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Some Historical Perspective

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FUND as instances here. It is better still to see those who have never neglected this dimension in their Ministries. Again, it would also be good to see those Churches and Ministers who are heavily involved in Mission, but only in Mission; similarly re-discovering that the Churches – to more fully share the Good News – must also have an evangelistic dimension. Rev Richard B. Cook in an *Expository Times* article: “St Paul – Preacher, Evangelist or Organiser” (ET 93:6) makes the case for a broader understanding of the term ‘euaggelizomai’. He argues that the term is much broader than simply ‘to preach’. Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel included his missionary strategy and goals, his lifestyle and all of his day to day activities. Evangelism was hard work. (1 Cor 15:10); it was dangerous (2 Cor.11:23-29); it involved signs of the Kingdom (Rom. 15:19) and the planting of Christian Communities in the hard places of the then known world (1 Cor. 3:5-11). “Evangelism means action in service and not simply preaching... Paul is to be counted among those Christian thinkers and doers who call the Church to live truly a life of service. Paul’s successors today are Christian activists who meet the executed Messiah in the person of the marginalised and oppressed, the sinned against, the struggling poor...”⁷ Those who warm only to Evangelism surely need to hear this call more clearly? They also need to read some of the work of liberation theologians which represent new Roman Catholic thinking on evangelization (evangelism and mission fused in praxis) at its finest. Strange that these theologians (who make some of the most telling critiques around of contemporary Marxism) are not read by some because they have listened only to the words of that great contemporary theologian, Norman Tebbit.

NOTES:

1. M. Green *Evangelism in the Early Church* (H & S 1970) pp137-8
2. Ibid pp 334-5
3. P.S. Fiddes *Past Event and Present Salvation* (DLT 1989) p.186
4. J. Moltmann *Theology of Hope* (SCM 1967) p 213
5. Ibid p. 327
6. Ibid p. 329
7. Richard B. Cook’s article in *Expository Times* 93:6

Michael I. Bochenski

Dissent Today

A few months after I began working for the Free Church Federal Council, I found myself in the lunch queue at a Ministers’ Retreat standing next to an old friend, or should I say, a friend of many years standing. He expressed surprise at my appointment, adding, “I never imagined you would be banging the Free Church drum!”

Now that may tell you something about him and his image of the FCFC in general, and of me in particular. The question it posed for me is this – is it our task today to be banging the Free Church drum?; to be shouting about our nonconformity?; to be vocal in dissent? And if not, what is the position of Dissent Today (the title set for me by the *Fraternal* Editor)?

Some Historical Perspective

While I defer to the Church Historians, of whom I do not claim to be one, as far as consideration of the details of Dissent over the last three centuries or so is concerned, it seems clear that for many of our forefathers (and mothers), dissent involved opposition, especially to the Established Church of England.

Ernest Payne, in an essay on "Access to the Throne" ¹ describes the way in which the ministers of the Three Denominations (Presbyterian, Baptist and Independent) waited upon successive monarchs with addresses of welcome. But the link between the addresses in 1688 and the Toleration Act of 1689 strongly suggests that the purpose was in part to secure support against the oppressive legislation of the 1660's which not only entrenched the Church of England, but forced the Nonconformists into a second class citizenship.

In 1732, this General Body of Protestant Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations, residing in and about the Cities of London and Westminster, formed a lay body, the Protestant Dissenting Deputies, "charged with the defence and extension of the civil rights of Nonconformists". C.W. Ikin, in an unsigned pamphlet ² recently written for the two bodies, says:-

"The fact of the existence of the Protestant Dissenting Deputies led nonconformists who were in trouble of any kind to appeal for their help and advice. Since the Deputies included people skilled in the law, they were often able to help those, especially in the country districts, who did not know their rights or were subject to petty local persecution over the registration of chapels and meeting-houses, tithes and church-rates, and especially over burial laws. They campaigned for the opening of new Universities without religious tests, and for the removal of these at Oxford and Cambridge. During the nineteenth century, they took part in the campaigning for the disestablishment of the Church of England; but they never sponsored it. Their approach was practical rather than doctrinaire."

Dissent involved opposition in order to secure both freedom from the domination of state control over worship and also civil rights for nonconformists. It had to secure the right to our own form of church government, based on the local gathered church, consisting of believers only, and non-hierarchical. It sought to secure these freedoms for all (cf Thomas Helwys) and not just for itself. Because of that, at its best, it had respect for other viewpoints, and sought to avoid dogmatism, while emphasising the centrality of the Gospel.

In part, this tolerance of others has proved a weakness. In 1981, the FCFC Education Committee³ published a set of documents including one on "Some Free Church Principles and their implications". The flexibility and variety of Free Church life is noted. "They have also learned...the importance of different emphases and the need to practice toleration, both within their own churches and towards other denominations of Christendom – and indeed towards other religions and philosophies." The implications of this are worked out, including a resistance to "the imposition of formulas from outside" and the resultant acceptance by some of other "exclusive emphases". The plea for a balance implies that sometimes there has been no balance.



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A Changed Situation

But does dissent still require opposition? I note that my dictionary uses words like 'difference of opinion', 'disagreement' and 'separation from', but does not refer to opposition. In politics, we have in England a set-up which is confrontational, government versus opposition. Does this have to be the pattern in Church life as well (or is that merely to allow cultural environment to dictate our behaviour and attitudes)?

My first vivid experience of ecumenical matters was at the first Youth Conference, organised by the (now defunct) British Council of Churches at Bangor in 1951. Memory suggests that the Baptist delegation numbered about 50. While there were similar numbers of Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian young people, the overwhelming majority present were Anglican. At that time, there would only have been one or two Roman Catholic observers. The denial of the bread and the wine to the Free Church members at the Anglican Eucharist caused an uproar. Rarely since have I heard the Free Church case so forcefully and persuasively put. The debate raged for two days, and invaded every discussion, whether in small group or in plenary. In the end, it was Douglas Stewart and Edwin Robertson who took us Baptist youngsters on one side and tried to get us to understand two things: - a) you have won your point and the Anglican young people now agree with you, and b) keeping on about it, will be totally counter-productive. It took a quarter of a century, but now, it is the Anglican who joins us in debate at the Roman Catholic denial of the bread and wine. Plus ça change!

Today, many of the items for which the Dissenters of previous centuries fought, are no longer matters even for debate. They have long since been achieved. Other matters are now no longer the exclusive preserve of the Dissenting Free Churches, for our influence (maybe) has spread, and we have allies among our former opponents. Roman Catholics emphasise the Scriptures and personal faith,⁴ and the importance of the local Church (their word is 'subsidiarity'). Anglicans increasingly accept that this country is a mission field to be evangelised, and dissent more strongly from government opinions than we would have dreamt of at that conference forty years ago. "Faith in the City" or David Sheppard's emphasis on "Bias to the Poor" rings bells in our hearts and minds. If this point is so largely won, may it not be counter-productive to persist?

" 'We are all dissenters now' it might be said" ⁵. "It can no longer be affirmed that the Church of England is the Tory Party at Prayer. Rather the churches together, often under the leadership of the Church of England, have become the most consistent and persistent of government critics, seen particularly in the refusal of the Archbishop of Canterbury to engage in a triumphalistic celebration of victory in the Falkland Islands war, and the tough analysis of urban deprivation contained within the "Faith in the City" report.

Two factors may help to point out why that editorial comment in the *Baptist Quarterly* is correct. In the hey-day of Dissent, few dissenters accepted those in the Established Church as fellow-Christians, and the non-acceptance was mutual. Today, perhaps because of the secularization of society, very few Baptists would exclude all but Baptists from heaven, or the kingdom of God. Indeed, in many of our Churches non-Baptist believers are welcome to join our Open Membership. We have learned to accept each other in Christ, to work together for Christ, and to trust one another to such an extent that we can differ in fellowship, rather than in opposition to each other. Our dissent then becomes a joint one, dissenting

together from customary secular morality and behaviour, often as exemplified in Government legislation.

It is also perhaps to be seen in the fact that dissent has to do with authority. In previous generations, our dissent was in part against a hierarchical structure. today, hierarchy in the Church of England is balanced by synodical government, and the priest consults his Parochial Church Council. Even Roman Catholic bishops will admit in private that they cannot rule by fiat and dictate what shall or shall not be. They too consult, and increasingly listen. That from which we once dissented has changed, so that today all our denominations have an authority structure which is simultaneously from the top and from the bottom. (We expect David Coffey to lead. We shall be disappointed if he does not prove to be a leader. But that lead will depend on the confidence and support of our people. It is both from the bottom and from the top!) If that analysis of authority in the various denominations is in any way correct, we do not need still to dissent, when that from which we have in the past dissented now bears so much similarity to what we ourselves practise.

Priority of the Secular Challenge

Which is why my old friend of paragraph 1 has not heard me banging the Free church drum very much! I believe that my voice, on behalf of and true (I hope) to the dissenting tradition, is more likely to be effectively heard within the ecumenical debate, together with the other (historically non-dissenting) Churches. To shout from outside in vocal opposition may from time to time be required. But more often, effective dissent will be achieved by sharing in the debate, so that the Churches Together may express their combined dissent at that which is lacking or wrong in the state and its culture.

In "Better Together"⁶ David Sheppard and Derek Worlock write of their work in Liverpool. The blurb runs thus:- "They discuss the spiritual principles which have come to unite them, and assert that each Church must learn to work with the other, remaining mindful of those areas where disagreement will remain. The result is uniquely powerful: a common Cristian witness to a troubled world."

Dissent today should take note of where disagreements remain. But in the face of the world as it is, that which we share and which unites us is far greater than the things over which we may dissent. God's will is surely that we are "Better Together".

Notes

1. *Access to the Throne* by Dr. Ernest A. Payne, C.H., published in the Free Church Chronicle (Vol XXXII no. 3) Autumn 1977

2. Obtainable from the FCFC, 27 Tavistock Sq., London WC1H 9HH (please send stamped and addressed 9' x 6' envelope)

3. "Education for the Eighties" (now in course of being revised for the 90's)

4. See Editorial Comment in *The Month* (April 1991), which was drawn to my attention after this article was written. The Editor notes the results of a survey which found that "of all religious groups, Roman Catholics were the most pro-(Gulf) war". His Editorial is a plea that dissenting voices within the Church (on the matter of whether war is just or not) must not be discouraged. The whole argument stems from these paragraphs:-