0960–2720

Editorial

Stephen P. Dray

I recently had a conversation with an older colleague who is a senior and respected figure in European evangelicalism. He complained to me that his experience of evangelicalism in Europe is that it is run by oligarchies who often use their power-bases to bully, crush and dictate; often displaying scant evidence of integrity and rarely, if ever, acting in line with truth or righteousness. Basically, one might conclude, significant areas of European (even global) evangelicalism are sick unto death.

These comments were made by someone whom I regard as among the most gracious and generous-minded people I know; they cannot, therefore, be dismissed as the words of a bitter or cantankerous spirit. Moreover, they have been echoed in personal experience and the testimony of other internationally-respected leaders. Briefly, then, I want to explore the way these oligarchies manifest themselves and what implications might follow for European evangelical theologians.

Evangelical institutions are, frequently and almost inevitably, incestuous. Those who become the 'in' people are, often, dictated through the network of existing known contacts and friends. In and of itself, there is nothing sinister about this if it is undertaken by individuals and groups who are acting with integrity. Working with the 'devil' you know is often better than with the one you do not. However, it can become more sinister. I recently had my attention drawn to the fact that a large regional association of a British denomination had appointed to the central council of the denomination a young man in the first year of his pastorate. Many other potential and highly experienced and (at least) equally gifted candidates existed for this vacancy... but the young man's father held a senior executive role at the 'centre'. It was not difficult to detect the start of a fast-track process to senior position, irrespective of gifting or track-record. Simply the family and face fitted.

Such oligarchies then have a habit of using structures to ensure power inheres with them and to use every conceivable method to ensure others are knocked into line or removed. Secrecy and a lack of transparency is a frequent accompaniment. I have in mind an individual who was met by a representative of a larger body, together with an intimidating 'heavy', of a large European evangelical grouping who are notorious for late and disruptive arrival at meetings and another, similarly large national denomination who seek to control the rest of Europe by dint of their considerable 'weight' and sense of gravitas... and will readily resort to lies if it suits. I think of a national Church who are marginalised and put under pressure by others on grounds of national politics. I recall the individual who was removed from an evangelical seminary for whistle-blowing on the grounds of expediency rather than justice and truth. Then there are the immoral invented structures and procedures that are devised to protect the centre and to dispose of those whose prophetic voices are uncongenial to the power-brokers or whose words threaten a breakdown of the status quo. A recent situation known to me was described as Stalinist in the way that an individual had been pursued and found guilty by the system... though an attempt to get the 'errant' individual imprisoned failed because of the integrity of the local police!

Such stories abound if the surface of European evangelicalism is but lightly scratched. No one who has had any dealings with denominational and trans-denominational or international agencies will register the least surprise. BUT this is not the Gospel of Jesus.

Western 'theology' (including its evangelical manifestation) has developed something of a scholastic 'disciplinary' character; dictated by the expectations of post-enlightenment perspectives. This has, almost inevitably, driven a wedge between the pursuit of God and the pursuit of the knowledge of God. Status and standing is grounded not in whom we know but what we know. This, I suggest, has fostered the sort of unredeemed conduct that has been described above; for our theologising has not reached the affections and the will.

Simply put, the challenge I want to put here is that unless theological and spiritual formation go hand it hand, our praxis will ape the world and, to put it bluntly, heaven help us!