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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 04

A STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Introduction. The idea of an 'Oxford Evangelical Research Centre' was first mooted in 1958. Its purpose, already described as 'A Strategic Priority', was to set aside a small team of scholars to think and make policies, and to write thoughtful and scholarly works, with a view to defending and vindicating evangelical Christianity, and re-establishing evangelicals in a position of theological leadership in the Church of England.

How far Latimer House has fulfilled this early vision we leave others to judge. The questions before us today are: is this a worthwhile enterprise? how can it be justified?

1. A biblical argument: The contemporary spread of anti-intellectualism in the church cannot be defended from the Bible. 'Commitment without reflexion is fanaticism in action'. The God of the Bible is a rational God who made us rational beings in his own likeness and has given us a rational revelation.

As we watch the apostles at work (the first evangelists), we see that they were not only proclaiming the gospel, but arguing it. They believed the gospel to be God's truth. So they sought to convince people in order to convert them. Luke keeps telling us in the Acts that many were 'persuaded'.

Similarly in Philippians 1 Paul describes his own ministry in terms not only of 'furthering' the gospel, but also of being engaged in its 'defence and confirmation'.

Such work is essential today. The so-called 'evangelical faith' is the faith of the gospel. And when the truth of the gospel is at stake, we cannot stand by and do nothing. We must defend it.

2. A historical argument: The great forward movements in the history of the church have been accompanied by theological renewal.

In the first three centuries Christianity was illegal, a *religio illicita*. But at the beginning of the fourth century the Emperor himself became a Christian. Crucial to this development were not only the writings of the apostles themselves, but also the works of the early Christian apologists like Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus and Origen. They vigorously defended the apostolic faith against heretics. As has been said, they out-lived, out-loved and out-thought their contemporaries.

Coming to the sixteenth century Reformation, although it can be explained partly in terms of sociology and nationalism, it was also fundamentally an intellectual movement. Luther, Calvin and the English reformers were men of God, men of the Bible, men of theology -they were not theological innovators, but defenders of ancient, biblical truth.

Today radical assaults are being made upon historic Christianity. Honest to God denied the personality of God. The Myth of God Incarnate denied the deity of Jesus. If the thesis of such books is true, the unique

distinction of Christianity has gone. There is no gospel left, for there is no Saviour, and there is no atonement. In its booklet Truth, Error and Discipline in the Church, published two years ago, the Church of England Evangelical Council called on the Bishops to discipline clergy who deny the fundamentals of the faith. Yet such a call for disciplinary measures rings a little hollow unless and until we can produce scholars of the same calibre as the heretics, who can overthrow them on their own theological ground. There is an urgent need to set aside able scholars who will do battle for God's truth.

3. A practical or strategic argument; Business men are sometimes represented as men of action rather than men of thought. This is a slander. The successful business man is a planner and a strategist. He looks ahead. He commissions research into market trends. He lays his plans with great care. Bernard Baruch expressed it thus: 'Whatever failures I have known, whatever errors I have committed, whatever follies I have witnessed in private and public life, have all been the consequence of action without thought.'

It is interesting to see that Dr. J. I. Packer, a distinguished former Warden of Latimer House, and later Chairman of the Council, recently called for a constructive evangelical response to modern trends, in order to reverse them. But 'will it ever be done', he asked, 'unless men are set aside to think and make policies (like the planners in any big business), and to write a constructive and forward-looking restatement of evangelical ideals?'

What filters down into school textbooks for children to read, and into the pulpits for church members to hear, all has its origin in the work of scholars and writers, and in the battle of ideas which they fight.

Conclusion

There is a tendency in some circles today not to wish to use the epithet 'evangelical'. It is understandable (for who likes to be labelled?) but shortsighted. An evangelical Christian is a gospel Christian, who believes, maintains and spreads the essential truths of the gospel. These cannot be surrendered. We evangelicals hold them in trust for the whole church. We have a solemn responsibility to summon the church to recover its heritage. To this end we need an Evangelical Research Centre. That is, we need Latimer House.

John Stott, President

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