

Theology Comes Tomorrow?

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The churches are still asking, with increasing distress, the as yet unanswered question, 'When are Evangelicals going to begin to think?'

Stephen Neill, *The Churchman*, 87 (1973), p. 274.

TOWARDS THE END of an article assessing the Bangkok Assembly of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism Stephen Neill posed the question which is quoted at the head of this article. It may very well be that we are moving to a time when that question may be able to be answered. The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation in July 1974 did not really offer very much on the subject of evangelism when its statements are seen in the broad perspective of Christian theology and practice, but when viewed from the point of view of the inner life of Evangelicalism and its relationship to the world in which we all live, then the congress takes on an important, but different, significance.

This preliminary report must be very restricted in its aim, and faces a number of serious difficulties. Not least is the fact that I was present at the congress, and that I enjoyed myself while I was there. But the congress itself was so diverse, and comprehended so many different people, backgrounds and points of view that to attempt to summarise in a brief space would be a folly. The programme of the congress was packed with a similar variety, and this variety was expressed in a multitude of ways. Even where items on the programme were not done in any self-consciously theological way, they nonetheless invite theological analysis and comment. How does one assess the theological significance of such a congress? One participant, very well informed and highly competent theologically, commented that there had been little theological engagement at the congress. How far may one speak of a theology of the congress? I do not think it is possible at all to speak of a theology of the Lausanne Congress, nor even of a consensus theology, though the Lausanne Covenant does provide a useful

guide as to what people were trying to think about. As the congress focused on a number of themes, rather than on one or two particular people who spoke, I shall try to lay out what leading people at the congress said on these themes, and then look at the covenant which emerged at the end of the congress.

The importance of the congress, however, resides more in the agenda which it has put before Evangelicals, than in the actual theological content of the covenant or other statements of the congress. It also resides in the possibilities of what I would call honesty, but which might also be called openness or even maturity. Three factors are important in this respect, and they are factors about the nature of the life-style of Evangelicals and their institutions. Evangelical theologians at the present time tend to do their work within the context of a theological college, or sometimes a university. Most of these colleges have clear commitments both to a foundation or constitution, and to a 'constituency'. This last refers often to those people who support the college, either financially or by sending students to enrol. A consequence of the 'constituency' context of Evangelical theological work is that it often tends to be very conservative, not to say timid. The actual restrictions, or inhibitions that influence people may not actually be open to straightforward description, they may, and probably very largely are, inhibitions within the mind. Nonetheless there is a relationship between the attitude in the 'constituency' environment and the inhibitions.

The second factor is that, in England at any rate, Evangelicals have tended to operate with a self-understanding that is characteristically middle-class, if not upper middle-class. One only has to attend a large meeting of Evangelicals, or to observe the dramatic socialising effect of the Evangelical theological colleges, to see some indication of this. These two factors combine to create at the moment an attitude that does not encourage new thinking about new areas or new problems.

The third factor is that many Evangelicals find fellowship and opportunities for Christian service in organisations which are inter-denominational in character, or which are closely tied to a denomination and a particular way of seeing ministry and service in that denomination. One might think here, for example, of Scripture Union, the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) or the Church Pastoral-Aid Society. It would be difficult to over-estimate the contribution of such societies, but the very character of the societies sometimes makes certain issues more difficult to handle. A good example, in my opinion, is the difficulty of open and free discussion in IVF circles of differences about church, ministry and sacraments, and the lack of writing, and publication from IVP, of substantial works on church and ministry. This reticence is entirely understandable, but it needs to be identified, because it actually influences the manner and the direction of Evangelical theology.

All this is to suggest that the Lausanne Congress has brought out, into the open some of the underlying tensions in Evangelical thinking or not-thinking; and yet the congress survived as an Evangelical congress! The theological significance of the congress thus may be in this 'non-theological' factor. The so-called maturity (that is honesty about differences without judgmentalism) that many felt emerged at Lausanne may actually be the biggest factor in helping Evangelicals to start thinking, and so to answer the question which Stephen Neill says the churches are asking. That honesty, and the agenda which the congress laid out for Evangelicals to think about, are the two things that give this congress a significance for theology.

The themes that emerged as being live issues in discussion at the Congress all turned in some way about the question of evangelism, but evangelism itself was not the most important theme to emerge. The most important theme was the social dimension of the gospel. This emerged under two identifiable heads; social ethics or social justice, and the relationship between the gospel and its proclamation and culture. That is to say, the culture in which the gospel is proclaimed, and the culture in which it may have been formulated by a missionary. Hovering near at hand to this discussion was the question of the church.

Evangelism

THE first person to tackle the definition of evangelism was John Stott, in his paper on 'The Nature of Biblical Evangelism'. He carefully set out his analysis of a cluster of terms: mission, evangelism, dialogue, salvation, conversion. Mission, according to Stott is a broader concept than evangelism. 'The mission of the church arises from the mission of God, and is to be modelled on it.' This is so in two major respects. 'First, he sends us *into the world*.' On the pattern of the incarnation the Christian is sent into the world, 'to identify with others as he identified with us, to become vulnerable as he did. It is surely one of our more characteristic evangelical failures that we have seldom taken seriously this principle of the incarnation'. Secondly the Christian is sent to serve, just as Christ served. Thus for Stott 'mission' 'describes everything the church is sent into the world to do'; that is to be the salt of the earth, and to be the light of the world.

Evangelism, is a part of this mission, it is the spread of the good news. Evangelism, he says, must not be defined in terms of results, nor in terms of methods, but rather it 'must be defined only in terms of the *message*'. In this message there are the gospel events, the gospel witnesses (those who could witness to Christ, and particularly the resurrection—that is the apostles, and the prophets of the Old Testament), the gospel promises and the gospel demands. Thus evangelism

'is sharing this gospel with others. The good news is Jesus, and the good news about Jesus which we announce is that he died for our sins and was raised from death by the Father, according to the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and that on the basis of his death and resurrection he offers forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit to all those who repent, believe and are baptised'. Stott also dealt with dialogue (a serious conversation in which we are prepared to listen as well as speak), salvation (personal freedom from sin and its consequences) and conversion (repentance plus faith).

This general approach, and his view of evangelism call for some comment. First, we see, in his use of the motif of the incarnation in regard to the role of Christians in the world a welcome re-entry of this doctrine into Evangelical speech. The use made by some Catholics of the idea of the church as an extension of the incarnation, specifically with respect to questions of ministry, has led some Evangelicals to fight shy of anything that looks like an incarnationist theology. However, there are certain areas of modern theological debate which become exceedingly difficult and impoverished without an incarnationist conceptuality—I think particularly of ethics and hermeneutics.

Second, we have to face the difficulty that the 'word study' approach involves. Stott began his paper with a reference to *Alice in Wonderland*, and said that the issue between Alice and Humpty Dumpty (the passage quoted will be familiar to those who have read Packer on Fundamentalism, even if they have not read Lewis Carroll) was still a contemporary one, namely 'whether man can manipulate the meaning of words or whether words have an autonomy which cannot be infringed'. The proposal is then to define the words biblically, and thus to establish the 'true meaning' for theology. It is to be hoped that this is not meant to suggest that this is doing theology, for it is not even good semantics. The fact is that the presence of Christians in the world in the New Testament is described by other words and developed under other motifs besides mission. Furthermore, the characteristic, or dominant, use of the 'sending' terminology in the New Testament refers to the quite particular work of the apostles (*apostles* means 'one who is sent'). This is an old chestnut, which James Barr rightly raised in connection with the earlier work of the Kittel dictionary, but which still needs further work and development. We cannot imagine that theology is fossilised in the semantics of the New Testament, not because we have some philosophical presupposition that precludes such a thing. Rather we cannot imagine it because the actual facts of the New Testament and its language prevent us from so doing. The actual theological work of the New Testament writers, especially people like Paul and John (to say nothing of Jesus himself) show that it is sense and power, conception and experience, to which they refer, not words and expressions. Paul is the slave of Jesus Christ,

not the tradition about him, important though that is to him. The presence of the gospels in the New Testament ought to remind us that we belong to Jesus Christ not a particular tradition about him—not even a tradition that is claimed to be found in the New Testament, nor even one that is in fact found there. The presence of variety in expression, of John along with the Synoptics, of the Son of Man along with the last Adam, prevent such selective institutionalism.

The problem is, of course, that we need to be able to understand each other from day to day, so that words, for the purpose of communication need to have at least some continuing identifiable range of meanings. In this context to identify more precisely the New Testament range is a valuable first step towards giving serious theological thought to the question in hand. That is, presumably, what John Stott was seeking to do.

There is a question of definitions as well in this discussion, which can be illustrated by reference to the slightly different ways in which evangelism is defined by Stott on the one hand, and René Padilla on the other. Stott says, evangelism is 'sharing the gospel with others . . . the good news about Jesus which we announce is that he died for our sins and was raised from death by the Father, according to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and that on the basis of his death and resurrection he offers forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit to all those who repent, believe and are baptised'. Padilla, in a section that is not exactly parallel in its intent to that just quoted from Stott, says 'the aim of evangelisation is, therefore, to lead man, not merely to a subjective experience of the future salvation of his soul, but to a radical reorientation of his life, including his deliverance from slavery to the world and its powers on the one hand, and his integration into God's purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ on the other hand'.

The difference is that while Stott sees the Christian's involvement in the world, and thus in the problems of social justice and so on, as a necessary part of mission, which he is careful to distinguish from evangelism, Padilla wants to have this involvement much more integrally related to the definition and conception of evangelism. Thus when Padilla thinks of evangelism in a country where, for example, racism is an important social problem, then evangelism must contain some reference to the implications of the gospel for that problem. There is, in other words, always a social dimension to the gospel that is proclaimed.

Padilla and Stott are by no means out of step with each other in their basic emphases, but there are discernible differences in conceptions. That cannot be said for the representatives of the 'church growth' school of thought. This school, chiefly represented at this congress by Donald McGavran, sees the fundamental task as planting and growing churches. In this context growing is apparently conceived of

entirely in numerical terms. I say apparently, because it seems impossible to think that such men, who have a recognisably traditional Evangelical religious background, can really think that the only criterion for evangelism and church growth is numbers. Yet that is the clear impression that their utterances give. It appears like some kind of ecclesiastical technology. There needs to be some kind of dialogue between church growth men on the one hand and the Stott-Padilla type of approach on the other.

Social Involvement

THE distinction between Stott and Padilla on the definition of evangelism provides a useful moving on point to the major topic of the congress—the social dimension of the gospel. Three points may be made here. First the idea was aired on a number of occasions that the credibility of the gospel of forgiveness was invalidated in some way by the failure of Christians to show real concern for their fellow men in the social and human situations in which they found themselves. Thus, for example, Samuel Escobar, in referring to the manipulation of a Latin American tribe for economic gain by a western based company and the plight of a western missionary in that situation, said, 'if this is not taken seriously by the evangelists (i.e. whether they stand with the rich or the poor) in both their style and their message, the credibility of the gospel is at stake'.

Counter point to this is John Stott: 'True, the gospel lacks credibility if we who preach it are only interested in souls, and have no concern about the welfare of people's bodies situations and community. Yet the reason for an acceptance of social responsibility is not in order to give the gospel a credibility it would otherwise lack, but simple uncomplicated compassion.' This passage leads on to the second point about social involvement, namely the basis and motivation for it. Stott clearly sees it as the straightforward expression of love, obedience to the point in the parable of the good Samaritan. Padilla strikes a different note when he asserts in part of his statement of the aim of evangelisation, that the convert is to be reorientated in his life 'including his deliverance from slavery to the world and its powers on the one hand, and his integration into God's purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ on the other hand'. He also refers to the prophetic role of the church to lay open 'the evils that frustrate the purpose of God in society'. Behind these assertions seems to be the thought that the social involvement of the Christian is based on the lordship of Christ over the world, as well as over the church. These assertions raise the further obvious question as to what precisely are the purposes of God for society, either in general or in particular? It is true that Padilla does say that those purposes will only be fulfilled

in the age to come, but he clearly implies some kind of continuity between that age and this, and of such a kind that a sufficiently definable idea of God's purposes for society here and now can be identified to enable action to be initiated.

I do not say that Stott and Padilla are working in different directions, but they express themselves in different ways, and for the purpose of theological understanding their different statements are susceptible of quite different developments. The assertion of the lordship of Christ over the world as the basis for Christian social involvement provides a greater possibility for the development of the idea of a Christian society in its structures, and it also provides the greater possibility of a justification for, and willingness for, structural actions in society, or actions designed to alter the structures of society. It seems to me also to be more open to the danger of a kind of triumphalism. There are a number of issues clustered around this point, and they include the questions of whether the individual or society is the object of God's redemption, in what sense is society redeemed or redeemable, what is the good, according to God's will and purpose, for a society made up of people most of whom admit to, and indeed have, no faith in Christ and little or no commitment to the behaviour values that a Christian might hold. What actually is society, what are the theological factors that make this analysis of society more acceptable to a Christian than that analysis?

These questions all cry out for answers, but they cried out in vain at Lausanne. Similarly Lausanne heard little or nothing about the problems of ecology, of dwindling energy resources, of population and support, or development and social liberation, of the moral status of international trade agreements, of the impact of modern technology on the nature of human society. There was surprisingly little heard of Karl Marx, though there was some reference to the quite distinct, but related, matter of communist-controlled states. There was an awareness, on occasion, of these sorts of questions, but they must, as yet, be regarded as matters on the agenda still to be considered.

The third interesting aspect of the social involvement theme at Lausanne was the eschatological dimension given to it by different speakers. Padilla admitted that the purposes of God for mankind would not be fulfilled until the age to come. So did Samuel Escobar, who said that we should encourage one another, 'that we are not only able to proclaim that "the end is at hand" but also to encourage one another in the search to make this world a bit less unjust and cruel, as an evidence of our expectation of a new creation'. Similarly, Peter Beyerhaus: 'Neither by a history of evolution nor by violent revolutions will this present world of ours be changed into the ideal state of the kingdom of God as promised through the prophets. Physically man and all creation are still under the laws of the old age of corruption.'

Once again, it is not so much a question of stating the matter dif-

ferently, as stating it in such a way that a different emphasis comes out. Clearly Padilla sees the eschatological situation in a different perspective to Beyerhaus. What is called for here is not so much analytical articles, as a lot more theological engagement between those involved.

Church

THE Trinity, Christology, justification, these have all been the subject of intense dispute and discussion in church history. But the church—that has rarely been the subject of sustained theological debate. Perhaps the twentieth is to be the century of the doctrine of the church. Certainly the century began (roughly speaking) with some very notable contributions, but these beginnings have been buried long since. Perhaps the movement into the so-called post-Constantinian age will prompt some serious theological work, and there are signs that Roman Catholics are turning to the subject with some vigour. Perhaps if we paid more attention to the Articles than to the Prayer Book, to Brunner than to Barth, to Streeter on the church than to Streeter on the gospels, then we might get somewhere. It is a long-standing rebuke of Christian theology that the subject of (the) church has been so poorly dealt with. It is even worse for Evangelicals. We have studiously avoided the doctrine, and closed our mind to what we might have to learn there.

At the Lausanne congress, however, a small squeak on the church was heard. The shift in Evangelical thinking and statements, however, should have led to a much more serious consideration of the subject. It was left to two people, in the main, to serve notice of the subject: Francis Schaeffer and Howard Snyder. Schaeffer put forward two dangers facing Evangelicals: on the one hand 'compromise of the Scripture' and on the other 'a sterile orthodoxy without the practice of a beauty of community'. The first of these is familiar to us from Francis Schaeffer's writings, but not the second. This absence of the theme of church/community in his writings in any large way is a great pity, since it is actually the key factor in the way in which the L'Abri ministry operates at Huemoz—at least as I experienced and perceived it when I was there some time ago. The theme is important because it brings us back again to the personal character of God and of his creation and redemption in Christ.

This theme is also important in the context of the emphasis on the social dimension of the gospel. The inevitable questions of the sustenance of faith for Christians thus involved must be dealt with. It is something like theological irresponsibility to say that Christians should come out of their little holes and greenhouses and see their involvement in the social trials and difficulties of humanity as central in their Christian faith and witness, without at the same time seeking to elaborate and develop those patterns of understanding and fellowship

which will sustain the Christian in such a situation. If John Stott is right to say that we repent of our lack of concern for people, then to fail to handle with the utmost seriousness the matter of church/community, with full theological rigour, will require in the future a far greater repentance.

In one of the really perceptive papers at the congress Howard Snyder asked a number of penetrating questions: Is the church an institution? What does it mean to say the church is charismatic? What is the relation between church structures and para-church structures? On the last question he confesses that in preparing his paper he had encountered a basic difficulty. He had been asked specifically to deal with the question of para-church structures in relation to evangelism, but, he says, 'I could find no *biblical* basis for a fundamental distinction between denominational structures and para-denominational structures'. That is actually worth pondering. He is saying that as far as the Bible is concerned IVF is as much a 'church' as the Church of England, *or as little!*

The Covenant

THE Lausanne Covenant is a long document, some 2,700 words. In its final form it is the result of a number of draftings, and a large number of responses to the final draft went towards the final revision. The actual work was done by a drafting committee chaired by John Stott. They sifted through hundreds of suggested amendments, including a total re-write, during the congress. For those who have an interest in *Redaktionsgeschichte*, the general changes were the following. The paragraph dealing with Christian social responsibility was moved so that it followed immediately the paragraph on the nature of evangelism, and a completely new paragraph on freedom and persecution was added. The paragraph on scripture was very slightly strengthened in a conservative direction, the definition of the nature of evangelism was given more social dimension by the addition of two sentences ('In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship . . .'), the paragraph on social responsibility was strengthened with references to the 'liberation of men from every kind of oppression' . . . 'our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ' (with regard to reasons for socio-political involvement). Reference was also made to discrimination, and the denunciation of evil and injustice wherever they exist.

On the church, the exhortation to break out of our ecclesiastical ghettos and permeate non-Christian society was added, as was the statement that a church which 'preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross'. On the urgency of the evangelistic task a surprisingly candid statement on the so-called moratorium was put in: 'A reduction

of foreign missionaries and money in an evangelised country may sometimes be necessary to facilitate the national church's growth in self-reliance and to release resources for unevangelised areas. Missionaries should flow ever more freely from and to all six continents in a spirit of humble service.' Also in this paragraph is the important reference to simplicity of life: 'All of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it. Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple life-style in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism.' The paragraph on the Holy Spirit was strengthened in a charismatic direction, and the paragraph on the return of Christ was made more explicit. The new paragraph on freedom and persecution was an attempt to associate with the persecuted in the world, especially those Christians who are persecuted by hostile governments.

It is a pity that this paragraph is marred by the quite unbiblical statement that 'it is the God-appointed duty of every government to secure conditions of peace, justice and liberty in which the church may obey God, serve the Lord Christ, and preach the gospel without interference'. It is also something of a pity that the word 'church' is used in this document in an unbiblical way.

The additions and changes in the covenant seem to me, however, to be in line with the sentiment of the congress, and in this respect the covenant broadly speaking reflects what people at the congress thought. Certainly people were signing it in large numbers, and it is likely that very few will refrain from signing it because they do not agree with it. This document thus becomes of some importance as an indicator of Evangelical thinking. It is also an indicator that there is still a long way to go. Certain areas have been touched on, and certain issues have at least been faced.

It is a document that is also marked by a note of penitence for failures. The document takes a stand on issues like scripture, social involvement and interdependence, but without arrogance. With similar humility the fact has to be faced that the congress in the end did not finally work out the relationship between social involvement and evangelism in any real depth, did not work out the basis or criteria for that social involvement in any real depth and only gave the most cursory notice to the subject of the nature and function of the church. It did not in fact take the discussion of these issues beyond the stage of an opening skirmish, and a recognition of their importance. The fact is that the major work theologically has yet to be done by Evangelicals in these areas. The frank and open recognition of their importance is, however, a major step forward. The contribution of the congress to a more open, honest and mature atmosphere in which Evangelical theologians can get to grips with these questions is also a major step forward. The fact that Billy Graham said publicly that he was in substantial agreement with René Padilla's paper, and thought

it one of the outstanding papers of the congress, is a sign and an assurance of that new humility and frankness.

A Theological Fellowship

BUT the question remains—will Evangelicals do the theological work that this congress has opened up? There is already a theological fellowship in Latin America whose papers are available in Britain. There is also the beginnings of something similar in Africa and Asia—but nothing as yet in Europe. Such a European fellowship seems to me to be essential. It should not be restricted denominationally, but should hold itself open to any who are in sympathy with the Lausanne Covenant and who are willing to actually do the work. Such a fellowship should be in close contact with the similar fellowships in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and since the Latin American fellowship is the most developed group perhaps we should ask for their advice and help as to ways forward. A fellowship of this kind is essential to encourage and stimulate people in this work. It is not the case that the whole Evangelical world has been changed by Lausanne—very far from it, and Europe probably still further than that! Such a European Fellowship should probably be mainly a corresponding group for a while, but there would obviously be the need, and in the European situation the opportunity exists, for well prepared working consultations. Such a European theological fellowship would be able to capitalise on the tentative, but significant advances made at Lausanne. If it did that it would bring closer the positive answer to the question posed by Stephen Neill—‘when are Evangelicals going to begin to think?’

Footnote

All the quotations in this article have been taken from the News Media release transcripts of addresses. The Congress papers are scheduled to be published by World Wide Publications, Minneapolis, on October 1st, 1974.