

EEA Gen Ass 2013:

Tuesday 10.45 10'

At a missions consultation in England in January of this year, I first heard Jim address the question of how the multiple crises facing Europe today should shape our mission. Jim invited two church leaders from the British Isles to respond, and I was looking forward to their contributions. Both took about 90 minutes to talk about their churches, yet neither began even to reflect on the impact of the crises on the mission of their church. When I asked the one representing my own denomination how the issues Jim had raised might shape this church's thinking on mission in Europe today, the response was: *I suppose it doesn't really. After all, the proclamation of the gospel is the most important thing!*

We might all agree on this last statement but may disagree as to its meaning. What did Jesus mean when he cited Isaiah 61, talking of preaching good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners?

Evangelicals have a rich heritage of social and political engagement, but our overall record is patchy. A Great Reversal in the later 1800's saw many withdraw from the public square to concentrate on 'evangelism and church life', while Catholics and neo-Calvinists developed biblical social doctrines. Not until Lausanne in 1974 did the global evangelical movement embrace a 'two-handed gospel', championed by our two heavy-weights, Billy Graham and John Stott. The LICC continued to stir evangelical memories, consciences and imaginations and in more recent times, Tom Wright has mentored a new generation of evangelical leaders in an awareness of God's purposes to bring heaven on earth, to renew, restore, liberate and transform his creation, not to destroy and abandon.

Recently while writing a paper on the emergence of an international post-war order based on a commitment to human rights, it became very clear to me how crucial the role of committed Christians was to the formation of the UN itself, and the development of the UDHR, as well as to the emergence of what has become the EU, and the formulation of the ECHR. Yet as Stott lamented in IFCT, (conservative) Christians often had problems with the concept of human rights as they seemed to suggest conflict, the assertion of one person's right against another.

However, many of those Christians were members of the so-called 'social gospel' churches which were often viewed as doctrinally questionable. And yet to a new generation of evangelical thinkers, there was much that these churches got right and much that our 'bible-believing' churches got wrong!

Other Christians active in shaping the post-war world, especially here in Europe, were devout Catholics - Schuman, Adenauer and De Gasperi, for example - and few in the evangelical world then could have imagined the convergence that has taken place in

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recent years, even to the point of the currency of the phrase 'evangelical Catholic' - whatever that might mean. Ever since the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, of May 1891 [*"Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor"* issued by Pope Leo XIII to address the condition of the working classes] the Catholic Church has instructed its faithful on the implications of the gospel for the social questions of the day. (*see Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.*)

In November of that same year, Abraham Kuyper in Holland organised the Christian Social Congress, having for years instructed his neo-Calvinist followers by daily newspaper columns on biblical perspectives concerning political and social questions. The congress aimed to bring together Dutch protestants for a thorough discussion of the 'social question' and a set of biblical responses.

Both the Catholic and neo-Calvinist traditions have continued through to this day, but by and large we evangelicals tended to live in our own world. Despite our claim to the heritage of Wesley, Wilberforce and Booth, and the slow dawning that began in the last quarter of last century, we remain johnny-come-latelys when it comes to thinking biblically about social policy.

Hence the response we observed at the January consultation from the church leaders present is probably not atypical. But surely it cannot be biblical.

Surely the current European crises will test us afresh on our commitment to preaching good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.

Surely we have to take seriously the words of Jesus, however inconvenient they may be for us as Protestants, when he says that the sheep and the goats will be separated on the basis of our response to the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the sick and the captives (Matthew 25),. *'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

Thursday

A faith based response to the crisis:

Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains lessons for living in a secularised world which we often find intimidating. Yet Paul affirms that it is 'now through the church that God's manifold wisdom is made manifest to the powers that be'. Our calling is to be memory, conscience and imagination in a society at drift.