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‘THE DANGER OF EVANGELICAL APOSTASY’ – CHURCH SOCIETY CONFERENCE REPORT 2008

By David Meager

Church Society met in May for its annual conference at High Leigh, in sunny Hertfordshire. The title of the conference was ‘The Danger of Evangelical Apostasy.’ The speakers asked to tackle this subject were Iain Murray, Andrew Sach, Jonathan Fletcher and Nick Tucker.

Iain Murray, co-founder of the Banner of Truth Trust, opened the conference with a talk on the characteristics and causes of apostasy and how we should contend against it. Iain explained that apostasy will always be a concern for the church because it is a subject that is given prominence in God’s Word. The books of Judges and Kings and the words of Jesus show how easily people depart from God’s truth. The New Testament churches are warned in 1 Timothy 4 that in later seasons people will depart from the faith; the book of Hebrews majors on this theme. Apostasy exists in the church for a variety of reasons, including the presence of unsaved people in the church, unbelief, and abused consciences. As people reject God’s truth, he gives them over to believe lies (Romans 1, 2 Thess 2.). The forgetting of lessons learnt in the past and an absence of zeal for the truth are other causes, but ultimately Satan is the real apostate as he attacks faith and truth; we wrestle not against flesh and blood but with the ‘spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’ (Ephesians 6). Iain outlined what our duties are in times of apostasy. We need to strengthen our awareness of the danger, and stress the urgency of progress, maturity and holiness in the spiritual life rather than be content with a ‘diet of milk’ (Hebrews 5 v12).

Jonathan Fletcher, minister of Emmanuel Church, Wimbledon, then gave his first of three bible expositions on Ezekiel 34-37. Jonathan explained how the kings of Judah had got steadily worse in failing to take care of the flock. He applied this to the bishops of the Church of England, many of which saw themselves as ‘princes of the church’ rather than servants – ‘imperial purple rather than aprons.’ However there is hope for God’s people, Ezekiel 34 describes the role of the new shepherd, how he will care for the needs of the sheep – Jesus seeks the lost and brings back the backsliders. Jonathan concluded by giving us some contemporary applications – we should be preoccupied with leading people to Christ and encouraging small/struggling churches.

The day ended with a discussion led by David Phillips on some issues in the Church of England including the Terms of Service Measure and the Manchester Report on Women Bishops.

Day two began with Jonathan Fletcher’s second bible exposition (Ezekiel 36 v16). Jonathan explained that Israel had been exiled because they had abandoned God’s covenant with him by sinning greatly. However, God delivered a remnant for the sake of his name. He cleansed them from their sin, gave them his Spirit and a new heart to obey him. Do we abhor our sin? Do we remember that repentance is a continuing thing? Are we jealous for God’s name as we seek to evangelise the lost?

Andrew Sach, on the staff of St Helen’s, Bishopsgate and co author of *‘Pierced for our Transgressions’* then spoke on the doctrine of penal substitution i.e. that Christ was punished instead of his people for their sin. Andrew explained that ‘evangelicals’ have started to raise dissenting voices in recent years over this doctrine. In 2003 Steve Chalk described Christ’s punishment for our sins as ‘cosmic child abuse.’ The Evangelical Alliance had failed to discipline Chalk and this view has now become an option for many ‘evangelicals’. Andrew explained from

Romans 3 v10-12 why Jesus had to be punished for our sins. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory and are therefore under God's wrath; because of his righteousness and justice he will punish all sin. Andrew expounded Isaiah 53 to show that the solution to this is that Christ is our penal substitute. He then discussed how some 'evangelicals' try to get around these verses and how we need carefully thought out answers. For instance some say that most of Isaiah 53 is not mentioned in the New Testament, however 1 Peter 2 v22-24 makes explicit reference to it – 'by his wounds you have been healed.' Others say that the gospels do not mention substitutionary atonement, however it is inferred in Mark 14 v33-36 when Jesus takes the cup of God's wrath. Andrew finished by saying that penal substitution was not the only aspect of Jesus' death, since his death is also an example of how we should live and suffer as Christians (1 Peter 2) as we take up our cross and follow him.

Following the Church Society AGM, Nick Tucker, research fellow at Oak Hill College, discussed the influence of Edward Irving on Christology in the 19th Century. The difference between orthodoxy and heresy often comes down to the person of Christ, which Nick demonstrated in the life and teaching of Edward Irving. Irving was a Church of Scotland minister with amazing oratory abilities and well connected to the social elite of the times (including Samuel Taylor Coleridge). However, he gradually developed heretical views of the nature of Christ's person and atonement, eventually he was deposed from the Church of Scotland in 1834. Irving went on to found the 'Catholic Apostolic Church' (which is still in existence today). Although at the time Irving was dismissed as heretical, his teaching has been influential amongst some Anglo-Catholics, liberals and charismatics. The life and times of Irving serve as a warning to us today about how quickly heretical views of Christ's atonement can take root and harm many people. Nick concluded by saying that we are not starting afresh in every generation with evangelical theology - we need a degree of historical awareness of our evangelical roots if we are to avoid being caught up in the latest fads.

Iain Murray then spoke about the Lord's Day. Iain outlined the biblical teaching on the Sabbath and the Lord's Day and then discussed its relevance for today and the witness to it from Christian history – when there has been revival the Lord's Day has been rediscovered and the keeping of it has made Britain an upright nation. We should delight in God's laws (Romans 7 v22) rather than seeing them as a burden.

The final day began with Jonathan Fletcher's third bible exposition (Ezekiel 37) – The valley of dry bones. Ezekiel was told to preach to the bones. The bones were covered in flesh then God breathed his life giving spirit into them. Although this was a prophecy about the restoration of the exiles to Jerusalem, Jonathan explained that when the word is preached faithfully the Spirit brings new life as it convicts, converts and trains in righteousness. Some Christians say that they belong to a 'Spirit church' whilst others (conservative evangelicals) are a 'word church.' However this distinction is wrong, true spiritual growth only occurs where the word is faithfully preached, although we must avoid the danger of just hearing the word without having our hearts changed.

The Conference ended with Iain Murray's final talk. Iain expounded Acts 4 to show the marks of true revival. Iain characterised true revival as a period when the Christian faith becomes the attention of many people, or an awakening – an outpouring of God's Spirit on whole communities; revivals are not organised, nor can they be predicted. Iain described some of the characteristics associated with men who have been used to preach in times of revival. As the Spirit is given so men lift up their voices with boldness, the result is preaching with new power and authority – 'God gave his spirit to simple men in great abundance' (John Knox on the Reformation). It is therefore not about personalities but about God as people hear him speaking to them through the preacher. The Spirit makes the messenger conform to the message, it makes him humble, tender hearted, bold – something of Christ is conveyed in the preacher. There is fervent love to God and man – 'if we be

in Christ we work for no worldly concern but for love.' (William Tyndale). Iain concluded by saying that we can either make too much or too little of revival, we still need to walk with God in the spirit but keep ourselves open to revival. We should pray that God would raise up Spirit filled men to preach the word rather than be distracted with other things.

The Conference was again a good opportunity to be encouraged and equipped to contend for the faith and to catch up with other Church Society members, make new acquaintances and talk to the speakers over meals and informal times. CDs of all the talks are available to order from Church Society.

David Meager is on the staff of Church Society.