Editorial

Evangelical identity

This was the theme of the 1978 Islington Conference, from which we publish Dr Packer's paper in the form in which it was given on that occasion. He is concerned to stress the fundamental christological truths which are basic to evangelicalism. It is interesting to move from a consideration of this to Mr Hickin's article about the now defunct Evangelical Fellowship for Theological Literature. He and I look at that fellowship from different viewpoints, which are perhaps caused by the difference between our generations. For those who were in at the beginning, EFTL undoubtedly did a most important work. For those like myself, who only belonged for the last ten years or so of its life, it was a body which had, through its success in achieving certain targets, rather lost its sense of direction. New opportunities were arising in the 1960s for the younger conservative evangelicals (the generation which had started to read theology in large numbers in the universities in the 1950s) to join in study groups (perhaps especially those sponsored by Latimer House) which were more akin to their own convictions but which had fresh targets in their sights. Once the conservative evangelical movement was interested at a theological level in the church and the world, there was a great deal of catching up to be done and it was exciting to be involved in the chase.

On the other hand, EFTL had by this time become so top heavy with bishops and professors that it had lost a good deal of its distinctiveness. Some among its members were very hard pressed to feel a great deal of affinity with the word 'evangelical', though they would not have wished to resign from a society which contained many of their old friends from days at evangelical theological colleges. One of the professorial members at the time of the fellowship's demise was Maurice Wiles, whose recently published views could hardly be considered 'evangelical'. An attempt was made to introduce a new constitution which would refer to 'Christians with an evangelical concern'. This, certainly with its small 'e', could have embraced almost any Christian and it was in fact changed in committee to 'with an Evangelical outlook'. The simple fact of the matter was that the success of the earlier days, particularly in relation to those of more 'liberal' persuasion, had meant that the thinking of the leaders had become part of the mainstream Anglican thinking on many matters and there was very little sense of excitement and adventure which younger members could feel—much as they benefited from

meeting the older members in congenial surroundings.

The influx into the ministry of numbers of men of academic ability who accepted the label 'conservative evangelical' coincided with both a forward-looking emphasis in the movement and a loosening up of some of its rigidities. Somehow the old-style 'liberal evangelicalism' of the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement had run out of steam, and it no longer proved an attractive alternative offering flexibility to those from a conservative background who had begun to take theology seriously. So many of the most able and independent spirits devoted themselves to the new conservative structures and as a result we have had NEAC I and II, the Keele Congress of 1967 and the Nottingham Congress of 1977. On a lot of issues this modern evangelical movement is internally divided but held together (in most cases) by commitment to the basics. At the moment it has in it people who are doing far more adventurous things than were done by the older 'liberals'. At its upper end an increasing number of its members are being drawn into higher positions in the church. Will it in due course go the way of EFTL and will new and more distinctive evangelical structures arise? These are questions which are worth asking (as similar ones are also worth asking of the Fountain Trust and of the Anglo-Catholic movement with its Loughborough Conference of 1978). The church must be continually renewed by the Holy Spirit using groups which stand out from the mainstream, and the reasons for which they do so will differ in each generation. While every group ought to wish that the church as a whole will benefit from their particular contribution, they have also to keep asking in what ways it is proper to preserve their identity and distinctiveness.

One of the great strengths of Max Warren was that he was far-seeing enough to realise that conservative evangelicalism would make a comeback, and in his non-partisan way he helped to make that possible. We can honour him for the work which was done by EFTL (particularly in the early days), rejoice that we have in this issue as a posthumous contribution a perceptive article on Simeon, and heed his call for the setting up of an evangelical 'think-tank'. There are a number of groups which are trying to do some forward planning but we could all benefit from a small group of people with wide ranging experience in the church and the world who would meet occasionally to try and see what were likely to be the major challenges to the church and humanity in the future—and how to meet them in a biblical way.

ROBIN NIXON