

PHILIP GIDDINGS

Our Mission in Britain – Summing Up

Philip Giddings summarises what he sees as the key features of each ICE contribution, noting the questions asked in response. The striking feature of the day was the shared understanding of what it means to be evangelical, and the unity found in being centred on mission.

Expectations

'Eclectics: conservative, open and charismatic': what did we expect? When we arrived, there was a sense of expectation – renewing some friendships, making others – tinged with about the tensions within Anglican Evangelicalism exposed by the disagreements about Rowan Williams' appointment to Canterbury. Are we three streams of one river? Or three streams taking different courses and moving towards becoming three separate rivers? 'Our mission in Britain' was the title for the programme. Surely if evangelicals could unite around anything, it would be that, whatever meaning we give to 'conservative', 'open' or 'charismatic', or indeed 'evangelical' itself. So the hope for the day was that we would find clarity about our common identity as we together explored our common task. And so it proved.

Evangelical Identity

Vaughan Roberts took us straight to the heart of the issue as he tackled the topic 'our mission in Britain today'. 'Our' – who are 'we' evangelicals? He began his answer with an account of our 'dynamic and diverse' historical tradition; the reformers, the puritans, the evangelical revival, the missionary movement of the nineteenth century. Here there were different emphases but a common core of beliefs. They did not agree on everything but they were united on five great truths: the supremacy of Scripture, the seriousness of sin, the substitutions of the saviour, justification by faith and the Spirit's work of regeneration, being born again.

For evangelical people united by those great truths, mission is the proclamation of the word of God by the people of God in the power of the Spirit of God. Vaughan stressed that people enter the kingdom by hearing the word. God uses as his human agents not only those specially gifted as evangelists, but the whole church, with our life of community being an instrument of mission – see Acts 2. The Spirit thrusts us out in mission, notwithstanding our diversities, disagreements and

disunity – features not absent from the church in Acts. And Britain today, with declining church attendance, especially amongst children, is certainly a mission field.

So what do we do? Vaughan advanced three principles: proclaim the gospel with conviction, motivated by gratitude to God and a love for the lost; go to where people are, rather than expect them to come to us: our modern network culture challenges the 'one-size-fits-all' parochial system; and reform the structures, always asking the question how is this helping us to reach others. He pointed to the problem of 'dead' churches which were reliant on subsidy from others.

Questions to Vaughan raised some important issues:

- does the stress on proclamation evangelism leave any place for social action?
- is the language of the gospel, particularly when expressed in evangelical jargon, accessible to people today?
- how does one define 'dead' or 'failing' churches?

Anglican Identity

Christina Baxter was in substantial agreement with Vaughan Roberts's analysis of what it meant to be evangelical and therefore focussed our attention on what it meant to be 'anglican' and 'open'. Christina spoke of the importance of affirming both aspects of the anglican tradition: the catholic (adherence to Scripture, the creeds, tradition and the gospel sacraments) and the reformed (the supremacy of Scripture, that creeds and tradition are capable for reform in the light of Scripture, order is to be understood in the light of the NT revelation, and the gospel sacraments speak most clearly of cross and resurrection), She urged us not to fall away from the Church of England's commitment to be a church for every one in every place, with an accountable leadership and participative church government.

Christina underlined that salvation is by grace alone, received by faith alone and that cross and resurrection must be central. In that context it was important that as evangelicals we were open – if appropriate critically – to insights from other perspectives: to those from other believers, especially the world-wide church, for the disunity of the church is a barrier to evangelism; from the renewal movement, for the Holy Spirit continues to empower and gift the church today as in NT times; from scholarship, for whilst avoiding captivity to wordly thinking we must engage with the questions and bring them to the bar of Scripture; from social action, since the word can be signed in action as well as the spoken and written word; from different forms of ministry, particularly that of women and lay people.

Christina also agreed with Vaughan about the scale and urgency of the mission challenge that we face in Britain today. She reminded us that mission belongs to all Christians and that we therefore need good ecclesiology which will set us free from thinking that we have to do everything: some things can be left to others, as churches engage in mission in different ways. The key is to be more mission-minded *together*. A good start would be to choose mission-minded bishops.

Again the questions after Christina's talk raised important issues:

- how we balance the centrality of cross and resurrection with the need for an incarnational approach to mission?
- can evangelicals produce good, strong ecclesiology? are we committed to the church or 'splitters'?
- what is the scriptural basis for the ordination of women, to the presbyterate or the episcopate?

Integrating Word and Power

Mark Stibbe began with what was in many ways the key theme for the whole day: the importance of 'both... and...' rather than 'either... or...'. For Mark this theme was applied to combining the charismatic with the cognitive and the exploration of the evidence, relevance and context of God's power in the life of the church. He reminded us that the Spirit's power was demonstrated in conversions – but not just conversions; it is also evident in miracles and grace gifts, the charismata. In a culture which is experiential, with so many 'truths' and 'experiences' on offer, we need to integrate word and power, not water down our doctrine. We should dare to pray for the gifts of the Spirit, but remembering that tongues, prophecy, healing deliverance are all supplementary to the main task of reaching out to the world with the good news of Jesus Christ. In a striking phrase he urged us to move from a church of consumerism – 'feed me' to one of evangelism – 'feed them'.

Mark challenged us with the reminder that God's power is most clearly seen in the context of suffering: radiance and joy in suffering, weakness and hardship being the primary context for hearing about Jesus. So we are not just indulging in fancy talk, but speaking of living by God's power and seeing it move in mission.

Again the short period for questions drew out important issues:

- in response to awareness of our smallness and our failures, the significance of perseverance
- the need to balance realism about vulnerability with respect for privacy
- the need for *visionary* leadership for the Church of England.

Winning the nation for Christ: repentance, passion, prayer

The addresses from our three speakers admirably illustrated the complementarity of 'conservative, open and charismatic'. There was deep and repeated agreement on what it means to be 'evangelical' and on the scale and urgency of the mission task which faces us in our country today. Any reflection upon what was said and shared must begin by recalling the starting-place for mission, our fundamental place of unity, that we begin at the foot of the cross of Christ. Individually and collectively we need together to repent of the complacency, self-centredness, pride and disobedience of the church which have resulted in the state of our nation today. We must repent of our past weakness and failings and experience again the forgiveness Christ won for us at such great cost to himself. There is the starting-place for mission, the launch-pad for evangelism.

Repeatedly through the day we were reminded that those engaged in mission and evangelism need themselves to be convinced and re-convinced of the truth of the Gospel, the reliability of the Scriptures and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. It will be from continued re-filling by the Spirit that we will develop the passion for mission, the love for the lost, which are the engine of mission endeavour, whether by proclamation of the word or demonstration in action. It will be by the convicting power of the Spirit that we, as individuals and churches, are transformed from preoccupation with our own concerns to reaching out to meet the needs of others, from consumerism to evangelism, from 'feed me' to 'feed them'. It will be by the fire of that same Spirit in our local fellowships, our dioceses and across the worldwide church, that we will be turned from defending and maintaining our structures to reforming them into God's instruments for fulfilling His mission in our contemporary, so needy world.

Passion without power is the short route to frustration. And power is certainly needed lest we be daunted by the scale and urgency of the mission task we face. Without God's empowering our awareness of our own frailty will enfeeble us. And this must surely drive us to prayer. Vaughan Roberts remarked towards the end of his address, 'what happened to the prayer meeting?' We know in heads and hearts that prayer is the source of power and God delights to answer us when we turn to Him in prayer. And as we contemplate the state of our nation and the state of our church there is no shortage of material to bring before our sovereign, gracious. Certainly this conference gave us plenty of fuel for prayer: for vocations and training for evangelical ministry; for forgiveness for our past failings; for healing and renewal; for mission-minded bishops; for perseverance in ministry; for visionary leadership. What does God have to do to drive us to our knees?

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