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Churchman

EDITORIAL

A Gospel for the Nations?

The dust has settled in Cape Town, and the 4000 plus delegates to the third Lausanne Movement conference that was held there from 16-26 October 2010 have returned home. Representing Evangelicals from around 200 countries, they had gathered for a week of intensive Bible study, discussion and reflection on the current state of the world and the church's mission within it. The gathering was all the more remarkable because it is not entirely clear whom it represented. Evangelical Christians are not easily pinned down, and it is hard to say what right the Lausanne Movement has to speak for them. A serious attempt was made to ensure that delegates came from different parts of the world in proportion to their population, which should have given significant preponderance to developing countries in Africa and Asia. The effects of this were mitigated however by the inescapable fact that most of the resources and personnel needed to stage the conference came from the West. As a result, delegates from the United States and the United Kingdom had a disproportionate influence on the proceedings, but perhaps that was a small price to pay, since otherwise the event would probably not have taken place at all.

Attendance was by invitation only, which may have been necessary to keep the conference within manageable bounds, but it is not entirely clear what the criteria of selection were. In places where Evangelicals are few, there was little difficulty deciding who should be asked to go, and the smaller the country, the more likely it is that its delegates reflected the composition of the Evangelical churches there. The rest of the world presents a different picture though, and the irony is that the countries whose delegates made the greatest impact were probably also the least fairly represented. This needs to be said, because the impact of the conference will be determined by the influence its participants have on the Evangelical churches in their home countries. It may be a big event for believers in Estonia or Tonga, but in most of the developed world it will probably go almost unnoticed.

In denominational terms, much will depend on the relationship the Evangelicals who went to Cape Town have with their own churches. There was

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a significant number of Anglican participants, but whether they can do much to raise the profile of Lausanne III in wider Anglican circles is doubtful, particularly in places like England, where it is hard to imagine that the national church would take much notice of such a gathering. That is a great pity, but we would be fooling ourselves to think otherwise. The truth is that for the majority of Christians in the developed world, including Evangelical ones, the conference will have little or no long-term effect and the money used to send the delegates to Cape Town would probably have been better spent on feeding the hungry in Darfur or Haiti for a couple of months.

Perhaps the best thing that can be said for something like the Cape Town conference is that isolated Evangelicals in remote and difficult locations benefit enormously from having fellowship with people from other parts of the world. For them, such a conference may be a real encouragement to their ministry, which may be dangerous as well as difficult. We have to face the fact that Christians are being increasingly persecuted in many places, not least in parts of sub-Saharan Africa where militant Islam dominates. Flying the flag for the cause of the gospel is not a bad idea when they are the target audience, and if the Cape Town jamboree has helped to raise the profile of the church in ways that protect it from harm, then it must be welcomed.

More worrying is the content of the message that Evangelicals are being asked to embrace as theirs. The official conference statement sounds rather like the sort of pep-talk a coach might give to his team in mid-season, when the team still has a chance of winning the championship if only it can regroup and pull together. As you would expect from such a talk, it contains the usual blend of confession for past failure to reach the intended goals along with an inalterable conviction that the goals themselves are necessary and worthwhile. Indeed, if the references to God were removed, it could even be a speech made at a Communist Party conference, where solidarity with the oppressed and advocacy of their cause are standard fare. In that sense, it has a rather dated feel, almost as if we were back in 1974, when the whole Lausanne Movement began.

This is worrying, because what is really happening in the world today is that millions of people are gradually moving out of poverty and oppression. That is not equally true everywhere of course, but enormous strides have been made in places like China, India and Indonesia and the trend looks set to continue.

The world's black spots today are mostly places where the government is inadequate to deal with the tasks it faces, and there is little or nothing that can be done by anyone else. But even in Southern Sudan or Somalia the example of other countries, where seemingly hopeless situations have been turned around, serves as a beacon of light to inspire those who struggle for fairness and justice. The world has woken up to the need for progress and development, which has now become a mantra almost everywhere.

What this means for us is that there is no need for the Evangelical community to jump on the social welfare bandwagon any more or embrace 'radical' causes that are now commonplace. Evangelicals have a good record of positive action in the spheres of health and education and this will no doubt continue, as it should. But we can thank God that there is now enough awareness of basic human needs in the world that we do not have to draw attention to them, or beat ourselves on the back for not doing more than we are. No doubt the poor will always be with us and we should certainly not neglect their needs, but there are plenty of other people crying out for social justice and this should leave Evangelicals free to make their own unique witness to the world.

What Evangelicals have to offer that others do not, is the gospel of eternal salvation in Christ. The Cape Town statement mentions this to be sure, but does not give it the kind of prominence it ought to have. There is little sense of the urgency of preaching the message to the ends of the earth and reaching those millions, not least in the secularised Western world, who have never heard what Christ has done for them and who in many cases do not even believe in God. Scientific atheism and the studied indifference of most Western media to the claims of the gospel are now greater challenges than poverty or famine. Yet of these things there is not a word, and the consequences of such neglect are liable to be felt on the traditional mission field before long. The hedonism and unbelief pumped out by the media of North America and Western Europe have a seductive power that is truly dangerous, but there is little sign that the Lausanne Movement is conscious of the massive evangelistic task that confronts us.

It is characteristic of armies that they are prepared to fight the last war, and it seems that the army of the Lord is no different. The main result of globalisation is that countries which until recently were insulated from the rich

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and culturally aggressive West are starting to feel its impact and are gradually finding themselves in much the same situation. For example, it is now not uncommon to hear cries for homosexual rights in parts of Africa and Asia where until recently the subject was never mentioned, and there is increasing pressure on governments there to apply 'international standards' in such matters to their own societies.

In many Western countries, the affluent society may be condemned in theory but it is enjoyed in practice, as the behaviour of many Evangelical leaders indicates only too clearly. While preaching the need for sacrifice and dedication from others, they themselves often enjoy a jet-set lifestyle in expensive hotels and restaurants as they move from one conference or committee meeting to another. It would be interesting to know how many of the delegates in Cape Town who came from the developed world were prepared to 'go native' during the conference and make their experience of South Africa authentic. Some undoubtedly did so, and they are to be congratulated, but it would be surprising if the upmarket establishments of the Cape did not benefit from their presence.

It would be quite wrong to point the finger exclusively at the West, however. Many Christian leaders from poorer countries are more than willing to enjoy the good life and spare all too little for the needs of their churches. The excesses of the traditionally wealthy are reprehensible but those of the nouveaux riches are grotesque, since they know only too well what they are doing – and why they should not do it. We would like to think that they had learned from the failings of others, but all too often they are rushing to copy them, with predictable results. The rush to embrace consumerist values is a spiritual problem, and one that Evangelicals around the world are not doing nearly enough to confront and overcome.

No-one can say what impact the Cape Town conference will have in the coming years, but unless Evangelical behaviour matches the claims made by it, we may be sure that it will not be great. The real challenge is not to organise another gathering with even more people in twenty years' time, but to practise what we preach, which is the only way our message its likely to be heard in the years ahead.

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