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N.E.A.C.3—A Conference Too Far?

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The focus of N.E.A.C. 1 was 'involvement', with N.E.A.C. 2 it was 'hermeneutics', and with N.E.A.C. 3 it was 'integration', such was the summary of the story so far as related by Dr. John Stott in his concluding address at Caister in Norfolk.

Whether 'integration' is the most appropriate epithet to describe the Third National Evangelical Celebration we shall see, but it does provide a useful point of reference as we stand back and try to assess this undoubtedly significant occasion. So, what of the event itself, and how is it to be evaluated?

The Event

The sober and cerebral setting of academia, so distinctive of the earlier N.E.A.C. conferences held at Keele and Nottingham universities respectively, gave way to the more relaxed and informal setting of a holiday camp by the sea. After all, this was to be a 'celebration' and a 'people event' as the run-up publicity material so effectively reminded us. This might explain why, on arrival, I was walking around in a bit of a daze half expecting to be met by a 'yellow coat' uttering the immortal words 'Hi-De-Hi'. In fact the nearest we ever came to this was at the evening celebration meetings with Bishop Colin Buchanan bellowing 'The Lord be with You', to which we *had* to reply, 'And also with you'. We practised this a lot. Come to think of it, maybe it was not so different from Maplin's after all!

The overall title for the celebration was 'Shaping the Vision', which, of course, assumes two things which were not all that evident. First, that someone had a vision, and secondly that visions can be shaped. Perhaps a more accurate title would have been 'In Search of a Vision', but then this would not have been so catchy or so affirmative. Whatever vision there was, some seventy or so workshops were organized to shape it, covering the widest variety of subjects imaginable, from matters of belief (e.g. What is the atonement?) to social concern (e.g. *Faith in the City*). One workshop which did seem to capture a considerable amount of interest was the one dealing with 'Signs and Wonders' (or as someone described it—'Signs and Wimbers'). In terms of the spirit and manner in which it was conducted—speaking the truth in love—it was a model for constructive dialogue between Evangelicals of differing persuasions.

In order to promote fellowship between the participants, cell groups met regularly each morning and received some excellent Bible

study from John Stott by courtesy of closed-circuit television (N.E.A.C. T.V. would you believe?). These were the 'mini' gatherings designed to complement the more 'mega' events meeting in the 'Big Top' in the evenings. Each of these began with a time of 'celebration' under the guidance of the liturgical renewal group led by the Bishop of Aston. This was then followed by the main address.

The general theme of the evening addresses was 'This is Your God', a series which began with Preb. John Gladwin giving an impassioned talk on 'The Just God', this in fact was more concerned with social justice than divine, but more of that anon. Dr. Christina Baxter taking as her title 'The Caring God', gave a most moving and challenging exposition of the Book of Hosea, while Dr. Vinay Samuel seemed to bite off far more than he could chew by taking us on a *tour de force* from Exodus to the Book of Revelation on the subject 'The One God'. Here the biblical content was indeed strong but the application was appallingly weak, again, more of that anon. The final evening address was presented by the Bishop of Coventry, Simon Barrington-Ward, which purported to be on the subject of 'The Saving God', but here we had the exact reverse of the Samuel situation—with the Biblical content being terribly lacking but with a valiant, although at points misguided attempt to be strong on application.

On the second day the conference was addressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury who received a rapturous welcome. It certainly was refreshing to be reminded by the Archbishop of our evangelical heritage and to hear of the evangelical contribution made to the life of the Church of England stated so clearly and warmly. The greater part of his message was devoted to the subject of 'ecclesiology' (—jargon for a doctrine of the church) in which he appealed to Anglican Evangelicals to engage in explicit thinking on the subject. (The choice of this subject by the Archbishop was not accidental nor fortuitous given that it is very much on the agenda of the Church of England Evangelical Council and the present pet subject of the Bishop of Aston). We were told by Dr. Runcie that, 'As the worldwide church searches for an ecclesiology which can form the basis of ecumenical agreement, your contribution could be invaluable'. But would it be so welcomed as the Archbishop suggests? Supposing that a biblically based ecclesiology was developed which did not allow for the broad ecumenical view of the church that the Archbishop clearly holds, but which had a more limited principled diversity such as we find in the teachings of the Reformers and Puritans (see for example Ian Murray's re-issued book, *The Reformation of the Church*), how would our contributions to ecclesiology fare then? I would suspect not very well. It is certainly difficult to envisage a truly biblical and therefore evangelical ecclesiology permitting as legitimate the strongly Catholic conclusions

reached by the Archbishop in his statement, 'If it is the Body of Christ, the Church too demands our belief, trust and faith'. Such a statement betrays an ecclesiology echoing the Pope's *Mystici Corporis* which is at variance with Scripture in that it goes beyond Scripture to the point of identifying and therefore confusing the Church with Christ by a misappropriation of the analogy of 'the Body'. Indeed, Evangelicals do need to do some serious work on this subject from a Scriptural base, but the results may not be so easy to assimilate into the Church of England as it is presently constituted and indeed may be wholly unpalatable to many who occupy positions of authority, for what it would demand is nothing less than wholesale reformation.

However, it was left to John Stott to perform the formidable task of drawing together the main strands of thought dealt with in the celebration into a report which was presented to us in outline in the final meeting. In spite of the time constraint (he was given thirty minutes in which to do this) he performed his task in a masterly fashion, stressing the Evangelical commitment to Theology, Scripture, Mission, the Church and Spirituality. If you have not done so already, do get hold of a copy of the report, in many ways it is vintage Stott and deserves careful consideration.

The Evaluation

In turning to an assessment of N.E.A.C. 3 as a whole it might be helpful to employ a technique common to management planning and attempt to match up the specified aims and objectives laid down by the planning committee, as expressed in a circular by David Sceats, Chairman of the executive team, with what actually took place. To some extent this will provide some objective criteria in evaluation.

The original working party behind N.E.A.C. 3 recommended the holding of an event with three objectives in mind:

- to foster unity and coherence among Evangelical Anglicans.
- to clarify relationships with the wider church and other Evangelicals.
- to maintain momentum in mission.

These three objectives were then translated into five major goals which the executive team hoped would find substantial realization at Caister. We shall consider each of these five goals in turn, reflecting on how much the reality squared with the expectations.

N.E.A.C. 3 was to be a people event

The hope was to involve as many lay people as possible and to design methods of learning which were of a participatory nature rather than the passive 'talk and chalk' line of approach. This did not mean that carefully prepared informative input was minimized but rather that it was enhanced by heuristic (self-discovery) means of gaining and applying knowledge. And for the most part this is what the

workshops did with varying degrees of success. On the whole the feedback from the participants was most favourable and many folk felt greatly encouraged and enthused to take what they had learnt and share their finding with the churches back home. All in all, this aspect of the celebration was a success.

N.E.A.C. 3 was to be a grass roots event

Hence the choice of venue to 'avoid the *élitist* ambience of a university' and to attract large numbers of 'ordinary' folk (presumably non-clergy!). This however, was not so successful. Of the 4,000 or so expected only some 2,500 turned up. Some expressed concern that there were very few young people or complete families present, but then the fact that N.E.A.C. 3 was held during school and college terms might have had something to do with that. Here the celebration did fall between two stools. On the one hand a holiday camp was chosen to entice families to come, but both the timing and events did not provide sufficiently for them—there really was nothing for the young (teenagers and under) at N.E.A.C.; on the other hand serious study was going on, but it was then that one wished for a warm, well-equipped seminar room which a university could have provided, but 'Neptune's palace' or a wet and drafty marquee could not. Instead of having the best of both worlds, in this regard we had the benefits of neither.

N.E.A.C. 3 was to be an experience of cohesion and festival

As you would have gathered by now 'celebration' was the key note at N.E.A.C. 3 and at times one felt that in the evening meetings it was a little forced; of the 'You *will* enjoy this' variety. On the first night we were exhorted to 'Be ourselves before God' and if the degree to which we celebrated was measured by the number of arms in the air, then yes there was a fair amount of celebrating going on. But to be frank some things were just plain silly and embarrassing when, for all that was initially said about being ourselves, we were all asked one night to emulate the dance group on the stage by raising our arms to the rhythm of the music. At other times it was bordering on the banal when for instance we were asked to bring an object to a main meeting which would symbolize our 'brokenness', a piece of wood or some other such object, and then to share these with one another. It must be admitted at this point that I together with a number of others left the meeting and so what happened after that I am not quite sure.

Without placing too much stress on that which could be claimed to be subjective ('One man's meat is another man's poison'), what I felt was singularly absent from all but one of the main meetings was a deep sense of the holy presence of God with a corresponding sense of awe and reverence on our part. The exception was the Sunday

morning Communion service, and how and why this was noticeably different I will venture to suggest in a moment.

Following on from this, it will come as no surprise to learn that whatever cohesion there was at N.E.A.C. 3 it was tenuous, to say the least. After the final evening meeting, (when we had to share objects of our brokenness) one well known evangelical clergyman who was visibly distressed told me that he and a number of others felt that they no longer 'belonged' at N.E.A.C. If this feeling was significantly wide-spread, then it does not bode well for any similar gathering in the future or indeed for the unity of Anglican evangelicalism in general. But why did many of us have this sense of unease and dissatisfaction? It would seem that the answer lies in the extent to which the next goal of N.E.A.C. 3 was achieved or not as the case may be.

N.E.A.C. 3 was to be a creative engagement with the Bible

Given that the central meetings formed the primary foci of the celebration, my comments about the place and handling of the Scriptures will be confined to these. The brief given to the main speakers was that they had to be expositional and that any prophetic note had to proceed from a solid expositional base. With one exception this simply did not happen.

Without doubt, three of the four main addresses left much to be desired and could hardly be described as evangelical at all. 'Tokenized' speakers was the order of the day and we suffered as a result.

John Gladwin certainly generated more heat than light in his talk 'The Just God', a collection of thoughts which hung upon, rather than were based upon, a few tenuous texts from Scripture. Man certainly occupied the centre of the theological stage for Gladwin while God was placed somewhere in the wings. What is the real sign of hope that injustice will not prevail? According to Gladwin it is that within us there are strong feelings of repulsion towards injustice and a desire to fight back. Unscriptural sentiments were being banded about as common place; for instance, that human injustice threatens to cut us off from the life of God's Kingdom. According to the speaker, people will find it very difficult to believe in God's justice unless they first experience human justice, and since this is not so, they are being kept out of God's Kingdom. I certainly do not recall the gross injustices that were prevalent in our Lord's day and that of the Apostles keeping people out of the Kingdom, nor for that matter at any time in history—what is so special about today? Although Gladwin did mention the story of the rich young ruler as a warning against the barrier that wealth can create to entering the Kingdom, the main thrust of Gladwin's thesis turned our Lord's warning on its

head, such that it is the absence of some measure of wealth that now provides the main stumbling block to people receiving the Gospel.

If this were not enough, Gladwin's portrayal (betrayal?) of the cross was nothing short of a superficial attempt to evangelicize liberation theology. Here we heard that 'God broke the back of injustice at the cross'. The fact that nowhere in Scripture is this ever proffered as an explanation of the crucifixion did not seem to bother the speaker; and although it could quite legitimately be claimed that from a human perspective, the cross was an instance of injustice, Gladwin was going much further in seeing this as the main *theological* motif rather than the cross being an expression of God's justice (*dikaiosynē*) as an atonement for sin. In listening to this address I was consciously reminded of Karl Barth's celebrated comment on theological liberalism as being a matter of 'Talking about man in a loud voice'—such a comment would not have been out of place here.

Vinay Samuel however did speak about God, assisted by the musical accompaniment of Garth Hewitt. Biblical references abounded as we moved swiftly through the Scriptures beginning with Exodus. But like many of the children of Israel as they were being led to the promised land, some of us too were lost along the way. One thing however did come over very clearly, namely that 'Idols are not primarily rivals of God, but of God's image in his people'. Again, man was back at the centre of the stage ushered on with such hermeneutical gymnastics that it left one quite breathless.

But what came over the gathering to applaud the Bishop of Coventry's address on 'The Saving God'? As a highly sentimentalized prosaic Oxbridge discourse, this was second to none, but what was it doing finding a place at an alleged Evangelical gathering such as this? Scripture was handled more by way of oblique allusion than by plain exposition, and whatever quotations there were, Scripture was clearly out-quoted by others ranging from Julian of Norwich to Max Warren. At one point, the Bishop made a passing reference to a group of people rummaging around in dustbins for some reason or another, which seemed to sum up my attempt to handle his address, namely as one looking for food in a dustbin, finding one or two good bits amongst much that was simply not recognizable as food or which was contaminated. Sadly, this was indeed a low point in the proceedings.

Thankfully there were two notable exceptions in the whole event. The first was provided in the evening celebration by Dr. Christina Baxter who did fulfil her brief quite admirably by rooting her address in God's Word and today's world. Certainly I for one will never be able to read the Book of Hosea in exactly the same way again. Her challenge to Evangelicals to pursue the truth in love has particular pertinence in the wake of the celebration. The second was Bishop John Taylor's address in the Sunday morning service in which he

expounded the text: 'Now brothers, I want to remind you of the Gospel' (1 Cor 15.1)—and we certainly did need reminding. One cannot speak too highly of what the Bishop said about the nature of the Gospel message and its profound implications. This was Evangelical exposition at its best—thoroughly cross-centred and Christ-centred. What is more, it was set within the context of a service of Holy Communion which was reverently and meaningfully led by the Bishop of Chester. Here we did meet with the Living God and maybe this is not so surprising given the centrality of God's chosen means of grace—the Word preached and the Word visible, brought together in a way encouraged by the Scriptures and advocated by the Reformers.

What is so instructive about Bishop Taylor's sermon within the overall context of N.E.A.C. 3 is the fact that not only did one rejoice in *what* was said but *that* it was said. This I believe sheds some light upon the main meetings in general, for what should have been the norm at an evangelical gathering like this became the exception and one is forced to ask 'Why?' Given that the speakers were briefed to be expositional it is unlikely that there was a deliberate policy abroad to downgrade expository preaching. However, it surely does reflect upon the choice of speakers, a choice thrown into sharp relief by the number of gifted expositors in the gathering who could have carried out the task properly and to great effect. The price paid by the organizers of N.E.A.C. 3 in avoiding the inclusion of the 'evangelical stars' as one of them put it, was far too high, viz., a disappointingly general absence of an authentic Evangelical handling of Scripture.

One would have thought that after all the ink spilt at N.E.A.C. 2 on the subject of hermeneutics, we as Evangelicals would have learnt something, especially that it is the first horizon (the Scriptures) that is to be theologically determinative of the second horizon (our situation). This means that in practice good biblical exegesis is to be followed by radical application. But because by and large we lacked the former, the latter failed to get off the ground. Such was the feeling that Scripture was not being handled properly that one Anglo-Catholic clergyman in attendance remarked that he found our Evangelical theology to be deficient because our handling of Scripture was too simplistic—quite a challenge coming from such an unexpected quarter! One couple, a medical doctor and his wife who is a deacon in a struggling Evangelical parish said:

We came to N.E.A.C. 3 expecting and hungry for some strong Biblical meat, but found the diet very mixed . . . these two sheep went expecting food from the rich pastures of the Word; but at times were fed with much poorer pasture. If future celebrations do not look like providing such Scriptural food, then I can only say that we shall go elsewhere, with non-conformist brothers and sisters, to find the nourishment we need to keep going in Evangelical ministry.

Sadly, they were not alone in their sentiments.

N.E.A.C. 3 focuses on mission

So what is left of the final goal? I suspect not as much as there could have been and this is only to be expected if the biblical grounding is weak. In his concluding address, John Stott rightly maintained that evangelism and social action should be integrated. This is the biblical balance which is presented to us, although it must be said that in terms of *priority*, there is an asymmetry with the overriding emphasis on Gospel proclamation. But there were some signs at N.E.A.C. 3 that a significant theological shift is taking place in some quarters of 'Evangelicalism' whereby integration is giving way to identification. Thus, instead of evangelism being seen as something distinct but inseparable from social action, the former is being reduced to the latter. For instance, one notable workshop leader stated quite clearly that; 'The *content* of the Gospel is to be defined in terms of the physically and socially poor', a statement which could have come straight from the founder of the Social gospel movement—Rauschenbusch or more recently one of the advocates of Liberation Theology such as Gutiérrez. This was no 'off-the-cuff' remark, but central to his whole position. Now the implications of this are quite serious. It does raise the question as to whether the term 'Evangelical' has become so broad in Anglican circles that it is in effect meaningless unless carefully qualified. As the situation is at the present, the term runs the risk of being used as a semantic Trojan Horse for the demise of true Evangelicalism. What is more, unless we are agreed on what the Gospel message actually is, then how can we be clear over the form mission is to take in our world today? Let me hasten to add that the position mentioned above is as yet a marginal one and was by no means central to N.E.A.C. 3; nevertheless it is necessary for the sake of the Gospel and the future of Evangelicalism in the Church of England, that attention be drawn to it at this juncture.

The Future

In his 'Challenge of N.E.A.C. 3' Gavin Reid says:

If Evangelicals can discover a new togetherness and discover that around a thought out Biblical position which faces today's challenges; and if we can do that hand-in-hand with a reaffirmed determination to work within the Church of England as it is . . . this could be an historic moment. If we fail, if we fragment, then I am convinced the moment will not return in our lifetime.

Certainly a 'togetherness' was attempted at N.E.A.C. 3 as was the affirmation to work within the church of England as it is, but that

which is essential for true success and not simply an appearance of success was largely missing, namely a 'thought out biblical position'. Even if it could be claimed that this was taking place in the workshops as part of an ongoing process, from the point of view of enhancing coherence amongst Evangelicals, it needed to be manifest at the central meetings and this did not occur. Consequently tensions remain amongst Anglican Evangelicals, tensions which ironically may have been heightened by N.E.A.C. 3 and which can only be eased if we return to reaffirming the full authority and sufficiency of Scripture, not simply by making statements to that effect, but by handling God's Word aright and living under it in a bold uncompromising way.

A hundred years ago while referring to the Great Evangelical Awakening, Bishop J.C. Ryle wrote these words:

Wherein do Evangelical churchmen fall short of their great predecessors in the last century? They fall short in *doctrine*. They are neither so full nor so distinct. They are too ready to fence and guard and qualify their teaching as if Christ's Gospel was a little baby and could not be trusted to walk alone. They fall short as *preachers*. They have neither the favour, nor fire, nor thought, nor illustration nor directness nor holy boldness . . . which characterised the last century. Above all they fall short in *life*. They are not men of one thing, separate from the world . . . indifferent to man's opinion, regardless who is offended, if they only preach the truth, always about their Father's business.

He then goes on to offer some reasons for the poor state of Evangelicalism in the Church of England of his day and states:

Ease and popularity and the absence of persecution are ruinous to some. Political questions eat out the vitality of others. An extravagant and excessive attention to the petty details of parish machinery withers up the ministry of others. An absurd straining after the reputation of being 'intellectual' and original are the curse of others. A desire to seem charitable and liberal and to keep in with everybody paralyses the ministry of others. The plague is abroad. We want a revival amongst evangelical ministers.

It would be difficult to find a more fitting comment on N.E.A.C. 3 than these words which although written so long ago, have an unnervingly contemporary ring to them. Perhaps more importantly the issues they raise should form the basis of an agenda for any future N.E.A.C. gathering if what Francis Schaeffer calls the 'great evangelical disaster' is to be averted and true Evangelicalism restored.

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