

Editorial

Mark Elliott

Those who have good skills of observation will notice that an article which appeared in the last number is re-printed in this: Philip Ziegler on Kierkegaard, but this time with end-notes in place. The editor of a journal should not allow footnotes to disappear when he converts a file from one format to another, but it happens. We are called to high standards, for the sake of our professional standing, but also for the sake of the Gospel. Yet these are ideals, and take practice to make us consistent in excellence of life. Of course along with this goes a readiness to give others and ourselves a second chance, to be 'generous' in our orthodoxy, as one recent American movement would say. Two essays in this volume speak of the generous provisions in the two testaments by the Lord God for too often ungrateful people. Both show how God's provision of his sacrifice is the heart of the matter of biblical faith. The other essay – on love and self-offering as an approximation to faith – immediately and obviously raises evangelical Protestant suspicions about the notion of 'incipient faith'. One could perhaps allow a NT missiological investigation of the subject and conclude that there are shades of conversion, as taught by Jesus and the centurion, Peter and Cornelius, and of course in recent times, by the Church Growth Movement, although there will be more room for the stirring activity of the Holy Spirit than for the Spirit in creation.

Where evangelicals are known for their generosity then they are known for a position which is far from defensive but which is secure in the knowledge of the resources of the gospel message and the Holy Spirit's guidance and wisdom for life. Often when non-Christian people are asked what is unattractive about the church, it is about the coldness of suspicion, of a lack of forgiveness, of feuds continued, of the message of the gospel of forgiveness neglected in favour of well, debates about how to read Genesis 1-3, or Rom 5. It is not that these matters are unimportant – they are foundational, but too often there is a sort of preference to ignore one's opponent than to seek to challenge, discuss

and pray together. In this global village, it can be easier to feel we belong to like-minded people on the other side of the world who agree with us on one point of doctrine than with flesh-and-blood neighbours among churches and families.

It is in part a question of identity. Is it in the Lord or in certain badges or markers of groupings? It would be very pleasing if our evangelical distinctives could include a sharpness in our message, a richness of biblical thought in our discourse, a forgiving and gracious spirit. Our theology will need to be in touch with pastoral issues as well as informed for the battle of minds to be 'taken captive for Christ'. 'Winning hearts and minds' is not going to happen if evangelical theology completely renounces the issues which seem 'trendy' – Jesus and non-Christian religions, faith and ethics, deconstruction and biblical theology, acceptable modes of spirituality. Of course one should not be running after the world's agenda and the old themes should never be ignored: Christology, justification, original sin – but they should be valued as inspiration-filled places (loci) to stand from which we can engage with the 'newer' questions.

We will also want to emphasise the fact that we live in a European, and even a world- community of ideas and doctrines. One problem with the hegemony of English is that, despite English allowing a certain amount of communication across nations, there is a distinction between what we read and write for our mother-tongue audience and a less high-quality summary of these ideas in English. The result can be superficial, as non-native English speaking theologians do not improve or "raise their game" in order to communicate internationally, while English native speakers assume that everyone from other countries is most interested in the kind of things which top American publishers promote. The pull of the Atlantic is great, but the reverse matters. Even of our conferences are going to be in English, that is no reason to allow a British-American agenda to drive what European Evangelicals talk about in public with each other across the national boundaries.

But, to return to the question of the limits of evangelical doctrine concerning a new or at least re-newed question of 'other faiths'. One would want to spend a little more time on the witness of Scripture on this matter, and perhaps also on how the Church through the ages has understood the faith and the status of those who have not explicitly expressed their faith in Christ. To speculate on just which criteria the Lord might use to judge the hearts of those who have not confessed Christ during their lifetime might well be in danger of

pushing beyond the 'no entry' sign of Romans 9:20. Yet speculation is one way of sketching out just what might be legitimately inferred from the voices and the silences of Scripture. Some may feel that this article goes too far and I would very much welcome and invite the expression of other views which might complement as well as challenge it, but overall enrich our thinking and protect it from being over-liberal and over-conservative, remembering that Jesus and Paul were neither.

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William A. Ford studied at Oxford before completing his doctorate at Durham University

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Nicholas P. Lunn is a Senior Translation Consultant with Wycliffe Bible Translators

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