

Evangelical Community

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AT THE REFORMATION, Protestantism turned its back upon monastic life. The luxury and idleness prevailing in contemporary monasteries and convents, their seclusion from active life, the binding vows which they imposed, their denigration of marriage and their demand for unqualified obedience to men fully explain and justify this attitude. Yet, 'If a pagan country is to be watered with the gospel, spiritual reservoirs are needed as a constant source of supply'. So wrote Dr. G. S. M. Walker in *The Growing Storm* (Paternoster, 1961), p. 31, with reference to the German monasteries founded during the mission of Boniface, and monasteries at their best have been such reservoirs. Whereas, on the whole, Evangelical policy has been towards the encouragement of isolation and even individualism. Evangelicals have recognised the value of fellowship when it may be had, but *κοινωνία* has not often been seen as an essential part of the Gospel proclamation. Seldom has the outsider been prompted to say: 'See how these Christians love one another!'. As a result, to the down-town areas of the nation, and indeed to the country areas, men have gone sometimes utterly alone without fellowship and sometimes without the encouragement of a wife. The unmarried Christian man or woman has often been desperately lonely. This has been seen most shockingly not only in the ordained Ministry and that of the licensed woman worker, but, for example, in the plight of the teacher who feels called both to teach and to live in some area like East London. So often the pressure of 'twilight zones' has taken its toll of physical and spiritual energy, and the worker has had to withdraw.

The Scripture seems to show quite another pattern of life. They were 'all together in one place' in Acts 2: 1 and, more strongly, 'They had all things in common' (Acts 2: 44). Are we right to reject this out of hand as one way of serving the Lord?

We often say that the poverty of the Jerusalem Church was due to this unwise experiment in Christian community living and this may be true, but are there not at least some who are called to 'sell all that

thou hast and come'? We know even today the depth of commitment to family life seen in the Jewish family and the consequent need for a similar depth of mutual caring amongst those who have been rejected by their families on embracing the faith of Christ.

The special place accorded to the widows in the Acts may show more than merely caring for the needy. Indeed, Paul urges that the widow should not re-marry; there was a virtue in remaining in her widowed state for the Lord. Today, on the contrary, we might well advise the widow to re-marry, as the single person is often severely limited in her service for the Lord. All these hints about the depth of community life in the New Testament suggested that a needed emphasis is missing from the church of today. Far outside the church itself the need for community is felt. The problem of how to live together is the great problem of the 20th Century and there are many attempts to work this out in practice. Parishes are seeking to deepen their own sense of family and community life and extra-parochial fellowships have grown up like those at Lee Abbey, Iona and Othona.

But there has not yet been an attempt to meet the need of the unmarried to live in 'families' rather than alone. Indeed, Evangelicals have traditionally been very hesitant about such attempts within the Church of England. Almost all such attempts at Community life have begun under the inspiration of the Oxford movement and concepts which may have had some justification have been overlaid by a theology and liturgical practice which has been far removed from the Biblical norm. Hence celibacy is on the whole not commended by the Evangelical in spite of what St. Paul has to say on the subject. The unmarried tends to be restricted not only in fellowship but also in ministry (whether ordained, licensed, or lay). Indeed, this may be one of the reasons for the serious losses from Women's ministry. Is it right that ministry for the unmarried must be exercised from the isolation of a third floor back room, without any fellowship more supportive than the tenuous family-centred fellowship of the parish church? And yet so many unmarried men and women, of many professions and none, have been gloriously used in spite of the danger of isolation.

There has now come into being a group of Conservative Evangelical Christians who believe that an experiment in Community which shall be 'Under the Word' should be made. Obviously there are things to be learned from previous experiments in community life both within the Evangelical tradition and outside it. There is much to be learned from the history of the Mildmay Deaconesses of North London, from the Mary Sisters of Darmstadt as well as from foundations like the Ecumenical Community of Farncombe. But while there is much to be learned from such great movements of the Spirit, nevertheless one of these has been an attempt at a permanent community based on Conservative Evangelical principles and any experiment which may be made must be 'sui generis'.

For example, the distinguishing characteristics of the Catholic Communities are vows such as obedience, poverty and chastity or obedience, stability, and chastity. The Evangelical who is characteristically concerned about obedience to new movements of the Spirit would find, for example, the promise of stability and obedience to a superior of uncertain value. While there must be leadership in any group of people, such human leadership can never be absolute for those who live by the Spirit under the Word of God. At the same time some degree of stability must be found. Missionaries overseas often commit themselves for life or for a definite period of years and this is seen to be a 'sine qua non' of an effective work. Hence it seems likely that people coming to the community would commit themselves for a period of time, perhaps six months, perhaps a year, perhaps five years and some in due course possibly for life. Thus the element of stability would be attained and the possibility of a common life made realistic. Whatever 'poverty' means in traditional communities, the common life together must have a place in our Evangelical fellowship for we are no strangers to the concept of living by faith and, although in the proposed community its members would in the main be out at work in one calling or another, the demands of the work as a community would necessitate a life of sharing.

The vow of chastity (properly called celibacy) which characterizes traditional communities does not exclude widows and widowers, but it seems likely that such a community would need to be for the unmarried or widowed. If some were married this would give to such folk a deeper relationship than was open to other members of the community and might be a considerable cause of strain.

Most important of all this community is not intended to live to itself. Indeed it could be contended that every experiment in community life which has become too concerned with its own life has had within it the seeds of decay. The history of Anglo-Catholic communities in the Church of England makes this plain. Many a community started its life in a down-town parish and did remarkable work for God. Then the history tells us that the life of the community could not develop adequately and premises were sought in the countryside. It is significant that many such communities are in decline today. The active communities which are fully involved in service and witness are those which are growing and in which change and development are taking place (with very often a thrilling movement towards a more Biblical worship). For reasons such as this, an Evangelical community would be founded in an artisan area, its aims being 'to witness to the Lord by outgoing evangelism and a community life where Jesus is Lord'. It is significant that out-going evangelism comes first and it could not be otherwise in a community which is thoroughly evangelical in inspiration and which moreover will be supported by the life of its members in ordinary jobs. There will be no escape from the world.

Rather will the community house make it possible for a deeper involvement as folk come to call or stay. The impact of such a home of joyful Biblical fellowship could be considerable on any area and particularly will this be so in areas where there is a continual draining away of natural leaders. It could indeed be a spiritual reservoir to water a pagan area with the Gospel. In due course there might be many such houses in different parts of the country (already there is a possibility in Wales).

Community life is surely in no way inimical to an Evangelical spirituality. Indeed this is the very soil in which one would expect it to grow and flourish with the greatest vigour, for Evangelicals are no strangers to sacrifice, to deep fellowship or to commitment. A number of Evangelicals believe that the time has come to make an experiment grounded in Conservative Evangelical theology. We hope that many will pray for and seek to set forward the establishment of the Community of the Word of God.