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Our Mission in Britain I

Islington Conversations : Eclectics (ICE) was started in March 2003. Conservative, open and charismatic Evangelical speakers were invited to address those gathered on the theme 'Our Mission in Britain'. The addresses given by Vaughan Roberts, Christian Baxter and Mark Stibbe are published here, together with the summary address given by Philip Giddings.

Vaughan Roberts defines evangelical identity in this the first of the ICE addresses. He describes various evangelical movements which had different emphases but shared common core beliefs. For Evangelicals to be faithful to the commission to be God's witnesses they must be committed to proclamation of the Gospel in Britain today. To carry out the commission obediently might mean reforming denominational structures that hinder the work of the Gospel.

Britain is in a missionary situation in the 21st Century. The statistics show a steady and consistent decline in church going in the last few decades. The most alarming figures concern children. Between one in three and one in four children disappeared from our churches between 1990 and 2000.¹ If trends continue, church going will have declined to less than two thirds its current level by 2030 and there will be almost no children in church.² The Church of England is a declining and ageing denomination and its problems are far from unique. We face a massive task if we are to begin to reach our nation with the gospel of Christ.

But before considering the pragmatic questions concerning what we should do, we need to start with doctrinal principles. Our response to the missionary challenge that faces us must flow from a clear Biblical understanding of evangelical truth and of the nature of the missionary task.

1. 'Our': Who are 'we' as Evangelicals?

(a) We stand in a particular historical tradition

We evangelicals stand in a particular historical tradition. The word evangelical was first used as a term of identification by Lutherans at the time of the Reformation in the 16th Century. Martin Luther had taken vows of celibacy and poverty. He had gone on pilgrimages and had even crawled up the steps of St Peters in Rome as

1 Bob Jackson. *Hope for the Church*. (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), p 10.

2 *Ibid*, p 12.

an act of penance, but still he knew he was not right with God. Then, one day, as he studied Romans 1 he understood the great truth of justification by faith alone. His teaching was condemned, he had to go into hiding for his safety and he was excommunicated. Yet still he carried on proclaiming the great message of the Gospel because he was convinced that was what the Bible, God's word, taught. Evangelicals are those who stand in the tradition of the first great reformers, Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, and their doctrine.

In the 17th Century, the Puritans emerged in England led by giants like John Owen, Richard Baxter and Richard Stibbes. History has given them a bad name yet they deserve to be treated far better. Puritanism stood firmly in the Reformed doctrinal tradition, but perhaps the Puritans should be remembered chiefly for their godliness; theirs' was a religion of the heart. They expected the great truths of the Bible to affect not just the mind but the emotions as well and then to be worked out in all the details of life. They were people who knew their God and were zealous in their love and obedience of him. We Evangelicals today stand in the tradition of the Puritans and their godliness.

Then in the 18th Century came the great Evangelical Revival. It was as a student in Oxford that George Whitefield first understood the gospel, cast himself on the mercy of God and was born again. The gospel so gripped him that all he wanted to do was to preach it to others. Crowds flocked to hear this 'boy preacher' after he was ordained at 21. The church authorities did not like it and barred him from church buildings so he began to do what had previously been unthinkable. He preached outdoors, beginning with the miners of Kingswood near Bristol. Whitefield was soon joined by John Wesley. Between them they travelled the length and breadth of the country and thousands were converted through their ministry.

The same evangelistic zeal is evident in the great missionary movement of the 19th century. Henry Martyn was a brilliant scholar at Cambridge. A glittering academic career lay ahead of him but he turned his back on all that and in 1805, at the age of 24, he set out for India to be a missionary. It took nearly a year to get there and almost as soon as he landed his health deteriorated. He died seven years later at the age of 31. Yet in that short time he had produced translations of the NT in Urdu, Persian and Arabic which laid the foundations for much future missionary work. There were many heroes like him: Hudson Taylor, John Paton, and the Cambridge Seven. Thousands left these shores at great personal cost, driven by a longing to take the gospel to the lost throughout the world. We stand in the tradition of the heroes of the 18th Century Evangelical Revival and the 19th Century missionary movement with their evangelistic zeal.

This is our noble heritage. It shows that Evangelicalism is a dynamic movement while at the same time being a diverse one. This has always been the case. Luther and Calvin did not agree on everything, nor did Wesley and Whitefield, and still today, we do not agree on everything. But throughout our history there has been a core of fundamental beliefs which have united evangelicals.

(b) We are committed to particular doctrinal truths

(i) Revelation: the supremacy of Scripture.

We submit to God's word, the Bible, as our authority. We do use our minds, take note of experience, and listen to the voice of Christian tradition but, if they clash with what the Bible says, the Bible wins because 'what Scripture says God says'. That is why evangelicals have never been content to regard themselves as having just one angle on the truth or being just one equally valid Christian tradition among many. John Stott has written: 'the Evangelical faith is not a peculiar or esoteric version of the Christian faith. It is the Christian faith. It is not a recent innovation. The Evangelical Faith is original, Biblical, apostolic Christianity.'³ The Bible reveals a large number of truths, many of which we affirm along with all true Christian people e.g. the doctrine of creation, the divinity of Christ and the Trinity. But there are certain evangelical distinctives, vital truths which others do not hold.

(ii) Ruin: the seriousness of sin.

All human beings are sinners who are justly condemned by a holy God. We all deserve eternal separation from God in hell and our greatest need is for forgiveness and reconciliation with him. There is nothing we can do to achieve that by ourselves.

(iii) Redemption: the substitution of the saviour.

God has done for us what we could never do ourselves by sending his son to be our saviour. He stood in for sinful human beings and took the punishment we deserved as our substitute. As a result we can be justified, declared righteous in God's sight, simply through faith in Christ. He is the only way to God and his death is the only means by which we can be forgiven.

(iv) Regeneration: the significance of the Spirit.

By a miracle of God's grace, sinful men and women are regenerated or 'born again' as the Holy Spirit opens their eyes, enables them to see both their sin and their saviour and then comes to live within them.

Those are the great doctrines that united our evangelical forbearers and set them on fire with love for Christ and a longing to tell others about him. Our diverse movement will only remain united today if we too commit ourselves to the same foundational truths. Evangelicals are those who stand in a particular historical tradition and who are committed to particular doctrinal truths.

(2) Mission: What is our mission?

Evangelicals are those who do not just believe certain truths; they do all they can to proclaim them. We need to reaffirm that evangelism is the heart of the work of mission Christ has entrusted to us. My working definition of mission is: 'The proclamation of the word of God by the people of God in the power of the Spirit of God'.

3 John Stott. *Make the Truth Known*. (UCCF, Leicester, 1983). p 3.

(a) The proclamation of the word of God

Jesus likened himself to a farmer sowing seed and 'the seed', he said, 'is the word' (Mark 4:14). The kingdom of God expands as the word of God is proclaimed, sometimes from a pulpit, often in conversations as the gospel is gossiped from one person to another. Just before his ascension to heaven, Jesus told his disciples that 'Repentance and forgiveness (would) be preached in his name to all nations' (Luke 24:47). He told them that they were to be his witnesses in 'Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). What was started all those years ago is still our task today and will remain so until Jesus returns: the proclamation of the word of God to the ends of the earth.

(b) By the people of God

God uses human agents. Some are especially gifted as preachers and evangelists. Nevertheless this is the task of the whole church, not just individuals, and it does not simply involve verbal proclamation and nothing else. We are called to live the Christian life together as communities of disciples. That is what we find happening straight after Pentecost. The first believers learnt together, ate together, prayed together, shared their possessions and gave to everyone as they had need. As they did so, 'the Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). Our task is to proclaim the gospel, undergirded by a distinctive Christian life as together we love God, one another, and our neighbours in the world.

(c) In the power of the Spirit of God

The command to be 'witnesses to the ends of the earth' was daunting yet it came with the encouragement that 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you' (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts makes it clear that mission is supremely not our work but God's. Despite the sins and weaknesses of the church and the opposition of the world, the word of God continues to spread. We are entirely dependent on God's power as he works by his Spirit to equip us for the task of evangelism and to give us fruit in it. Our mission is the proclamation of the word of God by the people of God in the power of the Spirit of God.

(3) In Britain: Our mission in Britain today

(I) Proclamation:

(i) We must believe our beliefs.

Strategy alone will not change anything significantly. Above all what we need is conviction. We must believe our evangelical beliefs. It was conviction that led Luther, Wesley, Whitefield and Martyn to make the difficult choices that they did. They stood up for their beliefs and were prepared to face great suffering to proclaim them to others. What about us? Do we share their conviction? Many of the gospel's truths, the universality of sin, the reality of God's judgment and the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to God, are unpopular, but they are truths which *all* people in our country need to hear. Will we contend for them in the church, resist false teachers who deny them, and proclaim them in the world, whatever the cost?

(ii) We must go to where people are.

Jesus said 'Go and make disciples' (Matthew 28:19). Too often we have turned the 'go' into a 'come'; 'come to our buildings, our territory and our way of doing things'. The reality is that people are not coming, so if we are to reach the nation we must go to them. Peter Jensen, the Archbishop of Sydney, has spoken of the ambitious goal his diocese has set of seeing 10% of the population in Bible based churches in ten years. The danger is always of settling for comfort in 'chug-along churches'. A key part of that strategy is what Peter Jensen has called 'multiplying multiplying entities', which means planting as many new congregations, fellowships and regular occasions for outreach as possible. We need to recognise that a 'one size fits all' kind of church does not work. We are operating in a society full of many different types of people, of many different lifestyles and cultures so it is no good to have one type of service at one time each week, thinking that that will reach the whole parish or area. It will not. Some will not go to church at that time, others would never feel comfortable in that kind of meeting (the music, style of teaching or language would not suit them) and others would never go near a church building. So rather than putting all our eggs in one basket, we need to 'multiply multiplying entities'. That might mean different types of service on a Sunday in different locations designed to be accessible to different groups of people. But it does not simply mean church or congregation planting as we understand those terms. It might rather involve a group of Christians meeting together for Bible study at work and inviting their colleagues to join them, or at the gym, or the pub. We must go to where people are and, as we do so, take the gospel.

(iii) We must reform structures.

This reformation needs to start in our own local churches as we seek to put evangelism right at the heart of our agenda. We need to be asking of every programme: how are we seeking to reach others through this activity? The PCC and leadership teams need to keep making sure that evangelism is at the top of the list of priorities. We must always be asking what more can we do to reach others? Otherwise we will just drift into 'chug-along' mode.

But it is not just local structures which need to change. Too often our denominational structures hinder mission rather than help it. What do we do if we find that our building is full and there is nowhere else to start a new work in the parish? Do we simply say we have to stop there as we can't grow anymore? What do we do if there is a large population near us who never hear the gospel because the parish minister never preaches it? Do we simply say that is their bad luck? If we believe our beliefs we will be prepared to work beyond our parishes and plant congregations there too. Of course we should be as sensitive and wise as we can and seek to avoid causing needless offence, but surely no-one has a right to complain. None of us can say that we are reaching everyone in our parishes. There is more than enough work to be done.

In many cases we have constricted our own gospel outreach to subsidise the work of churches which have no gospel or at least make no attempt to proclaim it to others. Evangelicals, of all people, must be committed to generous giving to support mission, but what if our giving actually hinders mission by propping up a

system in which ineffective churches are subsidised indefinitely and the life in evangelical churches is prevented from spreading? The old system is now beginning to break down, creating new opportunities to think the unthinkable. But let us not be naïve and expect dioceses on their own to come up with the ideal solution that best promotes the cause of the gospel. We need to get out of our different ghettos and work together in our local areas to create change. We can be resisted one by one but together we will be a great force for the gospel. Would it not be marvellous if, instead of sniping at each other and fostering little jealousies, we supported that evangelical church down the road as it tries to start a work in an unreached housing estate in the next door parish? And rather than joining in the chorus of disapproval or just staying silent, we spoke up for that other church which decides to cut its quota in order to employ an outreach worker?

(II) People

The work of mission is the task of the whole people of God, equipped to proclaim the gospel and live lives which commend it by suitably trained and gifted pastors. If we are to reverse the trend of decline we must seek to do the exact opposite of much denominational policy and greatly increase the number of full-time pastors and evangelists. Such people do not grow on trees. We should commit ourselves to praying the forgotten Lord's Prayer, that other prayer which Jesus taught his disciples to pray: 'Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field' (Matthew 9:38). Those of us who are ministers should see the recruitment and training of a new generation of pastors and evangelists as one of our chief jobs. Whether ordained or lay, these future gospel workers will need a firm grasp of evangelical theology, which is why it is vital that we fight to establish and maintain really excellent evangelical colleges and resist any denominational initiative that threatens to weaken them. They must be men and women of clear evangelical principles who are able to apply those principles flexibly. We need a whole army of 'principled pragmatists' who can adapt to reach different people in different ways.

(III) Power

Strategy alone will achieve nothing. Conversion is God's work which he achieves by his Spirit through his word. Our task is to spread the message and to live it out; then we look to God to do the rest. We need the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us. That truth should surely drive us to urgent prayer. It is striking that in our evangelical activism we find less and less time to pray. Where is the new generation of committed intercessors? We should be praying now as we have never prayed before, for forgiveness for our lack of conviction, and our infighting, for renewed urgency and passion for the lost; for the sovereign work of God in conversion.

The great ones of the past, Luther, Wesley, Whitefield and Martyn, have all been and gone. Now the gospel baton has been handed to us. We need to pray for God's strength and enabling to hold firmly to it and do all we can to pass it on to others, whatever the cost. There will be no true evangelical unity otherwise and more seriously, there will be little hope of seeing a reversal of the gradual drift of our nation away from Christ.

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