

EDITORIAL: THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE 1846-1996

The 150th anniversary of the Evangelical Alliance deserves to be noted by Scottish Evangelicals in particular, for Scots such as Thomas Chalmers and Robert S. Candlish were among its most energetic initiators. The preparatory meeting held at Liverpool in 1845 assembled on the invitation of Scottish Evangelicals, and the fresh spiritual impulses released by the separation of the Free Church of Scotland enthused the creation of the Alliance in August 1846.

The fortunes of EA have waxed and waned over the decades, but in the last quarter of the twentieth century it has become a very considerable force in British, and especially English, Christianity. The Scottish arm of the Alliance, which received its own identity and organization in 1992, inevitably experiences the tensions involved in seeking to be distinctively Scottish while part of a much larger whole whose very *raison d'être* is unity and co-operation.

To mark the sesquicentennial, the Evangelical Alliance met in National Assembly at a watering-place on the south coast, out of which emerged 'The Bournemouth Declaration':

AN EVANGELICAL AGENDA

We, the National Assembly of Evangelicals, meeting in Bournemouth, November 11-13th 1996, rejoice in God's grace and patience, conscious of the privileges we enjoy. We have listened to God and each other and present this agenda as a reflection of our discussion together.

CHRIST, SCRIPTURE AND UNITY

We honour Jesus Christ alone as Saviour and Lord. His atoning death, bodily resurrection and personal return are central to Christian faith.

We resolve to proclaim to all the reality of new life through the Cross.

We confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God's Word incarnate; supreme authority is his. We recognise scripture as God's word written, the definitive, normative and sufficient revelation of God's truth.

We repent of our neglect of scripture and resolve to study, live and apply it relevantly in our world.

We recognise that unity is both God's gift and God's intention for his people. He has made us one in Christ; he wants us to express that invisible one-ness in visible ways. We believe that unity becomes visible primarily through our shared commitment to God's word, to each other and to his work.

We acknowledge our failure to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

Our one-ness in Christ requires us to work together with integrity:—

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- to attempt to distinguish primary from secondary issues and to clarify the extent to which differing terminology can properly express the same truth;
- to affirm diversity and reach mutual understanding on secondary issues;
- to treat each other with love and grace and to live by the spirit of the 1846 Evangelical Alliance's 'Practical Resolutions'.

CHURCH AND MISSION

Missions begins with God, who calls us to share in reaching the world with his redeeming love. As Christ was sent by the Father, he now sends us in the power of the Holy Spirit. We recommit ourselves to this mission with renewed confidence in the one God revealed uniquely in Christ, and in the one gospel to be proclaimed to all people. We believe the Church is the community of faith which is called to be an authentic expression of the gospel and a sign of the Kingdom of God by:-

- developing missionary congregations of all ages, reaching across social, linguistic and geographical boundaries;
- planting radical and creative churches in unreached communities and people groups;
- releasing the vision, zeal and skills of younger leaders;
- recognising cultural diversity as part of our life and witness in the world;
- seeking to engage with the increasing pluralism of our world;
- rethinking the way we communicate and model gospel truth, love and reconciliation;
- receiving from and giving to the worldwide Christian family;
- preparing for future challenges and opportunities.

CHURCH AND SOCIETY

God created and sustains the world, and has given his human creatures stewardship over all he has made. We recognise that no area of life is outside God's sovereign rule. We take the incarnation and transforming work of Christ as our model for engagement. We affirm our commitment to releasing Christian people for involvement at all levels of society, informed by scripture and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

We believe it is important for the Church to be a listening people. We acknowledge our common humanity, rooted in the image of God, and our shared responsibility to:-

- uphold and defend the sanctity of human life, and protect and promote all that contributes to human dignity and development;
- build and maintain peace and reconciliation between communities and peoples in conflict;

- pursue justice and compassion within our society and the wider world;
- promote teaching and training for responsible family living;
- oppose all forms of racism in Church and society;
- resist the tendency to marginalise others, and act to break down barriers of prejudice;
- promote a positive expression of sexuality, in singleness and marriage, freeing everyone to develop the rich variety of friendships God intended, as revealed in scripture.

CONCLUSION

Recognising our total dependence upon God, we commit ourselves to pray and work together to equip and mobilise Christians of all ages in pursuit of this agenda.

We repent of our past failures, and pray for reformation and renewal in the Church and for a spiritual awakening throughout these islands.

13 November 1996

Not a Doctrinal Basis

It is important not to view this Declaration as a doctrinal platform of the Evangelical Alliance. Its actual Basis of Faith comprises eight doctrinal articles (on God, Scripture, sin, work of Christ, justification, work of the Spirit, church, return of Christ), prefaced by an introduction which reads as follows:

Evangelical Christians accept the revelation of the triune God given in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and confess the historic faith of the Gospel therein set forth. They here assert doctrines which they regard as crucial to the understanding of the faith, and which should issue in mutual love, practical Christian service and evangelistic concern.

In general shape it is not unlike the Doctrinal Basis of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), which has been widely adopted by other evangelical bodies.

The Alliance's original Doctrinal Basis, approved at the London conference in August 1846, had nine articles, briefer, and incorporating one or two items unlikely to appear in a similar formulation at the present time, including 'the Immortality of the Soul'. 'The Right and Duty of Private Judgment in the Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures' was the second clause, after the first on the Scriptures themselves. It presumably reflected not so much opposition to the prescriptive magisterium of the Roman Church as the sensitivities demanded in cementing an alliance of diverse Evangelicals in the mid-nineteenth century. These are explicitly addressed in three paragraphs that follow the nine clauses but are still part of the Basis of Faith itself.

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(i) It is, however, distinctly declared that this brief summary is not to be regarded, in any formal or ecclesiastical sense, as a creed or confession, nor the adoption of it as involving an assumption of the right authoritatively to define the limits of Christian brotherhood.

(ii) In this Alliance it is also distinctly declared that no compromise of the views of any member, or sanction of those of others on the points wherein they differ, is either required or expected; but that all are held free as before to maintain and advocate their religious convictions with due forbearance and brotherly love.

(iii) It is not contemplated that this Alliance should assume or aim at the character of a new ecclesiastical organisation, claiming and exercising the functions of a Christian Church. Its simple and comprehensive object, it is strongly felt, may be successfully promoted without interfering with, or disturbing the order of, any branch of the Christian Church to which its members may respectively belong.

Practical Resolutions

The extraordinary care devoted by the founders of the Evangelical Alliance to fostering Christian unity and harmony is also evident in the 'General Resolutions' adopted in 1846, which are referred to in the Bournemouth Declaration 150 years later as the 'Practical Resolutions'. It is to these that the Declaration itself should be compared, if to any statement from the Alliance's early days. Although they are lengthier than the 1996 Declaration, they bear reproduction here, not least because their substance derived from an important address by Thomas Chalmers and because they were read and emphasized at successive general conferences of the Alliance.

1. That the Members of this Alliance earnestly and affectionately recommend to each other in their own conduct, and particularly in their own use of the press, carefully to abstain from and put away all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil-speaking, with all malice; and, in all things in which they may yet differ from each other, to be kind, tender-hearted, forbearing one another in love, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven them; in everything seeking to be followers of God, as dear children, and to walk in love, as Christ also hath loved them.

2. That, as the Christian Union which this Alliance desires to promote can only be obtained through the blessed energy of the Holy Spirit, it be recommended to the Members present, and absent brethren, to make this matter the subject of simultaneous weekly petition at the throne of grace, in their closets and families; and the forenoon of Monday is suggested as the time for that purpose. And that it be further recommended, that the week beginning with the first

Lord's day of January, in each year, be observed by the members and friends of the Alliance throughout the world, as a season for concert in prayer on behalf of the grand objects contemplated by the Alliance.

3. That, in seeking the correction of what the members of the Alliance believe to be wrong in others, they desire, in humble dependence on the grace of God, themselves to obey, and by their practice and influence to impress upon others, the command of Christ, to consider first the beam that is in their own eye: that they will, therefore, strive to promote, each in his own communion, a spirit of repentance and humiliation for its peculiar sins; and to exercise a double measure of forbearance in reproof, where reproof is needful, the faults of those Christian Brethren who belong to other bodies than their own.

4. That, when required by conscience to assert or defend any views or principles wherein they differ from Christian Brethren who agree with them in vital truths, the members of this Alliance will aim earnestly, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to avoid all rash and groundless insinuations, personal imputations, or irritating allusions, and to maintain the meekness and gentleness of Christ by speaking the truth only in love.

5. That, while they believe it highly desirable that Christians of different bodies, holding the Head, should own each other as Brethren by some such means as the Evangelical Alliance affords, the Members of the Alliance disclaim the thought, that those only who openly join this Society are sincere friends to the cause of Christian Union; that, on the contrary, they regard all those as its true friends who solemnly purpose in their hearts, and fulfil that purpose in their practice, to be more watchful in future against occasions of strife, more tender and charitable towards Christians from whom they differ, and more constant in prayer for the union of all the true disciples of Christ.

6. That the members of this Alliance would therefore invite, humbly and earnestly, all Ministers of the Gospel, all conductors of religious publications, and others who have influence in various bodies of Christians, to watch more than ever against sins of the heart, or the tongue, or the pen, towards Christians of other denominations; and to promote more zealously than hitherto a spirit of peace, unity, and godly love, among all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

7. That, since all the disciples of Christ are commanded by the Holy Spirit to add to brotherly kindness, love, and are bound to pray that all who profess and call themselves Christians should be led into the way of truth; it is earnestly recommended to the Members of the Evangelical Alliance, to offer special prayer for all merely nominal Christians, as well as for Jews and Gentiles throughout the world.

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8. That the Members of this Alliance, earnestly longing for the universal spread of Christ's kingdom, devoutly praise God for the grace whereby, in late years, Evangelical Christians have been moved to manifold efforts to make the Saviour known to both Jew and Gentile, and faithful men have been raised up to undertake the toil. They would offer to all Evangelical Missionaries their most fraternal congratulations and sympathy; would hail the flocks they have been honoured to gather, as welcome and beloved members of the household of God; and above all, would implore the Head of the Church to shield his servants, to edify his rising churches, and, by the outpouring of his Holy Spirit, to enlighten Israel with the knowledge of the true Messiah, and to bring the Heathen out of darkness into light. They would also record their confident hope, that their beloved Missionary Brethren will strive more and more to manifest, before the Israelite and other classes who know not the Redeemer, that union in their blessed Lord, the spirit of which, the Members of this Alliance would gratefully acknowledge, they have generally cherished.

Evangelical Unity and the Evangelical Alliance

It was Chalmers' concern that the new Alliance should not find itself a union without a job to do. What may surprise present-day Evangelicals is that the great task he identified for it was simply the promotion of Christian unity. There is much in these Practical Resolutions that the evangelical community today should take seriously to heart, if it is in earnest in still regarding evangelical unity as a goal worth pursuing. Unity features with Christ and Scripture in the first section of the Bournemouth Declaration, but even if allowance is made for its brevity, it falls far short of the studied application of the Practical Resolutions' commitment to this grand object of the Alliance.

Any fair comparison of official EA position-statements of 1846 and 1996 must recognize the enormous changes, amounting one feels at times almost to wholesale transformation, that have overtaken British culture and society during this century and a half. They are responsible for the Bournemouth Declaration's prominent concern for mission – although it never uses the word 'evangelism'. And if we may speak of the maturing of Evangelicalism, this in turn explains the Declaration's high profile for Christian social responsibility compared with 1846.

Yet it is arguable that the Alliance, and the evangelical constituency as a whole, could do worse than revisit the Practical Resolutions espoused at the EA's foundation. Let the promotion of evangelical Christian unity be the great programme of the Alliance. Few who know the evangelical scene in the UK will doubt the urgency, and the difficulty, of this task. For these very reasons it must not take second place, or worse, to evangelistic or social schemes in the work of the Alliance itself.

Recovering a Doctrine of the Church

It may also be claimed that evangelical unity requires a stronger grasp of ecclesiology. Here a comparison of 1846 and 1996 is revealing. The original Doctrinal Basis contained no affirmation about the church, but only the following clause 9: 'The divine Institution of the Christian Ministry, and the obligation and perpetuity of the Ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.' Today's Basis of Faith asserts the doctrine of

The priesthood of all believers, who form the universal Church, the Body of which Christ is the Head, and which is committed by His command to the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world.

A more biblical confession might combine the emphases of both, the ordered institutional local interest of the founding fathers and the universal functional christological note of the present Basis. It is a weakness of the modern clause that its 'universal Church' lacks anchorage in ordered congregations marked by designated ministries of Word and sacraments or ordinances. Perhaps these are taken as read, but perhaps not. For the flabbiness of evangelical ecclesiology has not lain so much at the level of theological stratospherics but in maintaining the unity of God's people in one congregation. British Christianity, very largely on its evangelical wings, has witnessed in recent decades an unparalleled free-for-all in do-it-yourself church-making. It may well be that a stronger allegiance to the fostering of Christian unity will call for a firmer discipline in this free market. Here lies a noble goal for an Evangelical Alliance that is conscious of its heritage, into the next millennium.