

# Evangelicals, Ecumenism and Unity: A Case Study of the Evangelical Alliance<sup>1</sup>

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## Christian Unity and the Development of the Alliance

When it was formed in 1846 the World's Evangelical Alliance adopted as its motto '*Unum Corpus Sumus in Christo*': 'We are One Body in Christ'. Defined as it was by a shared Basis of Faith, the Alliance's unity was undoubtedly conceived in doctrinal and spiritual rather than ecclesiastical terms. Even so, the choice of bodily metaphor was hardly accidental: notwithstanding the various overseas mission agencies which had emerged over the preceding 50 years or so, the British Organization of the Alliance effectively became the first home ecumenical association. Whilst studiously avoiding any implication that it might challenge the loyalty of its constituent members to their respective denominations, it brought Anglican and Free Church Christians together in an unprecedented way. It did this first, by offering a structured, visible expression of unity which outlasted more ad hoc pan-evangelical protests against the perceived incursions of Rome and Anglo-Catholicism into British culture.<sup>2</sup> It then consolidated this unity in an even more tangible manner by embarking on a programme of 'common action', in which the London office of the Alliance co-ordinated a series of high-profile international campaigns for religious liberties.<sup>3</sup>

While this commitment to both visible and invisible unity fuelled the Alliance in its first few decades, the twentieth century brought unexpected reversals. Adrian Hastings suggests in his *History of English Christianity* that by the 1920s, whether in 'vigour of leadership, intellectual capacity, or largeness of heart', English evangelicals had never been weaker.<sup>4</sup> This trend was reflected in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, albeit to a lesser degree. Certainly, the British Alliance had dwindled significantly in influence by this point. The reasons for the decline are complex, but are due in no small measure to the rise of theological liberalism, and to the related scientific challenges of evolution and the new cosmology, each of which prompted Evangelicals to turn inward, and to neglect their previous levels of engagement with the wider church, and with society in general.<sup>5</sup>

Another significant development which affected evangelical unity and confidence during the early part of the twentieth century, however, was the rise of the modern ecumenical movement. This movement is widely regarded as having had its birth at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910.<sup>6</sup> Attended by some 1200 missionaries and church

leaders, the Edinburgh meeting built on previous world missionary conferences and was also deeply influenced by the Student Volunteer Movement and the increasingly powerful Student Christian Movement. Expressing the mounting aspirations of these bodies for more substantial union between the churches, the Edinburgh Conference's Commission on Co-operation and Unity ventured to suggest the goal 'that we should be one in a visible fellowship'. The World Missionary Conference Continuation Committee pursued this vision vigorously in the years which followed.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the Alliance was driven to reconsider the nature of unity, and its implications for the work of mission.

Four months after the Edinburgh conference, in October 1910, the Alliance held its annual meetings in Dublin. The theme of the meetings was 'The Problem of Unity', and Prebendary H.W. Webb-Peploe, vicar of St Paul's, Onslow Square, a noted Anglican evangelical and (from 1883) an Alliance honorary secretary, delivered one of the addresses. In the 1870s Webb-Peploe had been profoundly affected by teaching about the deeper spiritual life and had become a leader of the annual Keswick Convention, which attracted about 5,000 people each year and advocated consecration and personal holiness.<sup>8</sup> A prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral, Webb-Peploe was a dominant figure among evangelical Anglican clergyman in London. He spoke of himself as a strict churchman,<sup>9</sup> but he was also committed to the pan-denominationalism of Keswick's motto – 'All One in Christ Jesus'. Webb-Peploe brought the Keswick message about the power of the Holy Spirit to Alliance gatherings, and at the October 1910 Alliance meetings he argued in typical Keswick fashion for deeper spiritual unity.<sup>10</sup> The 1911 Annual Report of the Alliance showed that the Alliance Council was not uncritical of Edinburgh 1910, but on the other hand saw it as an 'evident outcome of the early and later labours of the Alliance in the promotion of Christian Union and co-operation'.<sup>11</sup>

Doubts about the emphasis of Edinburgh 1910 were most prominently expressed by Bishop Evelyn Hassé of the Moravian Church in Great Britain. Hassé believed that the Alliance had been more effective in fostering unity than had Edinburgh. He commented in *Evangelical Christendom* in 1911 that delegates had come to Edinburgh 'in ignorance of the fact that there had been preliminary negotiations resulting in understandings and concessions and limitations which had never found public expression, but which, if they had been made known, would have called forth protests from many quarters'.<sup>12</sup> The reference here was to the fact that Edinburgh was inclusive, extending beyond evangelical Protestants, and that in order to secure the presence of Anglo-Catholics it had been necessary to exclude from discussions at Edinburgh any allusion to Protestant missions

working in Catholic countries in Europe and Latin America. This troubled many evangelicals deeply. G. Campbell Morgan, minister of Westminster Chapel, London, said at the annual meeting of the British Alliance in May 1913 that he lamented the deliberate exclusion of mission in Latin America from consideration at Edinburgh. He saw this as 'a very significant and depressing sign of the time'.<sup>13</sup> From the evangelical point of view, it was also unsatisfactory that matters of doctrinal belief were not discussed at Edinburgh. This deficiency was later remedied through the Faith and Order Movement, which was formed in 1927 as a direct result of the Edinburgh conference.<sup>14</sup> Even so, the uncertainties of the Alliance about the legacy of the Edinburgh conference persisted through the 1930s and came to a head with the formation of the British Council of Churches (BCC) in 1942, and more acutely still, with the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948.

In 1946 the Alliance stated that it had nothing but goodwill for the British Council of Churches and the proposed WCC, describing them as potentially 'great and representative bodies'. Still, however, it had stressed that it was itself distinctively evangelical.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, a new wave of younger post-war leaders within the Alliance were pressing for an even more positive approach. Among these, Hugh Gough was prominent. Then rural dean of Islington, he would go on to serve as bishop of Barking and Archbishop of Sydney. Anticipating the impact of the WCC, Gough wrote in early 1947: 'It is essential that we should develop a deeper sense of our unity as members of Christ's holy catholic church. Evangelical individualism has obscured the corporate spirit and our church life has been sorely impoverished thereby.' Hence, when the Alliance chose to reject a request from WCC representatives to merge its week of prayer with theirs, Gough chose to reiterate the traditional Alliance theme of catholicity, and was keen to stress that although it was an association of individuals, it did not encourage individualism. The Council of the Alliance followed Gough's article later in the same year with an 'Evangelical Charter'. Some saw this as a statement of opposition to the World Council of Churches, but Gough denied the charge. Instead, he insisted, 'The World Council of Churches is out to achieve something which does not yet exist and that is the union of churches. We in the Alliance are out to demonstrate and foster something which already exists and that is the unity of the Spirit amongst all Christian people.'<sup>16</sup> As the Dutch scholar, J.B.A. Kessler, notes in his short study of the Alliance's history, the EA in 1846 was actually trying to achieve something that did not yet exist, just as much as was the WCC in 1948. Both were trying to *manifest* unity rather than merely *recognising* it. Having said this, their means to this end were undeniably different.<sup>17</sup> In fact, closer examination shows that these distinct approaches to unity led to enormous tensions.

## The Alliance and the World Council of Churches

The Alliance's Evangelical Charter of 1947 stated:

As the World's Evangelical Alliance is an alliance not of churches, nor of church societies, but of individual

Christians, its relationship with the World Council of Churches is clear. The World Council of Churches may (as some believe) have come into existence partly as a result of the prayers and witness of the World's Evangelical Alliance, but its objective is entirely different. The Alliance advocates the close unity of Protestantism and works for a more real fellowship between all evangelicals. It believes that here in real spiritual unity (a unity which already exists) and not in an outward uniformity (a uniformity which would have to be imposed against insuperable difficulties) lies the hope of revival and Christian victory.<sup>18</sup>

The first point of distinctiveness, that the Alliance was not an alliance of churches or church societies, was one that would not continue. By the 1960s, churches would be invited to join. Secondly, it is difficult to see the clear difference between the Alliance's advocacy of 'the close unity of Protestantism' and the early goals of the WCC. Although the ultimate objective of the WCC was broader Christian unity, it was essentially a Protestant initiative and brought together Protestants. Finally, there is a supposed contrast between spiritual unity and outward uniformity. In fact, the WCC never stated that it was in favour of uniformity, and the early leadership of the WCC was certainly committed to spiritual as well as organizational oneness.

Although the issue of ecumenism would become highly contentious among evangelicals, this was not so obvious in 1948. Kessler records that at least two (unnamed) members of the British Alliance were present at the 1948 conference in Amsterdam at which the World Council of Churches was formed.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in January of the following year this comment appeared in an *Evangelical Christendom* editorial:

True evangelicals assure us that these dangers – 1) false union outside of the truth, 2) reunion with Rome, 3) formation of a super-church – have so far been successfully avoided. The Council (of the Alliance), therefore feel that the right policy for evangelicals is to avoid opposition to the World Council, but courageously to point out wrong tendencies and carefully and prayerfully to foster that unity of the Spirit, which already exists between all true believers and is something infinitely deeper than the outward form of union which the World Council has brought into being. If evangelicals oppose the World Council of Churches or abstain from co-operating with it, the Council may well be captured by the Modernists or the Ritualists, but if we play our part we may be an instrument in the hand of God for reviving the churches.<sup>20</sup>

Kessler regards this pronouncement as ambiguous. It could mean, he suggests, that evangelicals were urged to co-operate with other Christians in order that the World Council's attempts at forming an organizational unity might by God's grace be so deepened and extended as to result in a true unity of the Spirit. However, it could also mean that evangelicals were expected to inject into the World Council's basically man-made and unessential unity the real unity that existed only between true believers.<sup>21</sup> Frankly, it is harder to draw the second inference than the first, although it was hardly surprising that an Alliance pronouncement would give priority to the unity of the Spirit. Certainly, Hugh

Gough's conviction in 1948 was that the Alliance could provide spiritual inspiration for the WCC and should continue to adopt a middle, or bridge, position.<sup>22</sup>

In the autumn of 1949 the Alliance Council looked again at the question of its attitude towards the WCC, but did not feel able to give full support to the new movement. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Alliance's leadership did not wish to be seen as being in conflict with the WCC, and the Council resolved that 'the Alliance, for the time being therefore, will adopt an attitude of benevolent neutrality'.<sup>23</sup> In the meantime, steps were being taken by evangelicals in the USA to set up a world evangelical fellowship.<sup>24</sup> The Alliance of the post war period in Britain still carried the cumbersome and confusing title 'The World's Evangelical Alliance (British Organisation)' – a hangover from disputes among representatives from different countries at the original international conference about how much of the new body's work should be channelled through London, and how much devolved to national and regional offices. There was a feeling, as the Alliance Council acknowledged in late 1949, 'that the Alliance is too much centred on Britain'. Evangelicals in some countries, however, understandably misunderstood the words 'British Organisation' as meaning that the entire Alliance was British-run. 'This', the Alliance Council conceded, 'tends to hold them back from closer co-operation with the parent body and in some cases has led to a national organization being formed with the same aims and objects as the Evangelical Alliance, but adopting another name in order to keep its national identity'.<sup>25</sup> There was pressure on the British Organisation, therefore, to foster trans-national co-operation. From the British perspective, the World Council of Churches was thus undoubtedly a stimulus to thinking about wider evangelical unity, even if moves towards a world fellowship were not made simply in response to the creation of the WCC.

In North America, however, there was a significant new evangelical movement dedicated to promoting evangelical unity. The American branch of the Evangelical Alliance had officially ceased to function in 1944 and a fresh body, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), had been formed.<sup>26</sup> This was to affect British evangelicals significantly. In 1946 Martyn Lloyd-Jones called a meeting at Westminster Chapel at which Harold J. Ockenga, the President of the NAE, was the speaker. This provoked Alliance fears that the NAE might be about to create a new pan-evangelical organization in Europe. Hugh Gough went to see Lloyd-Jones about this, but he was non-committal about the American plans.<sup>27</sup> Lloyd-Jones did, however, persuade the NAE to consult Alliance leaders. It was understood that the NAE would wish to proceed on narrower and more exclusive lines than the Alliance.<sup>28</sup> In 1948 a meeting about possible world links was held in Clarens, Switzerland, and in preparation for that meeting Gough and the Alliance's General Secretary, Henry Martyn Gooch, met in London with Lloyd-Jones and E.J. Poole-Connor, who in 1922 had founded the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC). Differences over policies of evangelical co-operation and the ecumenical dimension became increasingly apparent in the summer of 1948.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the year the FIEC had made it plain that it could not condone the way in which the Alliance invited to its platform those whose views were, from the

FIEC standpoint, divergent from the Alliance's doctrinal basis.<sup>30</sup> This was a foretaste of divisions to come.

## The British Alliance and the World Evangelical Fellowship

Given the differences of opinion in Britain, American interest in the creation of a pan-evangelical body became crucial. It was the outlook of the Americans, who were generally critical of the wider Christian scene in America outside evangelicalism, which would have a major influence on discussions in the period 1948 to 1951. At the preliminary discussions in Clarens, the view was expressed that the weakness of the World Council of Churches was that it did not in any way bind the members of the participating churches to the Basis of Faith agreed upon by the delegates. From 7 to 10 March 1950 an international delegate conference was held at Hildenborough Hall in Kent, the centre that had been set up by the British evangelist, Tom Rees. Those who attended included representatives from twelve countries in Europe, including the British Evangelical Alliance organization. There were also delegates from the NAE in America. Lt. Gen. Sir Arthur Smith, Chairman of the British Alliance, was elected Chairman of a new international committee and, as in 1846, it was agreed that a 'basis of belief would be the foundation stone' while each affiliated group would have freedom in 'the application of this basis to their national situation'.<sup>31</sup>

More concrete steps towards a world fellowship were taken at a conference at Gordon Divinity School in Boston, USA, from 4–8 September 1950, at which it was recommended to set up an International Association of Evangelicals. The agreed purpose of this body was: (i) to witness to evangelical and historic Christianity; (ii) to encourage and promote fellowship among evangelicals; (iii) to stimulate evangelism and promote united evangelical action in all spheres.

This flurry of activity generated further interest. The international committee formed at Hildenborough Hall met in January 1951 at Woudschoten, a student conference centre on the outskirts of Zeist, near Utrecht, in the Netherlands. It was recommended that the name of the new body should be the World Evangelical Fellowship. The committee invited evangelicals from around the world to an international convention at Woudschoten in August 1951. Among the speakers was John R.W. Stott, Rector of All Souls' Church, Langham Place, London, who expounded the theme of 'The Holy Spirit and the Church'. The name World Evangelical Fellowship was approved. Because some who were present were wary of joining a group opposed to ecumenical endeavour, it was stated that the Fellowship was 'not a council of churches, nor is it in opposition to any other international or interdenominational organization. It seeks to work and witness in a constructive manner, ever maintaining the truth in love'.<sup>32</sup> There were still fears, however – particularly among evangelicals in Europe, with whom British Alliance leaders had traditionally enjoyed good relationships – that the body might 'become ultra-fundamentalist and adopt a belligerent attitude towards the ecumenical movement'.<sup>33</sup>

Although most delegates affirmed the need for a world-

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wide fellowship of evangelicals, when the proposal to establish the WEF was voted on there was not unanimity. Eleven countries were in favour, but Germany abstained, and France, Denmark, Norway and Sweden opposed it since they wanted the Alliance to continue as before. Indeed, Spain was the only continental European country that joined WEF. One of the main concerns among the Europeans was that the word 'infallible' had been proposed for inclusion in the clause on biblical authority in the WEF's Basis of Faith, whereas it had not appeared in the doctrinal statement adopted by the original World's Evangelical Alliance in 1846, and used hitherto by national Alliances. For those who resisted it, this wording implied too mechanical an understanding of biblical inspiration. There were also concerns that co-operation with those who might not hold to the Basis of Faith in its entirety was being prohibited. These objections led to some hesitation among representatives of the British Alliance, but they decided to join nonetheless.<sup>34</sup> A constitution was drawn up consisting of the following five points:

1. Belief without mental reservations in the basic doctrines of our faith as expressed in the statement of faith.
2. Acceptance into active co-operation with us of all who hold these doctrines and give evidence of loyalty to them, though there may be differences in conviction on other points of doctrine or of ecclesiastical policy.
3. Obedience to the commands of Scripture by renunciation of all co-operation with unbelief in or apostasy from these doctrines.
4. Recognition of the complete autonomy of every constituent national or area-wide body within the Fellowship.
5. Dedication to a programme of mutual helpfulness in the propagation of the gospel, the defence of Christian liberties and the attainment of objectives which are of common concern.

As well as the creation of a world evangelical fellowship, evangelical division also resulted from the Woudschoten conference. In 1952 representatives from several European countries met in Germany and established their own separate European Evangelical Alliance. The breach with WEF would not be healed until 1968, up to which point WEF was able to make little headway in Europe. The stance of WEF towards the World Council of Churches also created divisions of opinion. In 1962 it held a conference in Hong Kong, at which the delegates from the United States suggested that article 3 of the constitution, which already spoke about the limits of co-operation, should read: 'Obedience to the commands of Scripture by avoidance of any association which would compromise its loyalty to the statement of faith'. Many of the delegates present, however, felt that to adopt wording like this would mean that WEF would find itself in open conflict with the World Council Churches. This may have been the thinking of some who proposed the amendment, but after considerable discussion the proposal to change article 3 was dropped.<sup>35</sup> The neutrality of the British Alliance towards ecumenism was being maintained, but the conflict being played out on the world stage would soon become public in Britain.

The anti-ecumenical convictions fostered by some British evangelicals after the Second World War found institutional expression in the establishment in 1952 of the British Evangelical Council (BEC), then known as the British Committee for Common Evangelical Action. This was formed in St Columba's Free Church in Edinburgh. Its founders were G.N.M. Collins and Murdoch Macrae of the Free Church of Scotland and T.H. Bendor Samuel and E.J. Poole-Connor of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. W.J. Grier of the Irish Evangelical Church, which became the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ireland, also later joined the BEC. Strong elements within the BEC had separation from larger denominations at the core of their identity. The Free Church of Scotland and the FIEC gave official backing to the BEC. Carl McIntyre, the leader of the International Council of Christian Churches – a fiercely anti-ecumenical organization based in North America – hoped that a British branch of the ICCC could be formed. Indeed, it was a conference held by McIntyre in Edinburgh in 1952 that stimulated the Free Church of Scotland to approach the FIEC about forming a new joint fellowship of evangelical churches. However, the BEC did not wish to be an appendage of an American body, aspects of whose spirit and stance its own leaders did not find acceptable.<sup>36</sup>

At this stage, the Evangelical Alliance was far more involved in evangelistic endeavour than it was in thinking about ecumenical issues. It was prepared to have dialogue with the British ecumenical body, the British Council of Churches, but this dialogue was focused on issues concerned with evangelism and the role of Billy Graham. In the mid-1950s, there was no reason to suppose that the BEC was going to play a significant part in British evangelicalism. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who would later become a major supporter of the BEC, was quite willing to be associated in the 1950s with the Evangelical Alliance. Lloyd-Jones was the main speaker, for instance, at an Alliance day conference held in 1957 at Westminster Chapel. E.J. Poole-Connor, writing to Lloyd-Jones to thank him for his contribution on that occasion, took exception to the fact that Hugh Gough, who had also spoken, had contemplated co-operation with the World Council of Churches. Gough's efforts to argue for a bridge between evangelicals and the ecumenical movement were dismissed by Poole-Connor as 'the vaguest platitudes'.<sup>37</sup> Although Lloyd-Jones attended a luncheon arranged by the BEC in the Cora Hotel, Bloomsbury, in 1954, he did not join the organization. This may be because he was opposed to para-church organizations, but it is more likely that he was wary of the BEC's relationship with the ICCC. He may also have considered that evangelicals had not had time to reflect on the issues involved in ecumenism.<sup>38</sup>

Such reflection was, however, taking place. In 1959 Gilbert Kirby, as General Secretary of the Alliance, published an article entitled 'Oecumenical Problems'. In it, he wrote: 'It is clear that spiritual unity can and does exist quite apart from ecclesiastical union. The great interdenominational missionary societies, the Keswick Convention, the Children's Special Service Mission, the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, the Evangelical Alliance and a host of kindred societies all bear witness to this fact.' He also referred to 'our sadly divided

evangelical ranks'.<sup>39</sup> The BEC was, at this point, seeking permission from Lloyd-Jones to print one of his sermons on revival, but the BEC had not yet been able to enlist Lloyd-Jones to its cause. The alternative visions of the Alliance and the BEC were, however, to become more evident in the early 1960s. An important assembly of the WCC was held at New Delhi in 1961. Although some evangelicals were present, evangelicals as a whole were seen as being opposed to the ecumenical movement on the grounds that 'Christian unity is invisible' and because the WCC was being viewed by many evangelicals as theologically modernist and set on relations with Roman Catholics.<sup>40</sup> In his report on New Delhi, Kenneth Slack, General Secretary of the BCC, saw that assembly as formulating a conception of unity that 'departs wholly from any idea that Christian unity is a wholly "spiritual" idea'.<sup>41</sup>

Despite all this, the Alliance itself desired a measure of organizational unity. To this end, a 'Union and Communion' statement was prepared by an Alliance theological study group and signed in 1962 by forty evangelical leaders.<sup>42</sup> Here it was clear that the Alliance's stance continued to be an inclusive one, with a plea being made the following year that in view of 'the growing influence of the ecumenical movement, evangelicals should overcome some of their petty differences and unite around the great fundamental verities of the Word of God and give evidence to the world of the spiritual unity that they already have in Christ'.<sup>43</sup> The way in which evangelicals united was more than by affirmation of their spiritual bonds, although at times Kirby appeared not to be sure how visible unity should be expressed. One method was by united celebration of the Lord's Supper. About 3,000 people gathered in the Royal Albert Hall in January 1963 for a united communion service arranged by the Alliance. Ernest Kevan and John Stott preached. Some had told Kirby that to organize such a service was 'irresponsible', and others had expressed misgivings, but after the event the Alliance office had been deluged with letters expressing deep appreciation of the service.<sup>44</sup> It was, from the perspective of the Alliance, a visible demonstration of unity.<sup>45</sup> Both in 1962 and in 1963, Kirby reflected in the Alliance's newsletter *The Evangelical Broadsheet* on the prospects for unity. He recognized that evangelicals were divided in their assessment of the ecumenical movement, but considered that God was pointing Christian people towards spiritual unity. Evangelical Christians had been rediscovering the effectiveness of such unity when expressed in positive action. In some areas local Evangelical Fellowships had come into being and, through their agency, Bible Rallies and Conventions had been held. There had been a drawing together of evangelical societies and Bible colleges were by then linked together in the Evangelical Missionary Alliance.

For all the success of the Albert Hall event, other evangelicals were thinking seriously by this time in terms of more thoroughgoing, structural unity. In the period 1963 to 1965 J.I. Packer, who had been deeply involved in the revival of Reformed theology in Britain, served as a member of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission discussing the report *Conversations Between the Church of England and the Methodist Church*. Packer began to contemplate a comprehensive state church that excluded liberals but included Anglo-Catholics. Lloyd-Jones found this a disappointing development and

stated his belief in the need for more independent evangelical churches.<sup>46</sup> In a parallel development at the Nottingham Faith and Order conference in 1964, 550 delegates from fifteen denominations passed a resolution inviting BCC member churches to work for unity by 1980. For the first time, evangelicals were represented in some strength at such a conference.<sup>47</sup>

Tensions were growing. Kirby, who was more acutely aware of the problems within evangelicalism than almost anyone else, began, in 1962, to plan for a National Evangelical Conference. This was eventually held in 1965. By this stage, Kirby had enabled churches as well as individuals to affiliate to the Alliance and 6,000 evangelical churches were invited to send delegates. 1,155 registrations were received. Anglicans formed the biggest group, with Baptists not far behind, followed by members of FIEC churches. The National Assembly of Evangelicals, as it was called, was held in Church House, Westminster. A number of Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists who attended had begun to question whether their position in their denominations was tenable. For his part, Kirby stated: 'The evangelical is the loyalist in his denomination – our denominations owe their origins to the very things that we hold dear . . . There is good historic evidence for staying in until we are thrown out.'<sup>48</sup> The Assembly decided to set up a representative Commission of nine people to study evangelical attitudes to ecumenism, denominationalism and a possible future united evangelical church.<sup>49</sup> A report was to be prepared by the Commission for the planned 1966 Assembly. Kirby wanted a balanced picture of evangelical views. Undue deference must not, he suggested in July 1966, be given to the right wing or the left wing of evangelicalism.<sup>50</sup>

## 1966: Evangelicals in Disarray

In planning for the 1966 National Assembly of Evangelicals, Gilbert Kirby took a calculated risk by asking Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Stott to play a prominent part in the opening session. What Lloyd-Jones said on that occasion did not surprise Alliance leaders. Indeed, he was asked by the Alliance to state publicly what he had said in private. Lloyd-Jones had put his views to the members of the commission and the members of the commission believed that he should have the opportunity to state his position. According to several commentators at the time and subsequently, Martyn Lloyd-Jones was advocating at the opening public session of the 1966 assembly that evangelicals should leave their denominations if those denominations were 'mixed' – that is, theologically compromised by liberalism.<sup>51</sup> Others, including Lloyd-Jones' biographer Iain Murray, have denied this.<sup>52</sup> If secession was implied at all, however, Lloyd-Jones did not specifically use the term 'separate' or 'secede'. As far as he was concerned, the key issue was the broader one of the doctrine of the church. 'I would dare to suggest tonight', he said to his Alliance audience, 'that we find ourselves in a new situation. And the new situation has very largely been caused by the rising and revival amongst us of what is known as the ecumenical movement, which began in 1910, but has become a pressing problem to us as evangelicals, especially since 1948.'<sup>53</sup> It should be remembered, as Kessler notes, that just

a month beforehand the British Council of Churches had covenanted for organic church union in Great Britain by Easter 1980, and that this may have served to make Lloyd-Jones' statements all the more cutting.<sup>54</sup> Lloyd-Jones did refer to denominations being 'prepared to put everything into the melting pot in order that a new world church might come out of it' and spoke of Methodists and Anglicans, Congregationalists and Presbyterians as 'well on with their negotiations'.<sup>55</sup> As Robert Amess comments, the fact that a 'world church' has never shown any sign of emerging has not lessened the impact that Lloyd-Jones made.<sup>56</sup>

But Lloyd-Jones was not simply being negative. Indeed, he castigated evangelicals for being negative and being 'defensive in their denominational relationships'. On the one hand Lloyd-Jones regarded the position of evangelicals as 'pathetic', 'tragic', and 'serious', especially in view of the ignorance that prevailed among evangelicals about the changing attitudes of Protestants to the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, Lloyd-Jones believed that 'evangelical people have got an opportunity today such as they have never had'. The opportunity, as Lloyd-Jones saw it, was to stop being only an evangelical wing in what he believed would become a 'comprehensive, total, national, territorial church', and instead to 'start afresh' and 'go back to the New Testament'. This kind of call was not new. It had been the vision of the Brethren movement in the nineteenth century. What made this occasion significant was the passionate call issued by Lloyd-Jones for a fellowship or association of evangelical churches, which would be free from what he saw as the compromises entailed in ecumenical or wider denominational involvement, and which instead would express 'evangelical ecumenicity'. It was inconsistent, in Lloyd-Jones' view, for evangelicals to unite with those with whom they agreed only on secondary matters. 'Why is it', he asked, 'that we are so anxious to hold on to our inherited positions?'<sup>57</sup>

As Robert Amess points out, to blame Lloyd-Jones for personally wrecking the serene waters through which evangelicalism seemed to be sailing at the time of the 1966 Assembly would not be just. It cannot be fairly argued, he suggests, that Lloyd-Jones abused the platform he was offered. He had been requested to express his view and he made it clear that he was not saying anything that he had not previously said to the Alliance commission on church unity.<sup>58</sup> Neither was he directly responsible for what followed. John Stott, who was chairing the meeting, brought the evening to a sensational end by adding his own comments. Both history and Scripture, asserted Stott, were against what Lloyd-Jones had said. 'Scripture', Stott continued, 'is against him; the remnant was within the church not outside it. I hope no one will act precipitately.'<sup>59</sup> The outcome of these events is not in dispute. 'One immediate consequence was a deep division both between Anglican evangelicals and many of their non-conformist brethren, but also among non-conformist pastors and churches.'<sup>60</sup> But that meeting did not cause the division. One Baptist writer commented about that evening: 'I went to the Central Hall, that night, disillusioned with the Baptist Union, desiring closer unity with evangelicals.'<sup>61</sup> This kind of comment indicates something of the atmosphere of the times. There were evangelicals who were disillusioned with denominations, even when, as with the Baptist Union, the majority of those who were within a denomination were

evangelical. This disillusionment would lead not only to secessions from denominations but to the emergence of new churches – something that would in turn result in the forming of new denominations.

The 1966 Assembly continued with other business. The report prepared for the assembly referred to the option of 'a united evangelical church on denominational lines'. The commission stated that it had found no widespread support for such a move. Rather, it encouraged 'evangelical churches of varying traditions' to form effective fellowships both locally and nationally.<sup>62</sup> In the debate that followed, points were made on both sides of the argument, with some supportive of secession. Still, a large majority adopted the report of the commission. Positions had, however, publicly polarised and attitudes were palpably hardening. *The Church of England Newspaper*, which represented an inclusive position, dismissed what Lloyd-Jones had said as 'nothing short of hare-brained'.<sup>63</sup> The reporter for *Crusade*, influenced no doubt by Gilbert Kirby's restraint, was content to call the opening session of the assembly 'adult stuff'.<sup>64</sup> Looking back over a decade later, Kirby felt that encouraging Lloyd-Jones to put his case had been 'probably one of my biggest mistakes'.<sup>65</sup> Evangelicals committed to separation from theologically 'mixed' denominations would associate increasingly with the BEC. Morgan Derham, who followed Kirby as the General Secretary of the Alliance, commented gloomily that evangelicals were being pushed to make a choice between denominations and individualistic anarchy.<sup>66</sup>

### *The Aftermath of 1966*

Hopes of conciliation within the evangelical constituency were largely dashed at a packed meeting of the Westminster Fellowship of ministers in November 1966, when Lloyd-Jones made the issues clear. There was, he said, an unmistakable cleavage between those who believed in staying in their denominations and those who saw no purpose in so doing. From now on, he added, he would offer his help only to ministers already out of their denominations or thinking of leaving.<sup>67</sup> The stance taken by Lloyd-Jones gave a huge boost to the FIEC and the BEC. In 1967 Westminster Chapel, which had previously been in the Congregational Union, joined the FIEC, and the numbers at the BEC's 1967 conference mushroomed to 2,700 when Lloyd-Jones spoke. The same year saw the launch of *Evangelical Times*, a monthly 'separatist' newspaper edited by Peter Masters, previously a member of Westminster Chapel. Two main reasons were advanced in favour of its appearance. First, it would meet the need for a means of communication between thousands of churches, missions and assemblies in Britain that were wholly evangelical, self-governing, unaffiliated to denominational bodies and usually strongly opposed to ecumenicity. Secondly, it would serve as a contrast to existing popular Christian journals that adopted a benevolent or at best strictly neutral attitude towards the ecumenical movement.

Meanwhile, Anglican evangelicals were travelling in a different direction. The historic National Evangelical Anglican Congress held at Keele University in April 1967 declared the following:

The initial task for divided Christians is dialogue at all

levels and across all barriers. We desire to enter this ecumenical dialogue fully. We are no longer content to stand apart from those with whom we disagree. We recognize that all who 'confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit (World Council of Churches Basis) have a right to be treated as Christians, and it is on this basis that we wish to talk with them'.<sup>68</sup>

The older evangelical view, that ecclesiology was a 'secondary' matter, was being questioned – not least because of the neo-Puritan movement's emphasis on the church.<sup>69</sup> It was perceived at the time that Keele, with its new stress on the visible church and on wider ecclesiastical involvement, would loom large in the annals of Anglican evangelicalism.<sup>70</sup> The Alliance's position, as a force for evangelical unity, was under threat. Morgan Derham considered that it was essential for the Alliance to find ways of restoring belief in pan-evangelical co-operation. The Alliance attempted to do this by encouraging the formation of regional and local evangelical fellowships, conferences and meetings of ministers. Anglican evangelicals were involved in such events. For instance, one of their leaders, Michael Cole, was prominent at a Northern Alliance Conference in 1967.<sup>71</sup>

These attempts did not, however, placate the separatist wing. At a meeting of the Alliance's Executive Council in October 1967 it was reported that resignations had been received from John Caiger and T.H. Bendor-Samuel, both of whom 'were finding themselves in a difficult position, due to their positions in the Westminster Fellowship and the British Evangelical Council respectively'. At the same meeting considerable discussion took place regarding 'the increasing activity of the separatist movement associated with the BEC'. There had been meetings between Alliance and BEC leaders with the aim of establishing a working relationship,<sup>72</sup> and it was decided by the Alliance Executive Council that it would be good to meet again and to come to an agreement on 'professional etiquette'. It was noted that very few individuals or churches had withdrawn from the Alliance.<sup>73</sup> In the same period Roland Lamb, who had been a Methodist minister, was appointed as part-time secretary to the BEC in order to promote what was at the time a growing movement.

The major figure within the separatist constituency was, however, Lloyd-Jones. Sir Fred Catherwood, Lloyd-Jones' son-in-law and a deacon of Westminster Chapel at the time, speaks of Lloyd-Jones' 'passionate plea for evangelical unity'. He comments on the result of Lloyd-Jones' concerns:

Evangelicals divided instead of uniting. In retrospect it is easy to say that he should have left it there. But the vocal minority, who wanted to translate his plea into a united evangelical church, also wanted him as their leader, and he was identified with them and lost to the evangelical majority.<sup>74</sup>

One result of the October 1966 débâcle and the events that followed was that the separatists were perceived as a single-issue party.<sup>75</sup> It was not obvious to the bulk of evangelicals that the ecumenical movement was as central to the ecclesiastical scene as the separatists seemed to believe.

Alan Gibson, who became the General Secretary of the BEC, wrote in 1988: 'Perhaps that was one weakness of evangelical beliefs in 1966 – they gave more credence to the power of the ecumenical movement than it merited.'<sup>76</sup>

## The Doctrine of the Church and More Recent Developments

Despite the rupture that had taken place in evangelicalism, there were continuing relationships between those who differed on the ecumenical movement. An attempt was made in 1970 to engage in constructive dialogue on the subject through a day conference in London on the 'Doctrine of the Church'. This brought together thirty-four evangelical leaders. The event was held at the Alliance offices, but was not officially sponsored by the Alliance. At a time when evangelical Anglicans were widely thought to have taken on the Keele agenda and to be largely ignoring pan-evangelical concerns, it is significant that twelve Anglican clergy were present, and that they formed the largest denominational group at the conference. Included among them were Raymond Turvey from St George's Church, Leeds, who was a co-chair of the conference, J.I. Packer from Tyndale Hall, Bristol, and Colin Buchanan from St John's College, Nottingham. These three had been invited to speak, but others in attendance included Alan Stibbs from Oak Hill College, London, Michael Saward from the Church Information Office, and R.T. Beckwith and J.W. Wenham from Latimer House, Oxford. It had been hoped to have a residential conference, but the publication in 1970 of the book *Growing into Union*, part-authored by Packer and Buchanan, which espoused evangelical-Anglo-Catholic co-operation, had caused fresh tension within British evangelicalism.<sup>77</sup>

Free Church leaders at the conference were divided between those who were separatist by inclination and those who were open to wider denominational involvement. The Baptists included David Pawson from Guildford, one of the sponsors of the conference, Robert Horn from Horley Baptist Church, who was a speaker, Paul Helm from the University of Liverpool, Graham Harrison from Newport, and Ron Luland from Bedford. Some of these Baptists were within the Reformed constituency. John Doggett represented the Strict Baptists. There were no members of the Methodist, Congregational or Presbyterian denominations present, apart from Iain Murray, an Independent Presbyterian, and D.O. Swann, an Independent Congregationalist. FIEC/independent representatives included Leith Samuel from Above Bar Church, Southampton, who was a co-chair, David Middleton from Surrey Chapel, Norwich, who was a speaker, Michael Buss from Tollington Park Baptist Church, and Alan Gibson, then a pastor in Winchester. Harold Rowdon and H.L. Ellison, both of whom were well known for their Bible College teaching, represented the Brethren, and John Lancaster and Eldon Corsie the Elim Pentecostal denomination. John Laird, the former General Secretary of Scripture Union, was the Chairman. Morgan Derham and Gordon Landreth, past and present General Secretaries of the Alliance, were also in attendance. Landreth acted as secretary to the conference, and it is symbolic of the Alliance's 'benevolently neutral' policy on ecumenical matters at this time that his role was

essentially one of quiet note taking.

The main speakers presented their papers. From the Anglican side, Colin Buchanan argued that *Growing into Union* had not changed the situation among Anglican evangelicals. As had been set out at Keele, they wished to be involved both in Anglican affairs and in relationships with other evangelicals. Packer acknowledged the mistrust and pain that had been caused by the book's publication. He had spent much of his life with Free Church evangelicals and hoped that the conference would result in greater understanding. Regarding the nature of the church, Packer questioned whether apostolic practices were norms for all time. Earlier generations had been divided over this matter. On the ecumenical issue, Packer argued that it was legitimate to talk to people in the ecumenical movement and in the Church of Rome. These were highly complex bodies and it was extremely difficult, in his view, to simplify what was going on within them. Packer saw any approach that put everything in unduly black and white categories as 'sectarian'.<sup>78</sup>

In response, David Middleton said that Free Church evangelicals had hitherto thought that evangelical unity was more important than denominational unity, but the attitude of evangelical Anglicans was throwing doubt on this assumption. He wondered whether the uniqueness of Scripture as the authority for the church had been betrayed in *Growing into Union*. Robert Horn took up the question of episcopacy. It had been thought that evangelical Anglicans regarded episcopacy as of the *bene esse* of the church, but it seemed that the new approach was to regard it as of the *esse* of the church – that is, as intrinsic and indispensable rather than merely preferable. In *Growing into Union* fellowship seemed to be on the basis of the episcopacy rather than the gospel. 'Regarding future relationships among evangelicals', said Horn, 'church issues could not be isolated and all interdenominational activity was affected by the present tensions, including the work of Societies like Scripture Union, I.V.F., etc'. He asked how evangelical Anglicans related their position to these societies and whether they had faced the implications of the new lack of consensus among British evangelicals.<sup>79</sup>

Both Buchanan and Packer responded to these statements. Buchanan accepted that there were different views of the doctrine of the church among evangelicals – hence the conference. He asked Free Church evangelicals to accept the integrity of their Anglican brethren. He added later that the two Anglo-Catholics they had worked with, Graham Leonard and Eric Mascall, were serious about sharing real theological concerns. Packer asserted that it was wrong to say that *Growing into Union* placed Scripture and tradition on an equal footing. Scripture must test tradition. On the subject of church order, episcopacy had been defended in *Growing into Union* as a 'meaningful sign' of the identity of the church. Confession of the faith and the sacraments were also signs. Finally, he acknowledged that there were omissions in *Growing into Union*. The way of conversion had not been spelled out. Justification by faith had also received a barely adequate treatment.<sup>80</sup>

The ecumenical issue became a focus in subsequent discussion. Some who considered ecumenical involvement to be a mistake believed that through ecumenical discussions in which evangelicals took part evangelical orthodoxy was

being diluted. Leith Samuel said he had hoped that Anglican evangelicals would 'stand together with all evangelicals when the question of the church was in the melting pot', but that now they 'were looking the other way'. H.L. Ellison took the view that there were not two standpoints, Anglican and Free Church, but three. The third he believed was that of the radical reformation. This might have seemed to complicate matters further. Despite this, the conference members at least agreed to suggest to their respective bodies that a small working group should go on discussing the issues. More specifically, it was proposed that Gordon Landreth should discuss this with Roland Lamb so that future initiatives should, if possible, have the co-operation of the BEC.<sup>81</sup> When they came to consider this proposal, however, the Executive Council of the BEC told Landreth that it did not see the EA as an appropriate group to mediate between those evangelicals taking opposite views on ecumenism since it was an involved party.<sup>82</sup> This conference illustrated that at the beginning of the 1970s deep feelings of suspicion and of distrust, as well as genuine doctrinal differences, had emerged among British evangelicals on the issue of ecumenism. However, while the inclusive vision of the Alliance had suffered a severe blow, it was not dead. Indeed, as the 1970s progressed, mainstream evangelicals, and a growing charismatic evangelical constituency, would see the separatists somewhat marginalized. After the death of Lloyd-Jones in 1981, these separatists would lack a leader or leaders of the stature they needed. Separatists themselves have tended to agree with this analysis: 'One obvious difference between 1966 and 1996', wrote Geoffrey Thomas, 'is the figure of Dr Lloyd-Jones . . . Our greatest weakness is a lack of an awakening ministry in the nation.'<sup>83</sup>

In the meantime, evangelicals within most of the historic denominations went on to see their own profile increase, while the Alliance gradually recovered from the crisis of 1966 to become a more inclusive and socially engaged body. While continuing to eschew formal membership of the BCC and the various 'Churches Together' networks that superseded it, it broadened to embrace emerging Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, considerably increasing its membership, its political clout and its recognition in the wider church community through the 1980s and '90s.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, the ecumenical movement itself significantly reassessed its priorities following various failed attempts at structural unity and covenantal partnership between the denominations.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that the more decentralised model of unity represented by the 'ecumenical instruments' which now pertain in the UK bears more than a passing resemblance to that formulated by the Evangelical Alliance at its inauguration 158 years ago. This does not mean, of course, that serious theological divisions will not remain within and beyond evangelicalism over how God's people might be one. But it does suggest that the practical experience of the Alliance in seeking to maintain unity and truth through this period bears valuable lessons not only for evangelicals themselves, but for the life of the church as a whole.

## Notes

- 1 Much of the material which appears here is adapted, updated and applied from various sections of Ian Randall & David



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  - 19 Kessler, *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance*, 92.
  - 20 *Evangelical Christendom*, January-March 1949, 1.
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  - 23 'The New Alliance', *Evangelical Christendom*, October-December 1949, 86.
  - 24 For more about the origins of the WEF see David M. Howard, *The Dream that Would Not Die: The Birth and Growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1846-96* (Wheaton/Exeter: World Evangelical Fellowship/Paternoster Press, 1986).
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  - 27 EA Executive Council Minutes, 25 April 1946; 25 July 1946.
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  - 56 R. Amess, 'Evangelicals and the Ecumenical Movement' (unpublished M.Phil Thesis, Open University, 1998), 154. I am indebted to the thesis by Robert Amess in this section.
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# Where is the Love? Clarity and Charity in Evangelical Relationships

*John Woods*

**KEYWORDS:** unity, evangelical essentials, Apostles' Creed, Evangelical Alliance, biblical truth, joyfulness, courtesy, differences, Jerusalem Council

## Finding Common Ground among Evangelicals

Evangelicals have often handled their differences by appealing to the dictum: 'In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity.'<sup>1</sup> Peter Meiderlin arguably borrowed this sentiment from Augustine of Hippo, and a wide range of people from Richard Baxter to George Bush has used it since. It is suggested that Meiderlin was moved to coin his motto in the 1620s as a result of a dream. In the dream he sees a godly theologian in a white robe, sitting reading the Scriptures:

All of a sudden Christ appears to him as the victor over death and devil and warns him of an impending danger and admonishes him to be very vigilant. Then Christ vanishes and the Devil appears in the form of a blinding light, moonlight to be exact, and claims to have been sent on a mission from God. He states that in this final age the Church needs to be protected from all heresy and apostasy of any kind and God's elect have the duty to safeguard and keep pure the doctrinal truths they inherited. The devil then alleges that God has authorized him to found a new order of these doctrinally pure elect, some sort of a doctrinal heritage coven. Those who join will bind themselves to an oath of strictest observance to these doctrines. The devil then extends to our devout theologian the invitation to join this militant fellowship for his own eternal welfare. Our theologian thinks about what he has just heard and decides to bring it in prayer before God, upon which

the devil immediately vanishes and Christ reappears. Christ tenderly raises the trembling Christian up, comforts him most kindly, and before he departs admonishes him to remain loyal only to the Word of God in simplicity and humility of heart.<sup>2</sup>

This dream became for Meiderlin a rallying call to work for unity in the truth.

Perhaps the idea that the 'devil is in the detail' of theology is somewhat overdone, but there is a point here that is worth pondering. The more dense and specific our statements of faith, the narrower the range of Evangelicals who will be likely to affirm them.

John Calvin, whom no one could accuse of lacking theological clarity, is clear about the need to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials in theology. He states that 'not all the articles of the true doctrine are of the same sort', and adds that 'Some are so necessary to know they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion'.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin is able and willing to fight bravely for these necessary articles of faith, but sees that not all issues fall into this category. In this respect, he suggests that we should apply Paul's directive: 'All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you' (Philp. 3:15). On the basis of this text, Calvin asks the rhetorical question: 'Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians?'<sup>4</sup> And he assumes that our answer will be Yes. Calvin reminds us that we must not be too hasty in dividing on issues that should never divide evangelicals. This does not, however, remove the need to seek to understand what is true: 'First and foremost', he writes, 'we should agree on all points.' Yet he adds to this aspiration a stark dose of realism: