any contemporary understanding of prophecy. It has to be admitted, not least by those involved in charismatic renewal, that such fear has been well founded. However, as David Watson was fond of saying 'the answer to abuse is not disuse but proper use'.

Perhaps particularly today, living as we are in a culture that is search for meaning, significance and for something to fill the 'moral and spiritual vacuum' evident in national life, it is vital that the church discovers how to speak prophetically to contemporary culture.

The words of Bernard Pawley when he was archdeacon of Canterbury, in the debate in General Synod on NIE are worthy of repetition. He said:

The long suffering clergy do not wish to be told again and again to reinterpret the gospel or make it relevant; they want help in doing it and

want to hear what the gospel sounds like and looks like when it has been so treated. There is therefore here a poverty of inspiration which I find a little alarming. It seems to me at this point the whole enterprise betrays its lack of inspiration and needs to be re-orientated in one particular classical direction, that of prophecy. If you are going to indulge in evangelism, you have got to have prophets, who to my mind are signally lacking. If you want to do evangelism, first catch your prophet.<sup>2</sup>

A moments reflection will remind us that there is not only the 'eternal and unchanging gospel about God's revelation to humanity in Jesus Christ', but also a changing face of that gospel. As someone has said 'the Eternal Word speaks only in the voice of local dialect'. As Evangelicals, I fear we have been slow to recognise, and resistant to embracing, the truth that the gospel is to be clothed afresh in every age and setting. We have not been very 'discerning of the times', unlike 'the men of Issachar' who, we are told, 'understood the times and knew what Israel should do' (I Chron. 12:32). Yet, even in Scripture the gospel is nuanced in a number of different ways. For Jesus the gospel centres on the theme of the Kingdom. In John that message is transposed (for a Greek culture?) into eternal life. In Romans Paul focuses on multiple themes of rightness, and the righteousness of God and humanity, whilst fullness is his theme in Colossians.

There are increasingly in our ranks, those who are helping us at this point, not least people like Graham Cray. However, we are much in need of thinkers, apologists, prophets and poets, who can help us understand the culture in which live and to which we are sent. It is this that we should specifically be praying for in the second half of the Decade. How much, for example, the church stands in need of a whole new generation of the likes of C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot and Charles Williams. We had better understand, however, that they will look so different from those three men that we may have difficulty recognising them if they appear among us.

'Catching prophets' is a major task for us in the second half of the decade.

### **Are we marketing a privatised gospel?**

Without prophetic discernment we are in danger both of preaching a message which does not connect with people today, and also of succumbing to the spirit of the age ourselves. There are a number of positive explanations for the growth of the Evangelical movement in recent years. In part this has been due to the growth of evangelical scholarship and leadership respected beyond the bounds of the tradition. With the emergence of the charismatic movement, there has been a rekindling of the spirituality at the heart of the gospel, namely the encounter with God to which the gospel points and leads. Functioning in a culture which is turned off by religious organisation and turned on by spirituality, it is not surprising that such a movement should flourish.

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2 B. Pawley, *Report of the Proceedings of the General Synod of the Church of England*, Church Information Office, London July 1979, Vol.10 no.2, p 514.



Yet, there is another way of understanding this growth. It could be that we are marketing the most attractive gospel in privatised, individualistic, consumer culture. Such a gospel would confront few of the crucial touchstones of our consumer culture, but would give individuals a spirituality that enabled them to accept the status quo. I do not suggest that this is the primary cause of growth, but we ought to consider whether it is part of the explanation of what is going on. Richard Foster, in his book *Prayer*, puts it graphically, in this way:

Many of us today live in a kind of inner apartheid. We segregate out a small corner of pious activities and then can make no sense out of the rest of our lives.<sup>3</sup>

Against this, there are signs of Evangelicals addressing just such issues. The Institute for Contemporary Christianity founded by John Stott, and magazines such as *Anvil* and *Third Way* are evidence of a richer understanding of the gospel and its relation to the whole of life amongst Evangelicals today. It is here that we need to put our own house in order, and ensure that the gospel we preach is big enough to warrant calling it 'biblical'.

Attempts have been made in recent years to recapture the whole-life nature of the gospel by refocusing on the theme of the Kingdom. I sense that such a focus and theme is fading. Whilst seeing the Kingdom as fundamental to our understanding of gospel, my own judgement is that 'kingdom' language (as well as 'power' language) is not the best way to communicate the gospel in a culture which has a very negative view of hierarchy, power and control. A biblical theme which suggests itself as more appropriate is that of *new creation*. It immediately resonates with concern for the environment that greatly shapes the concerns of many younger people today. It also links, creatively, the new creation at the personal level brought about by faith in Christ, with a concern for the whole of human society and the created order.

In my book *Being human, being church* (Harper Collins, 1995) I sought to enrich our understanding and communication of the gospel by seeing it in terms of 'God's way of being human, revealed in Christ and made available by the Spirit'. My plea at this point is that we find ways of developing and expressing the gospel in an integrated whole-life perspective of the New Testament. Whilst finding ways of being 'culturally relevant', we must resist the temptation to market an individualistic, spiritualised, distortion of the gospel.

### Is evangelism really the purpose of life?

A further way in which the Decade challenges us as Evangelicals concerns our almost universally perceived strength — namely our emphasis on evangelism. Is that not what makes us Evangelicals? Indeed the struggles the media often have in distinguishing between 'Evangelicals' and 'evangelism' shows how closely the two go together in the minds of many people. Certainly we do put a major emphasis on evangelism as a core focus of

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3 R. Foster, *Prayer*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, p 179.

discipleship. We teach those coming to faith that 'witnessing' is what being a Christian is all about. Yet our very strength can become a weakness.

One of the problems of separating out evangelism as a discreet area of work and of Christian discipline, is that it becomes, thereby, distorted. That same problem seems to be evident in the area of stewardship. Unless stewardship is seen as part of a bigger picture it will always be distorted and fail to stand on its own, and be liable to the criticism that 'it's all about money'. Yet stewardship only makes sense if it is woven together with grace, vision and a sense of belonging. Equally we may well have distorted evangelism by making it such a primary focus of the Christian's calling. As David Gillett observes, in *Trust and Obey*:

However sensitive, realistic and discerning may be the approach, it remains one of the inescapable facts about Evangelical spirituality that, at the top of its activist agenda, there lies a commitment to achieve a goal which only some (perhaps not the majority) fulfil in the whole of their Christian pilgrimage.... It is perhaps here, more urgently than elsewhere, that the over-individualism of the revivalist legacy needs to be challenged. It is the corporate life and witness of the community of believers that bears the responsibility for this evangelistic task.<sup>4</sup>

It is time for us to re-work our discipleship teaching to focus on themes such as the Kingdom, the new creation, or the two great commandments, and then relate matters such as prayer, church, giving, and evangelism to those overarching themes. This is not mere semantics. It is about the development of whole people and healthy churches that proclaim the gospel by the way they function before anyone has spoken a word. It is not about downgrading evangelism, but about integrating it in such a way that more members of our churches can relate their daily living and discipleship to incorporate witness and evangelism in a way that is natural, rather than by placing them under guilt about their failure to 'lead others to Christ'.

### **Have we limited the meaning of conversion?**

A further point at which the Decade asks awkward questions of us as Evangelicals is about our understanding of conversion. The whole process approach to evangelism, of which the Alpha course is the most visible expression, points to a changing understanding of how conversion takes place. This has been further reinforced by the research of John Finney in *Finding Faith Today*. He established that, even in Evangelical churches preaching an understanding of conversion as primarily a moment in time, only one third of church members in such churches could point to a specific time for their coming to faith.

However, there is a more to a biblical understanding of conversion than that it is a process that may take months, or — in fact typically — three to four years. In our emphasis on the gospel call to conversion it is vital that we see and live out the implications of the truth, that conversion is a way of life. As the RC *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* puts it:

4 D. Gillett, *Trust and Obey*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1993, p 163.

Few Christians are ever fully evangelised. All our lives we need the power of the gospel to transform us (p. 14).

I would rather say 'no Christian is ever fully evangelised', but the statement stands as a Catholic corrective to the unspoken assumption in many Evangelical churches that conversion is something that did happen, rather than a way of life into which we have stepped. Visiting Glastonbury Abbey recently I was struck by the outline given of the three monastic vows of the ancient church. I had always thought they were the vows of 'poverty, chastity and obedience'. However, as set out there, 'poverty, chastity and obedience' were simply a sub-text of the middle vow which was to give oneself to a *life of conversion* expressed by those three disciplines. How far has the evangelical Church communicated, and built the life of the local church, around 'a life of conversion'?

It may be that conversion understood as simply the moment of beginning the life of discipleship (as in 'I was converted in 1957') has led us into what I call 'bolt-on spirituality'. That is a process whereby we lead people into some initial encounter with God, but then allow that relationship to become attached to a privatised, materialistic, consumer-culture worldview and lifestyle. When that happens, and testing comes, we can hardly be surprised that people respond out of those pre-Christian values rather than out of a new found faith.

We need to learn from the early catechumenate tradition which knew that it takes three years to help a person lay the foundations of a new identity, value system and lifestyle shaped by the gospel. Interestingly, Wesley, in establishing the Class Meetings of early Methodism, was consciously seeking to recreate the catechumenate model.

We urgently need resources for this work of evangelising the whole person — what has been called, for obvious reasons, a *Beta* course. I am glad to have been involved in developing one such model, called *Emmaus*, which builds on the General Synod report on initiation entitled *On the Way* (CHP, 1995). *Emmaus*, a modular approach to discipleship development, will be published in the autumn of 1996 by Church House Publishing and Bible Society. No doubt others will follow. Certainly, the shift to a process approach to evangelism cries out for resources to do the whole job, and not to rest content with leading people into an initial encounter with God and imagining that that is all that is required.

### Gifts to give

Having sought to name and address some of the hard questions which we as Evangelicals should face, I want to conclude by pointing to what we are likely to be best able to contribute to the work of the whole church in the second half of the Decade. In other words, having first considered what Evangelicals need to be learning in the Decade, I want to turn the title of this article around and ask what Evangelicals might bring to the whole church as resources and insights from which others can learn. There are four such insights I want to identify.

### Faith as encounter with God

It is in the preaching of the gospel 'for a verdict' that much of the strength of Evangelicalism resides. Yes, there are lessons to be learned about this which have already been identified. Yet this witness to the core of Christianity being about encounter with God is a vital truth that must not be allowed to be overlaid with other considerations. As John Baillie put it many years ago:

The great fact for which all religion stands is the confrontation of the human soul with the transcendent holiness of God.<sup>5</sup>

It is this that is the heart of the Evangelical witness within the Church. We lose sight of it at our peril. However, it is not sufficient that we point others, enquiring after the Christian faith, to this need for a living encounter with God. The church must build its whole life around the call to be the community that lives its whole life by encounter with God. Conversion and encounter, are not just about how the journey of faith starts. They are the tracks on which the journey lies, and the destination to which the journey calls us.

So, for example, if we are to have 'testimonies' let them be of present encounters with Christ, not just — or primarily — about initial encounters. A young couple contemplating marriage, may find the story of how an older couple 'fell in love' during the war entertaining, but would they not be more likely to find it instructive to know what that falling in love *then* has led them to and means to them *now*. Equally the testimony disciples are called to give is to a present, living, knowledge of God — including the struggles, failures, and unanswered questions.

So let personal encounter with Christ, and a community living in openness to God today, be at the heart of our work and church life.

### Listening obedience as the way to wholeness

Evangelicals are supremely 'people of the Word', yet I detect that Scripture plays a smaller part in the lives of many members of Evangelical churches than it used to. Related to this is a considerable demise in the (now dated terminology of the) 'Daily Quiet Time'. We cannot resuscitate the past, but we do need to find ways of helping people to encounter God through openness to Him in the whole of life. That includes specific focus on openness to God through listening prayer (how much prayer is simply 'telling prayer') and meditation on Scripture. Our culture fights against such an approach, for it involves not just physically stopping long enough to pray and read the Scriptures. It involves that inner stillness which can listen as well as talk in prayer, and hear with the heart not just the mind in reading Scripture.

These are vital, lifegiving, skills we need to give to church members. In doing so we equip people to see that an authentic Christian spirituality is a yielded spirituality of openness to God. It is well described in the title of the Jean-Pierre de Caussade book, *Self-abandonment to divine providence* (Collins, 1933). In a culture that emphasises our control over our destiny, this availability to God's agenda — well expressed in the opening emphasis in the

5 J. Baillie, *Our knowledge of God*, OUP, Oxford 1939, p. 1.

Lord's prayer on *Your name, Your Kingdom, Your will* — is a healing corrective. But it is counter-culture, and will not grow in the church in such an environment without careful nurture.

### **Transformation as foundational to true spirituality**

There is a growing hunger after the spiritual dimension. Spirituality is all the rage. But the search is for a spirituality that I can choose, and which helps me cope and get on in life. Secular spirituality is an attempt to develop engagement with the transcendent in a way that leaves me in control. Yet, as Richard Foster puts it in his introduction to his book *Prayer*:

Who can ever master something in which the main object is to be mastered?

It is that transformation about which Paul wrote so much. Whether calling the Romans to be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:2), testifying to the Galatians that 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20), or urging the Ephesians to 'put on the new self, created to be like God' (Eph. 4:24), Paul consistently witnesses to the transforming nature of Christian discipleship.

It is this that the work of initiation points to, alike for the newcomer to the faith and to those well established. It is this that is the basis for all authentic witness; that we are in some measure, whether consciously aware of it ourselves or not, a sign of the transforming nature of the knowledge of God to which we point others.

This will lead us inevitably to be counter-culture, or at least to have a set of 'counter-values', by which we live and thereby proclaim the gospel. It is this power of God to transform which is at the heart of the evangelical message.

Integral to such living is the church seen as a community which is a pilot project for the age to come, the place where the values we preach in our evangelism are lived out in the frailty of human relationships and enterprises.

### **Christ as central to all that is**

There can be no more truly Evangelical note on which to end this article and focus our attention in the second half of the Decade, than on Christ himself. How easily we take him for granted and become sidetracked onto lesser agendas. Yes, we need to take seriously issues such as the ordination of women, the losses of the Church Commissioners and the proposals of the Turnbull commission. Yet in all these, and above and beyond them, we are to keep our eyes on Christ, as the focus of God's purposes in the world. To take our eyes off Christ is to put them on something less than, not more than, him.

There is no Christianity beyond Christ. It is all *in Him*. Post-modernism tells us that there are 'no grand narratives now'. We need to listen to that and

understand the suspicion in which 'grand narratives' are held. We may be well advised to recognise that being able to say 'Jesus is Lord of all' will happen to people many steps on into the journey of faith. But the truth remains that in Christ we do see all creation holding together and being taken, painfully, through to God's final purposes.

Our focus, then, is to be on Christ. At times that will confront the worldview of those around us. But also, let us never underestimate the sheer attractiveness of the human Jesus to people down the ages and across every culture. It may well be that we will need to point to him especially as God's model for what it means to be fully human. But to him we must point, for in Christ are not only hidden the treasures and wisdom of God, but also all the hope for humanity.

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