

## **‘By the open statement of the Truth’**

### **Lausanne and the Polemical Imperative**

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Without wanting to question the value of the Lausanne movement as originally conceived, important questions about its historical development are in order. The responsibility for worldwide evangelization highlighted by the initiative of the Billy Graham organisation in 1966 (Berlin), was important in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and remains so at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup>. What follows, therefore, is meant simply to advance this commitment. If it raises questions about how well the movement handled the issue of a gospel polemic in the post-Enlightenment world, its intention is simply to deepen the impact of our evangelism.

Hence my first observation about the movement’s origin. When Lausanne gathered in 1974 the evangelical community worldwide was already subject to serious weaknesses and oversights stemming from what I call ‘the Pietist Hangover’. Lutheran and Reformed churches at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century had succumbed to a sterile scholasticism. A form of ‘dead orthodoxy’ prevailed through much of protestant Europe. The infant church in North America had its fair share also, as Jonathan Edwards testified. An understandable reaction set in, therefore, and Pietism was the result. This was a renewal movement within the German church which led on to widespread revivals. Thankfully many of its key characteristics remain to this day and continue to benefit evangelicalism worldwide following the late 18<sup>th</sup> century missionary initiatives it inspired.

But Pietism had weighted Christian experience in favour of the *heart* rather than the mind and encouraged *private* spiritual experience rather than public social and political engagement. A Bible-based, Christ-loving believer, concerned to share the gospel with the lost and expressing neighbourly care for those with physical needs was the pietist ideal – all good of course. But it wasn’t someone engaged in politics or academia! So the wider social and intellectual responsibilities which, until then, had been accepted as part of the Christian ‘mission’ tended to be ignored or even down-graded.

The consequence was disastrous if only in terms of timing. Enlightenment philosophy was steadily enlarging its influence throughout the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The French Revolution of 1789 reinforced the philosophers’ new brand of freedom and consciously repudiated Biblical revelation and traditional norms of behaviour. A new world order, it was claimed, was about to liberate the entire human race. True, revolution necessitated upheaval and flux, yet it was for a good cause: all was heading in a positive and liberating direction – and away from religious superstition. Meanwhile, industrialisation with its accompanying migration to the cities further loosened people’s ties with the church. In short, Christianity faced an intellectual and social challenge more intense than anything before. Yet Pietism’s bias away from the mind and from public engagement deprived

those who held to the traditional faith the wherewithal to stand against it. They were intellectually unprepared for the arguments thrown against them. Consequently many European churches began to haemorrhage and, sad to say, nothing so far has been able to reverse that trend. Further afield, however, global mission had advanced rapidly. William Carey and Henry Martyn were already in India by 1805. Missionary societies were springing up on all sides. The evangelization of the world was an evangelical success story.

Overseas advances, however, masked a growing discontinuity and instability at home. European evangelicals lacked confidence intellectually and little was being done about it. The humanists by comparison were well primed and persuasive. The pressure was on. What were the Christian faithful to do? Many took the easy route, namely, to ignore the deficiencies and focus instead on what they were good at. If they couldn't reply to the philosophical onslaught they could at least devote themselves to evangelism. Intellectual and cultural challenges were by and large shelved. Some even justified this peculiarly evangelical form of 'sublimation' on the grounds that Paul had specifically warned his readers against 'vain philosophy' (Col 2:8). Fundamentalism was the result.

What weakened western evangelicalism even further was its growing dependence upon 'technique'. Machines were not only useful they were beginning to mould the way people thought. Methods appropriate to the factory – speed, organisation, efficiency etc – became the models for all social activity, nowhere more so than in North America which soon outstripped western Europe commercially. In the process she took upon herself the mantle of what Neil Postman calls the world's first 'technopoly' - a society, that is, so governed by commercial priorities that humane ways of doing things are swamped by the demands of the machine. In fact the States became a 'totalitarian technocracy', Postman says. And evangelicals were not exempt. They, too, followed suit and began to frame their evangelism along the same lines. As one historian puts it, 'between 1800 and 1860 the professional revivalist was an American phenomenon... (he) was the inventor of *new techniques*' - like the 'anxiety seat' and new styles of music and song deliberately designed to sway people emotionally.

As part of this development Moody and Sankey visited the UK in the 1870s and 1880s. Then there was a lull. North American preachers had been successful up to a point. Thousands of people had responded to the gospel and not least the famous Cambridge Seven who re-energised the cause of foreign missions after 1884. But the cultural tide was running the other way. 'The revivalists at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century... failed at the most important test: they did not make contact with the world beyond the organised church... They were using methods which depend for success on the pre-existence of a Christian community in order to tackle a situation *whose central difficulty lay in the absence not only of a Christian community but of any community at all...*'

Then Billy arrived. The London-based Haringay crusade in 1954 took Britain by storm. American energy and organisational *chutzpah* were back. For the first time since Moody and Sankey the vision of a worldwide evangelistic thrust seemed attainable after all. Furthermore, believers in the 'missionary nations' now outnumbered those in Europe and

North America. Could their energies and skills not also be harnessed for the great commission? What was needed was a new impetus - and in God's providence it would be the Billy Graham organisation that would provide it. The 'Lausanne movement' was born. At the Berlin Congress of 1966 representatives from all over the world gathered for consultation and inspiration. Then came Lausanne, followed by Manila and other smaller assemblies. Now we await Cape Town October 2010.

The agenda was clear, as it had always been for evangelicals. The gospel must be taken with the utmost urgency to the ends of the earth. Few realised, however, how seriously they had been weakened by the pietist legacy. The missionary imperative had seemed justification enough to keep on as in the past, only with greater application and zeal. "Evangelicals mustn't be distracted from the Great Commission. Social and cultural engagement is what 'liberals' do - and only because they have abandoned the Bible. A '*social gospel*' is all they have to offer. Our task is different. Society is best changed through preaching the gospel. Evangelism alone is the biblical priority." By 1974, however, the extent of worldwide poverty, famine and oppression were obvious. Graphic media images of human distress seared the global conscience. How then did evangelism relate to all this? Could it simply be ignored? Could evangelicals just keep going as before? Lausanne 1974 would have to answer the pressing questions, not least because of the many delegates from the developing world.

The result was a long overdue self-examination and reassessment which culminated in the Lausanne Covenant. Whether or not Lausanne was the best forum for a doctrinal overhaul like this is another discussion, but the important thing was that a consensus emerged bearing the characteristics of what some have called 'a more holistic view of mission'. Evangelism and social engagement, though needing carefully to be distinguished, could no longer be kept apart. Reform was on the way. Even today, however, complaints about the encroachment of 'a social gospel' continue to be heard.

The relevance of all this to our title, '*Lausanne and the polemical imperative*', is simply this. If 20<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism had to pause in 1974 and take stock of its neglect of the socio-political aspects of biblical mission, 21<sup>st</sup> century evangelicalism now needs to face up to what was even then, 36 years ago, a more serious neglect - and which today could be described, with only slight exaggeration, as a matter of life and death. The pressing need is for *an intellectual challenge to western, scientific materialism* - to the very thing in other words which undermined western Christianity in the first place and which still holds many in thrall. *Put simply it is the need to stand firm on 'truth'*. That the Bible is objectively true - not just 'a religious truth' - is the fundamental assertion of the Scriptures upon which all else rests. Francis Schaeffer coined the now famous expression, 'Christianity is True Truth' - or it is nothing.

Of course this has been the touchstone of evangelicalism throughout its history, as much in the past two centuries as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan revolution and the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation - and so back to the early church Fathers. 'Sola scriptura' sums it up. The Bible is the only authority to which the church is finally answerable. Why? Because it tells us the truth about the universe in which we live - never exhaustively but always

faithfully and reliably. And this evangelicalism doggedly maintained. What post-18<sup>th</sup> century evangelicals failed to do, however, was to apply this conviction to the cultural upheavals of the time. Though they affirmed Scripture as truth they failed to respond adequately to its intellectual challengers. In short, they neglected the apostolic summons to ‘destroy every *argument* which raises itself up against the *knowledge* of God’ (2 Corinthians 10:5). As a result the institutions of western society were overwhelmed by the advance of scientific materialism - its schools, universities, newspapers, films, radio, television etc. The much needed counter-attack never came. Only C S Lewis and a few other apologists around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered anything like a suitable challenge - which, thankfully, has been built on ever since as we shall see.

The earlier neglect and collapse, however, has been costly and will not easily be remedied. If anything the sense of implausibility which characterised British unbelief in 1954 when Billy arrived in England is now more widespread and entrenched. The New Atheism is evidence enough. ‘God probably doesn’t exist so enjoy life’. Supernatural facts are even more strenuously denied because ‘unscientific’. The idea that Adam and Eve were the progenitors of the human race is derided. A God who judges sinners is considered offensive, even repulsive. Condemnation of certain sexual acts is repressive. Worst of all, exclusive Truth *has* to be anti-social – perhaps even criminal.

The irony of the situation is this: while evangelicals were, at best, slowly gearing themselves up for the intellectual challenge they had long neglected – and at worst still hiding their heads in the sand - the Achilles’ heel of their opponent’s entire strategy was becoming increasingly apparent. The philosophers of the Enlightenment had enthroned human reason - only to find later that that they were unable to account for it! Precisely because a naturalistic view of human experience doesn’t square with reality, its concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ become its weakest link. As Paul puts it in Romans 1, ‘thinking themselves to be wise they became fools’. Having built a worldview on the sufficiency of the human mind – and the repudiation of divine revelation – they were forced to conclude that the finite human mind can never arrive at ‘truth’. Since human knowledge is limited, no ideas or propositions can be absolute: they cannot, ipso facto, be anything but relative - whereupon ‘Truth’ disappears. Anything goes.

But most evangelicals weren’t even remotely aware of this intellectual component in the humanist crisis surrounding them. They saw the ‘breakdown of society’, the decline in standards, the rise in crime and so on, but the key element now making an evangelical come-back feasible – the culture’s own admission of intellectual uncertainty and confusion – was a closed book to them. Prominent non-Christian social commentators expressed dismay bordering on bewilderment, but evangelicals didn’t even know about it. ‘What concerns me’, said Niall Ferguson in 2005 ( a ‘self-confessed materialist’ incidentally) ‘... (is) the moral vacuum our de-christianisation has created’. Hence his startling appeal, ‘Heaven knows how we can rekindle our religion, but I believe we must’. True, a few prescient commentators like Francis Schaeffer realised what was going on and tried to redirect evangelical attention to this gaping hole in the enemy lines. But few paid sufficient attention. ‘The answering of people’s questions’ Schaeffer

pleaded at Lausanne in 1974 'is also part of preaching the gospel'. But the leaders were busy about other matters, particularly their unceasing appeals for the spread of the gospel.

What attempts *were* made to get involved within the academic arena were too little and too late. Tyndale House in Cambridge, for example, was founded in 1944 and its beneficial effects into evangelicalism worldwide immeasurable. But even here the general lack of awareness manifests itself in that the key issue facing the western church in 1944 was not in fact biblical studies, important as that discipline was and is. What in fact needed most to be challenged was the naturalistic epistemology undermining all religious claims. This was the central issue but it received little or no attention within church circles. Even Lausanne 1974 seemed unable to address it properly, perhaps, as we've seen, because the focus had already been concentrated on evangelism and the need to square this with social action. So it hardly got a look in.

The irony is intense. Even though our chief opposition since the Enlightenment admits its own bankruptcy we fail to press the issue home. More recently there have been significant responses as we have said and one detects a mounting apologetic groundswell. But still the intellectual challenge, especially for ordinary members in the church, falls far behind what it should be. Evangelical ministers teach and preach faithfully from the Scriptures yet their congregations remain largely unaware of Humanism's decline and how best to launch a counter-offensive. Not surprisingly, therefore, Daniel Bourdanne, General Secretary of IFES worldwide, makes the observation that 'the university is...a strategic place where the ideologies, philosophies and scientific theories of our modern societies are formed. Yet the impact of evangelicalism is declining considerably in its midst. Are we losing the battle for the mind...I strongly suspect that there might be a significant correlation between our inadequate approach and the limited impact we are having on society.'

If anything this oversight is more serious by a half than the earlier oversight which Lausanne had to deal with in 1974. The challenge of social and political injustice *did* require a more holistic view of mission and the Covenant was right to correct the earlier mistakes. And for all that we can be thankful. But surely the challenge of a naturalistic view of reality was even then a far greater challenge? Why then was it not addressed? The same unbiblical view of spirituality which prevented a holistic view of mission also crippled the church from getting involved intellectually. My point is this, Lausanne 1974 chose to deal with the first, but it said little or nothing about the second.

Which leaves us with a final question: will Cape Town Lausanne recognise its earlier oversight and do something about it? Or will the central issue in post Enlightenment Christianity yet again be overlooked? If it is then the western churches will continue their decline – and, worse still, the churches in the rest of the world which currently thrive will themselves be undermined.

One thing would make a radical difference. Antonio Gramsci calls it the deliberate nurturing of 'organic intellectuals'. As an Italian communist (who died in 1937) he realised that armed revolution would be ineffective in turning Western Europe towards

Marxist ideology. His alternative, interestingly, was to reach back *to the Protestant Reformation model*. What the Christian church did then, he argued, was to develop men and women of sufficient intellectual ability and training who, because properly equipped and adequately supported, were able to infiltrate and in due course take over the institutions of cultural influence. What he had in mind no doubt were men like Roger Ascham and William Cecil. Both were undergraduates at St. John's College Cambridge, and both had become Protestants by the mid 1530s. Ascham tutored the future queen and her younger half brother, Edward VI. And Cecil, later Lord Burleigh, as Queen Elizabeth's principal Secretary, influenced almost every aspect of Elizabethan society. They were 'organic intellectuals' (as over against 'traditional intellectuals') because they espoused a *different world-view* to that of the establishment *and, at the same time, were able to argue their case with sufficient attractiveness and plausibility* so that the whole society followed their lead. At the heart of their success, however, lay a polemical commitment. They realised that the conflict between the alternative worldviews vying for power could be resolved only by outright opposition (polemis = war). Not a war of physical arms, of course, but a war of ideas.

Recent steps to produce organic intellectuals within Evangelicalism have already made a huge difference and are brim-full with promise. Leading atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens have been challenged in public. Some university departments of philosophy have even changed hands. Some schools and colleges have committed themselves to such a project. Powerful apologetic tools have been produced by the bucket load. A noticeable momentum has even been established through initiatives like the European Leadership Forum in Hungary. My conclusion then is this: Cape Town Lausanne should openly and unreservedly endorse and promote such models throughout the world. The change of direction is already long overdue. It will not be without its discomforts and vociferous complaints - and after our track record one can be excused for wondering if even so bold an initiative as a Cape Town covenant can shift evangelicalism from its present ruts. But it would be a good first step and, more importantly, it would be the *right* step. And under God, who knows! Given western materialism's emptiness and distress - which only the blind could fail to see - it is just possible that such a step would ignite a new and unquenchable Reformation which really would evangelise the entire human race.

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