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Editorial

1984 and all that

Thanks to the genius of George Orwell, 1984 has the distinction of being the most famous year of the twentieth century—not for anything which has happened or will happen during the course of it, but because it has come to symbolize the idea of a technocratic civilization returned to barbarism by the ingenious device of what might be called relentless over-civilization.

Orwell wrote his book at the end of the last world war, no doubt as a premonition of the disasters which might have overtaken us in the post-war generation. Now that the biblical span of forty years is almost past, we can look back to 1945 with a far greater sense of recognition than Orwell, and perhaps many of his contemporaries, would have thought possible. The changes which have occurred in the interval have been many, but few of them can be said to have interrupted the flow of human life or broken the links which bind us to the past. The great achievements of western civilization have come under furious attack, but they have not been forgotten, nor have they been suppressed to any great degree, at least in the countries of their origin. The Western European states have recovered from the war and gone on much as before, though with an increasing sense of mutual interdependence. Russia and the USA have changed even less, and the countries of the Third World, for all their tumultuous entrance into the society of nations, are still the arena in which the great powers fight their battles for influence. Africa was carved up a century ago among Britain, France, Belgium and Germany; today the contenders are Russia, the USA, China and the Arabs. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose...*

The continuity in world affairs, even the traditionalism of global politics, is a factor which is likely to make a greater impact during 1984 than anything which Orwell predicted. Even in Britain, where the social order has changed perhaps more than in any country which has not experienced war or a violent revolution, the ancient fabric of the state is still recognizably intact. We still have a high degree of personal freedom, an unfettered press and television, a society which demonstrates by its frequent outbursts of conscience that it has not forgotten the basic human values. All these things have continued, and some have even intensified, since 1945, and we have every reason to be grateful.

More in doubt, perhaps, is the fate of the Christian church. In some ways, things are much the same. The bishops are as unlikely now as they were in 1945 to lead anybody into a Brave New World;

despite the occasional flourishes of rhetoric, they are as uninspiring as ever, and few people take any notice of what they say. It might have been different had Archbishop Coggan, as he then was, followed up his 'Call to the Nation' in the autumn of 1975 with something more than an expression of satisfaction that 27,000 people had written in response; but the opportunity was missed, and now it has been all but forgotten. Billy Graham is back after thirty years, a little more tolerated than he was then, perhaps, but scarcely more of an insider in the corridors of ecclesiastical power.

What has changed since 1945 is the length and complexity of those corridors, and here we encounter a phenomenon which plagues the whole of our society in a way which even Orwell could not properly have foreseen. This is the scandal of a creeping bureaucracy, of committee-making in the name of democracy ('collective leadership'), which threatens to become as much of a tyranny as the dictatorship of the proletariat, though one in which we will have acquiesced in the name of freedom. The *ASB* is the most obvious product of this new wave, and not a few of its critics have detected an indigestible wodge of 'newspeak' in its pages. The ecumenical movement is another; we are now so united with each other that scarcely anybody knows precisely what it is he is supposed to believe.

These things—and many others—are proffered to the public as signs of health, though from another angle they are more likely to be symptoms of an apparently ineradicable disease. We have become addicted to verbiage, dished up in ways heralded as forever new (this is 'renewal'!), but having little effect on the spiritual condition of men and women, who stumble in ignorance or faint for want of a clear word from the Lord. Evangelicals are not much different, when it comes down to it; their great achievement of the past few years has been the formation of consultative groups and assemblies whose main function seems to be to pass motions and resolutions which nobody else takes much notice of (fortunately, perhaps).

The incongruity of evangelicals meeting to debate issues of church and society becomes more apparent when we reflect that evangelicalism has always been a spiritual movement, whose adherents have set their hearts on things above—an attitude now derided as 'pietistic' and 'otherworldly', or just simply 'old-fashioned', which is perhaps the most cutting insult of all. It is not that these issues do not need airing—they do. But it might be thought that they should be aired in the church; at General Synod, for example, where the evangelical group is notoriously uninfluential, especially when compared with the Anglo-Catholics. It is almost as if the Anglican Evangelical Assembly has become a substitute for the church as a whole, and it is interesting to note how that body likes to stress its comprehensiveness and broad base—characteristics which in former times were thought to be the marks of the Church of England, not of groups within it.

The AEA is countered by the vested interests: evangelical societies with their patronage trusts, which act as a kind of counterweight to the enthusiasm of the younger radicals whose motions clog AEA and CEEC agendas, but these are bound to appear stodgy and slow-moving beside an organization which has no roots to tie it down. What will happen in the long term is hard to predict, but already it has been made clear that disapproval by the AEA/CEEC is tantamount to excommunication from the fold. What has not yet been made quite as explicit is the fact that such disapproval is likely to be reserved for those who try to insist that an evangelical movement, society or journal should stand for the principles which have always characterized them. We are heading back to papalism by committee, to censure by bureaucrats who imagine that a vote in a meeting, however 'representative', will be sufficient to chastise and even silence any voice of protest!

Churchman believes that as an evangelical journal it must adhere to the principles laid down in John Stott's closing address to the Nottingham Conference (NEAC) in 1977. That was a recall to fundamentals in a clear but also in a fresh and challenging way. John Stott said that evangelicals must be *Bible people*. The supreme authority of Holy Scripture, infallibly true in all it affirms, must be upheld in theory and applied in practice. An authoritative Scripture demands a coherent systematic theology (did not John Stott remind us at the same conference that we had few, if any, systematic theologians?). It also demands clear and incisive preaching, which will apply the text to our lives. Where can we go for that now?

We were also reminded that evangelicals are *gospel people*—men and women with a message to proclaim. We do not believe that human beings can save themselves, either by psychiatry or by revolution in the name of freedom. Nor do we believe that the church, or any other institution, can offer us an alternative life-style which takes us back before the curse of Eden. Only a personal relationship with God in Christ, who has paid the price for our sins and ransomed us for the Father, can free us from all that has held us in Satan's grip. We are not hearing much about these things in evangelical circles at the moment, and yet these truths are the foundation of our faith and the constitution of our whole being. Perhaps 1984 will see a return to these principles, a renewal of the hard effort needed to understand and communicate God's Word, and a new determination on the part of us all to live out the gospel in every aspect of our lives—and not merely to wear the badge 'evangelical' as if that by itself constituted an inerrant passport to the kingdom.