

Editorial

Mark Elliott

A paradox:

Of the making of books there is no end (Ecclesiastes 12:12); but not all the books in the world could contain all that Jesus did (John 21:24.) There is so much in print, and so little time to read it all. Because words are so common they should be valued more precious, and not wasted.

We cannot join in all conversations and dialogues. We have to discern, with God's help, which few are truly vital—usually those which will keep our school, our church, and our families flourishing in the present. We feel we do not have the time or the energy to 'save Europe' or speak to its soul. But is there not a place for presenting our best local endeavours? It need not be about pretending to take an interest in 'Europe' or say, in French evangelical theology when one is a Bulgarian. Like those who desire prayer, we can showcase our home situation, our local theology with all its strengths and weaknesses.

For this reason Paternoster (the publisher of this journal!) is to be congratulated for taking local Scottish theology seriously. I have recently read three books from Paternoster: on John McLeod Campbell, Thomas Erskine, and George Adam Smith respectively: three figures from the nineteenth (and in Smith's case into the twentieth) century who were not without controversy in their times. Their teaching may have left much to be desired in places, yet they believed in the gospel, were Christ-centred, seeing the need for personal, biblical faith. All three sought to combine critical questioning of received ways of biblical interpretation with commitment to their Lord in his two natures. The perfect obedience of Christ included a penitence on which believers should base their own penitence. 'He [Campbell] proclaimed a God whose love brings about atonement, rather than a God who needed an act of atonement to enable him to be loving and merciful.' (Peter K Stevenson, *God in our nature: the incarnational theology of John McLeod Campbell*, [2004], 110) and in Christ God assumed fallen human nature but overpowered its impurity with his purity. Campbell had faith that

the bible could be read according to its historical context and a *richer* Christocentrism emerge.

We do not want to treat such men as heroes: Erskine was sorrowful when he realised that the views of Renan on Christ as a moral teacher may have been encouraged by the likes of his, Erskine's own emphasis on Christ as an ideal. Erskine's incarnational soteriology with its echoes of that of William Law meant that there was Revelation in the gospel (so, D. Horrocks, *Laws of the Spiritual Order: Innovation and Reconstruction in the Soteriology of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen*, 2004), although as a Romantic evangelical he preferred to speak of Scriptures as 'inspired'. Smith, according to Iain D. Campbell's *Fixing the Indemnity: the life and work of Sir George Adam Smith (1856-1942)* (2004) believed that historical criticism, if used responsibly, could open up the religion and faith of Israel, personalised in the agonies of Jeremiah's soul as a type of Christ, to refresh and inspire modern people. Perhaps through considering their successes and failures we can be enabled to see the shape of true evangelical faith.

Now someone reading this who is not from Scotland and who has no real interest in learning more might be justified in saying: 'so what?' But there is something to be said for taking an interest in that which has no direct relevance to us. Like Jesus and the interruptions to his mission, like the very fact that prayer is not always about asking for the most obvious things pressing upon us, now, but is for interceding for others by going behind the visible to the principalities and powers, the influences, the genealogies which account for the difficulties and opportunities facing our brothers and sisters. Mission means taking an interest in the oddest of places at times.

And of course it is not as though what Scottish Christian theologians faced was so far different from what those from other European countries were. The names and the places and the movements may be different, but we need to learn from each other's ways of. I was excited to find a book with the title *Theologie de l'Europe de sud* (C. Théo-

bald (éd.), although I was eventually disappointed due to its lack of theological description and judgement. And a distance across the centuries should not put us off. The Nineteenth Century disputes of religion versus science are being played out with perhaps more polarisation of views and intensity than 150 years ago when Darwin's views began to be noticed. Richard Dawkins continues to proclaim that science and religious faith cannot mix,

and religious fundamentalists agree with him.

One plea: that when we those of us meet, let us say, in Prague in early August this year, let us bring ourselves, our traditions and our present burdens, whatever excites us and concerns us. And then to spend some of the time communicating this, some time listening to others as they do so, and as much of the time as possible listening for and to the Word of God.

CONFERENCE

Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians

Reconciliation

Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions

FEET Biennial Conference

4.-8. August 2006

Prague, Czech Republic, IBTS-Konferenzzentrum

Further Information from:

Prof. Henri Blocher (Chairman)
60bis bd de Strasbourg, 94130
Nogent-sur-Marne, France
TF +33 1-4877 8693
henri.blocher@free.fr,
Henri.A.Blocher@wheaton.edu

Gert F. Hain (Treasurer)
Karl-Broll-Strasse 7, 35619
Braunfels
Germany
+49 6442-5218 (private)
+49 641-9526251 (business)
Fax: +49 641 95262712
kasse@afet.de

Prof. Christoph Stenschke (Secretary)
Olper Str. 10, 51702 Bergneustadt
Germany
+49 2261-914585
CStenschke@t-online.de