

The Christian Scene

Harry Uprichard writes from Northern Ireland

The image most people in the mainland have of Northern Ireland is largely conditioned by the media, a land of bombs and bullets rather than the proverbial land of "saints and scholars". It would be easy to draw the inference that Christianity in the province, let alone evangelicalism, was at a low ebb. Yet this would hardly be true. Church attendance is generally more healthy than on the mainland and certainly, within my own Presbyterian denomination, there are a growing number of expository evangelical ministries aimed at declaring the full counsel of the Word of God. The sad thing, perhaps, is that, as evangelicals, we have made so little impact on our "Northern Ireland situation". But we continue to pray and work to resolve this and are encouraged by others who pray for us in our difficulties.

One highlight of our year is the Portstewart Convention. This is a "Keswick" type convention taking place each year at the end of June in the very pleasant surroundings of a North Antrim holiday resort. A marked feature of "Portstewart" over the last number of years has been the tendency to both expository and theological ministry. In June 1985 the Rev. James Philip from Scotland, spoke most effectively on "the death of Christ" during the morning Bible Reading Sessions. The meetings in the large tent are well attended though young people until recently had not been as plentiful as might have been the case. This has been more than remedied by the introduction over the last two years of a young people's week-end. This year the speaker was the Rev. David Smith and numbers attending were estimated at six to seven hundred. It has been a worthwhile addition to the convention.

There are quite a number of evangelical groups, both within our various denominations and combining these. One such is the Evangelical Fellowship of Ireland. It includes representatives of the main Protestant denominations on its committee and concentrates on providing two annual conferences for the encouragement mainly of those involved in ministry. Some attempt is made to alternate conferences between doctrinal and practical, ethical, moral emphases.

Last April Rev. Derek Thomas dealt with the call to the ministry and some of the difficulties involved in early stages of the work. In November 1985 Dr Eryl Davies' subject was the Biblical doctrine of God's Wrath. The Irish Reformed Fellowship is a similar group though it seeks to spread its influence both in the South and North of the island.

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Within the Presbyterian church the Westminster Fellowship provides a social point for evangelical thinking and interest mainly among ministers and elders of that church. Professor Donald McLeod of the Free Church College Edinburgh was the guest speaker at the annual Lectures in Contemporary Christianity. Dealing with the subject "Church/State Relationships - The Christian in Politics", in his usual excellent manner, he challenged members to review their entire

Evangel editor, Harry Uprichard, gives us an insight into evangelicalism in Northern Ireland.



Christian witness within our troubled situation and this provided some valuable and helpful discussion. At the spring Conference the Rev. Peter Whyte, also from Edinburgh, expounded with great clarity "Principles of Headship in Church and Family" and Dr Hugh Blair from the province spoke in autumn on "Preaching and Applying the Old Testament today". The W.F. have also been holding provincial rallies in an attempt to develop evangelical thinking beyond the bounds of those involved in ministry. The Campaign for concerted Witness to Reformed Truth (C.C.W.) is another group within Presbyterianism. It concentrates more on influencing Church policy and being actively involved in that direction.

As ever, evangelicalism could be more vital in Northern Ireland but there are indications of its presence and importance.

Among other denominations too, evangelicalism is making its voice clearly heard. For example, the Church Society (Ireland) Conference had as their guest speaker the Rev. Dr David Samuel (Director of Church Society England. His subject was entitled "Evangelical Identity - Past, Present and Future". In March 1985 the Reformed Presbyterian Church hosted a visit of Dr Tremper Longman, Associate Professor in Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He gave two lectures to theological students and ministers, one on the theology of the Book of Ecclesiastes and the other in the form and message of Nahum.

What however of the impact of all this on Church life in general, both at Synod, Conference and Assembly level and at grass roots life in the pew? This is always difficult to assess. The May/June period is the time for our major Church's Annual meetings. Reports are presented, discussion involved, resolutions taken and for many the cumbersome machinery of Church government revives for another little time. Sometimes debates can be lively and vital issues arise quite unexpectedly.

1985 was a relatively quiet year. One of the major issues discussed in our various annual meetings was the Warnock Report. Reactions were varied. Within our own denomination there was quite a strong lobby severely critical of all embryonic experimentation. The debate had been going on for some time and it was natural to see it raised at church annual meetings.

At both the Methodist Conference and General Assembly of 1984 the whole question of "Special" or "house fellowships" had been discussed. Quite a number of these had arisen

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- iii) to encourage evangelicals to get involved actively with LIFE
- iv) to foster these aims by organising and promoting conferences, speakers, articles, leaflets, books and films.

Our *raison d'être* is to get Bible believers working within the local Groups and organisations of LIFE. Many, it is true, were – and some still are – reluctant to join an association like LIFE that is not thoroughly church-based and Biblical. Some believers have found it difficult existing in the environment of the few Roman Catholic dominated local LIFE Groups. Qualms about raffles and lotteries as means of raising money to keep the local Groups viable are occasionally produced. But what are the alternatives? Ignore the abortion problem and forget the unborn children? The answer is to recruit more members from your fellowship into your local LIFE Group and explain your reservations about finances and covenant instead! Within any LIFE Group you will find cobelligerents from all walks of life – it will be an eye-opener for many.

the believer, with the Scriptures in hand and the love of Christ in heart, should have been in the forefront saying 'No' to abortion and doing all possible to help women avoid its horrors.

The input from evangelicals during the past three years has been considerable – it has been one of the major growth areas of LIFE. Several evangelicals now sit on Central Committee, the national policy making body. A pleasing number of believers now hold office or even chair LIFE Groups, many are becoming increasingly involved in the pregnancy care services, Christian's homes are being opened to needy pregnant mums and many hundreds of our folk are busy in lots of other LIFE activities. We have been given every encouragement to operate within LIFE; we have surrendered no principle nor set aside any conviction. The challenge is out – Evangelicals for LIFE will make it easier and more hospitable for you to work in the pro-life cause.

The great need among evangelicals is still for education. What do the Scriptures say concerning abortion? When does human life begin? What does the Warnock Report mean? How can we care for the mother and her unborn child? Evangelicals for LIFE can help your fellowship tackle these and other questions. We now have a considerable number of well-informed speakers throughout the U.K. We are willing to come and speak, perhaps show a film and bring literature to aid you. For more information, including a copy of the latest Newsletter, write to Evangelicals for LIFE, 118-120 Warwick Street, Leamington Spa, Warks, CV32 4QY.

USEFUL BOOKLETS

- Abortion – a Matter of Life and Death*, 1981, Evangelical Presbyterian Church.
- Gordon Wenham and Richard Winter, *Abortion – the Biblical and Medical Challenges*, 1983, CARE Trust.
- Peter Barnes, *Open Your Mouth for the Dumb*, 1984, Banner of Truth Trust.
- Huw Morgan *Let Them Live!*, 1985, Evangelical Press.

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derisively to him: "Go up, thou baldhead; go up, thou baldhead."⁶

Conclusion

The culmination of this parable differs in the two Gospel accounts. Matthew's and Luke's accounts vary in the concluding phrase, "But wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matt. 11:19), and "But wisdom is proved right by all her children" (Luke 7:35). The suggestion has been made that the difference in wording may go back to an Aramaic expression which in translation was misunderstood.⁷ Whatever the cause may be, the meaning which the words convey does not vary. Wisdom represents God's wisdom; it may even be a circumlocution for God himself. According to Matthew, the divine works of Jesus (Matt 11:5) are proofs of God's wisdom. In Luke's Gospel, God's children are a testimony to the veracity of his wisdom. For example, tax collectors and immoral women, rejected as outcasts by religious people of their day, saw in John the Baptist and in Jesus the wisdom of God revealed. Both John and Jesus proclaimed the message of redemption to them – John in all austerity at the Jordan (Luke 3:12, 13) and Jesus in table-fellowship at their homes (Luke 5:30).

Notes

1. Jeremias, in *Parables* p. 161, follows the suggestion made by Bishop, in *Jesus of Palestine*, p. 104. Jeremias writes: "That some children were sitting perhaps implies that they were content with 'piping' or 'wailing', leaving the more strenuous exercises for the others." However, there is a real danger of reading too much into the text at this point.
2. Marshall, *Luke*, p. 300.
3. F. Mussner, in "Dernichterkannte Kairos (Matt. 11 vs. 16-19; Luke 7 vs. 31-35)," *Biblica* 40 (1959): 600, pictures all the children sitting down and calling out
4. A. Plummer, *The Gospel of Luke (ICC)*, p. 163.
5. Matt. 9 vs. 11; Luke 5 vs. 30; 15 vs. 1-2; 19 vs. 7.
6. Piska 26, in W. G. Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati*, 2 vols. 1:5 26-27. Also see Strack – Billerbeck: *Kommentar*.
7. Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 162, n. 44.

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mainly in the Co. Down area of the province and were proving an embarrassment to denominational loyalties. One of the chief characteristics of the movement was the pronounced activity of "shepherds" whose role was to oversee individual members of the fellowship. The problem certainly afforded major denominations the opportunity to have a long hard look at their structures and to gauge whether these were sufficiently warm in fellowship, attractive in aspect and relevant in caring. The removal of these fellowships from the Methodist denomination, with whom they had been chiefly linked, however, has meant that the problem has receded. 1985 provided the "tidying up" reflection necessary and beneficial after such an issue.

One subject discussed at the Church of Ireland Synod was that of the place of the child in the Church. With a report before the General Assembly due for discussion in 1986 on that very subject we might well see the whole question of the significance of infant baptism and the child and communion come to prominence.

How much of all this finds its way to the pew is certainly debateable. However, the strong expository and theological emphasis in the province can only have a good influence on the life of the Church. And we pray that this will continue to be the case. As ever, evangelicalism could be more vital in Northern Ireland but there are indications of its presence and importance. The growing biblical emphases within it gives great hope for the future.