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It has been an interesting 158-year experience from 1830 to 1988 and perhaps some may call it a "journey in the wilderness." There have surely been many lessons to be learned. We have at least discovered that we are not a perfect fellowship of Churches. Unity in Christ is not as easy as was believed in 1830! The great Augustinian slogan "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love," is much more difficult to live than to say. For we have had the greatest of difficulties in deciding what is an essential, and even greater difficulty in deciding that a non-essential may have liberty. But the experience has been of the utmost importance. For it is in that crucible that we have discovered the Christ afresh in the lives of men and women. For there we have rejoiced and wept together.

It is in the Church where we must bear witness to Christ. The Church is His body, a living organism seeking to respond to His call, seeking to be Christ to the men and women of our world. We could never be humble enough to be a reliable witness to the great things that promote the reformation of the Church, if we did not go through the experience of being the Church.

To summarise what I have been trying to say, it is this, that the great principles incorporated in the "Declaration and Address" can not really be given expression unless we have had the experience of being the Church. Without the experience of confronting our humanity in Christ in the Church, we would be far too arrogant and understand too little to be effective in the task of reform. Reform of the Church requires the qualities espoused by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to be a peacemaker, to be persecuted for righteousness sake.

THE EUROPEAN EVANGELISTIC SOCIETY

STRATEGIC WITNESSING

A LECTURE IN HONOUR OF

DEAN E. WALKER

BY

DONALD E. STEWART

Presented at

**The European Evangelistic Society Luncheon
at the World Convention of Churches of Christ**

at the Sheraton Auckland Hotel

Auckland, New Zealand

November 5, 1988

STRATEGIC WITNESSING

PRELIMINARY:

It is a great privilege and honour to be here today to participate in this first World Convention presentation of the Dean Walker lectureship in honour of the late Dr. Dean Walker. It is amazing how little communication there is between the Churches of our movement in America and in Australia. That tenuous relationship is carried on by the World Convention Secretariat and by a few individuals who maintain a useful contact between various parts of the fellowships in both the United States and Australia and New Zealand.

Distance and the lack of regular contact between our churches in my country, Australia, and the churches in the United States means that we are not always aware of who people are, and very few people of our American churches have become known at all in the Australian context. One of those few people to be known for his work has been Dr. Dean Walker.

It was my privilege, while on a visit to the United States in early 1988, to meet and spend an afternoon with Dr. and Mrs. Walker and a group of other friends. I recall that on that occasion we spent some time in discussing the work being carried on by the European Evangelistic Society in Tübingen, West Germany. In that conversation, I caught a glimpse of the greatness of that man. His death on April 4, 1988, is a severe loss to the whole movement. The loss of Dean Walker's stimulus means that for all of us there is the responsibility of pressing forward to seek in Jesus, as he did, both the source and object of faith, through whom man is restored to God's image and the church, conforming to that image is His body in the world. For me then it is a great honour, indeed, to be able to speak on this occasion. I therefore wish to thank the European Evangelistic Society for their kind invitation to deliver this lecture in appreciation of Dean E. Walker.

INTRODUCTION:

The great issue that brought our movement into being was the need for the reformation of the Church. It has always seemed to me that the Lutheran Reformation was incomplete. It was incomplete because it never did encompass the whole Church, and has never touched the Eastern Church. In the Western Church it gave rise to a concept of private interpretation that has led many people to do that which is "right in their own eyes" and by so doing has fractured the fellowship of the Church. Our movement came into being with a call to return to the principles and practices of the New Testament Church and the laying aside of the traditions of history, so that we may return to the simplicity and the divine power of that early Church.

This concept of reformation is simple and has been embraced by various people from time to time. Unfortunately those who seek to write our history often place us in a history that has a single developing strand originating with Thomas and Alexander Campbell on the American frontier. But our history is different from that. Various people at various times and in various places have seen the need for a renewal of the reformation begun by Luther. It should not be surprising that many of these people have been drawn into a fellowship of Churches seeking the restoration of the principles of Christianity as depicted in the New Testament.

The Campbell contribution has been the provision of a relatively comprehensive rationale that in a broad sense drew us together in common cause. Much that the Campbells desired to see has already been achieved. Sectarian division which held people apart has declined in its power and people in the United States and in Australia less often use "denomination" as the basis for selecting a Church fellowship to make their spiritual home. But this does not make me feel that we have achieved our purpose. For "the truth" is still a fundamental part of the Christian gospel. A great amorphous church loosely bound together in an undenominational fellowship is not the goal.

The goal we seek is a Church bound together by "the truth" of the Gospel. Even if we were to attain Church unity, if it did not contain "the truth" of the Gospel, then God would raise up people who would destroy that unity to seek "the truth".

The time is now well overdue when we should be taking a fresh look at our strategy for witness to the things that God called us to be for His Church. The sectarian divisions have new opennesses and subtle shut-outs that need to be taken into consideration in the presentation of the old-ever-new-truth.

THE DECLARATION AND ADDRESS:

In 1809, when Thomas Campbell withdrew from the Seceder Presbyterian Church and published the "Declaration and Address," Australian settlement consisted of the main settlement at Sydney, bound in by the Blue Mountains, with two small settlements at Hobart and Launceston in Van Dieman's Land, or as it is known today as Tasmania, with the latter having been established only three years earlier.

What was of importance in the "Declaration and Address" written by Thomas Campbell in 1809, was that this document was definitely not for the formation of a Church. It heralded the formation of an association which would see as its purpose "to support a pure Gospel ministry that shall reduce to practice that whole form of doctrine, worship, discipline and government, expressly revealed and enjoined in the word of God."¹ They went on to declare that they were "voluntary advocates for church reformation."² They declared in Clause V "That this society, formed for the sole purpose of promoting simple, evangelical Christianity, shall, to the utmost of its power, countenance and support such ministers, and such only, as exhibit a manifest conformity to the original standard in conversion and doctrine, in zeal and diligence; only such as reduce to practice that simple, original form of Christianity expressly exhibited upon the sacred page, without attempting to inculcate anything of human authority, of private opinion, or inventions of men as having any place in the constitution, faith, or worship of the Christian Church or anything as a matter of Christian faith, or duty, for which there can not be expressly produced a "thus saith the Lord," either in express terms, or by approved precedent."³

From this declaration it is clear that this society was formed with the intention of not becoming a Church but to be an influence far and wide for the principles for which they stood. While they carefully prescribed whom they would support, they clearly had in mind the influencing of people beyond their own company as to the correctness of their position and a desire that such persons would embrace the same position.

While our movement has found in the "Declaration and Address" of the Christian Association of Washington, the heartland for the content of our movement, it has been unfortunate that this society came into being when it did, for its intention has been lost in the subsequent formation into a fellowship of Churches. Allow me to explain what I mean. Historically the "Declaration and Address" precedes the formation of a fellowship of Churches and therefore the fellowship of Churches has never been committed to the influencing of the wider (whole) Christian Church to these "truths." The result is that we have tended to spend much of our time navel-gazing and conducting endless purges of our brethren. Had this concept come at a later time in our movement's history, then our history may have taken a much more influential and useful turn for the Kingdom of God.

I want to propose that there is a bigness to our movement which should seek to be an influence across the whole spectrum of the Church. There is a need to

reactivate the Christian Association of Washington or some other like body to actively promote, from a non-sectarian base, those "truths" which lie at the foundation of our fellowship of Churches. You may well ask, why can we not do this from within the fellowship of Churches. The answer is simple - that is not the purpose of a Church fellowship. A Church fellowship is to provide pastoral care and support of the membership in their witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. At the present time we are frustrated in our endeavours to be both the Church and to promote a concept of the Church to a wider competitive church scene. I have listened to the frustration of some of our ministers fired up with what we stand for as a movement but unable, in the work of ministry in the Church, to be able to find how they might give useful expression to those very concepts that fire them up.

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of the message.

It is difficult to evaluate the breadth of the impact of the work of the European Evangelistic Society in Tübingen, but I believe that it has been significant. Perhaps a small Australian anecdote can help to demonstrate what is happening. Dr Robert Banks, an Anglican (Episcopalian) Minister spent a sabbatical term at the University of Tübingen, and there discovered our Christliche Gemeinde and the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins. He wrote the fascinating little book *Going to Church in the First Century*. He subtitled it "an eyewitness account". It is not difficult to see the members of our Gemeinde in the characters of his book. In the preface he acknowledges the assistance of the Gemeinde and the Institute.⁵ The sort of theology that Dr. Banks presents in his book *Paul's Idea of Community*⁶. Its well the concepts that lie at the heart of our movement. This anecdote is being repeated in many ways and in many places.

The work of the European Evangelistic Society is picking up the two strands of being an influence and of being a living Church fellowship in the Tübingen scene.

THE BASIS FOR A STRATEGY:

What I have been trying to argue is that in the very early stages of our movement the question of influence on the wider Christian Community was of great importance, but that desire to influence has largely been lost in the work of forming a fellowship of congregations. Both activities are of great importance if we are to truly share the "truth" that God has entrusted to us. That "truth" needs to be tested in the arena of Christian thinking and theology and upon the plane of Church fellowship.

The European Evangelistic Society experiment in Tübingen has sought to capture these two elements and at the same time engage in the process of Christian Theology in one of the great world centres for Christian thinking and teaching. The experiment has had its difficulties. There have been difficulties in finding suitable Directors. There have been difficulties in the provision of funds. There has been the difficulty of developing a new Church fellowship in a culture dominated by centuries of the "Landeskirche." There are difficulties in getting the idea of this ministry and concepts about this ministry across to our own peoples. But the experiment has been successful, and I believe, will continue to be successful.

However, that does not mean to say that the process has been perfect or that it can not be improved upon. Central to this whole process is the confrontation with the "truth of the Gospel" when we, from our perspectives, share with others from different perspectives, our unique understanding of that "truth". The fact is that the interchange expands the understanding of the "truth", providing new insights. The problem confronting the European Evangelistic Society is how this process may be

THE TUBINGEN EXPERIMENT:

The University of Tübingen was founded in 1477 and for much of its history its faculty of Theology has been one of the most important in Europe. It was one of the early teaching schools for the reformation. Philipp Melancthon, one of Luther's lieutenants, taught in Tübingen.

The European Evangelistic Society chose Tübingen because it was a world centre for theological thinking and an important teaching school. The Tübingen theological school also had an openness to new ideas and valued that as one of the features of the faculty. Names such as Hans Küng, Otto Betz, Martin Hengel, Peter Stuhlmacher and Jürgen Moltmann bear testimony to the wisdom of the choice of Tübingen. I shall never forget the excitement I felt the first time I read Küng's "The Church" for in places it seemed to me that he was talking about the Church in the way that Campbell had spoken of the Church, certainly better than I was telling it. I asked myself, "Is it possible that he has been influenced by our movement?"

I do not know if Küng had been influenced in any way or whether he came to his conclusions by himself, but I do know that there is a friendship between him and the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins that the European Evangelistic Society has established in Tübingen. Similarly I do know of the regard which Moltmann holds for the Institute. I also know that when James Dunn, the British theologian and Bible Scholar, goes to Tübingen, he worships at the Christliche Gemeinde which is the Church fellowship that has grown alongside the Institute, and has been supported by the European Evangelistic Society.

What the European Evangelistic Society has done is to establish two things in Tübingen. The first is the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins, which is dedicated to the study of the Early Church, to seek to uncover the principles of New Testament Christianity, and to engage students and professors in study and exchange on these issues.

The second thing that has been done has been the establishment of a Church fellowship or Gemeinde to complement the Institute. Here there is a living example of the kind of Church fellowship that they talk about in the Institute. It becomes the crucible in which the issues are worked out by the local fellowship. Here student ministers come to find a fellowship and are inspired by the newness of the experience. It thus becomes a talking point among the student body as they consider the issues that it brings to their attention. Some go out to minister in the Evangelical Church of Germany with the experience of worship in the Gemeinde and the impact of the preaching and study in the Gemeinde as an influence upon them. There is therefore available both an academic intellectual experience and a living emotional experience

shared more widely, so that our broader Church community may share in these new insights into the "truth". There are opportunities for some of our scholars and budding scholars to engage in studies at Tübingen. We need to encourage that process and develop it further. But there is a need to widen the exchange. I want to suggest that the Society should look at the possibility of audio and/or video taping the seminars and workshops for "sale" to our ministry training institutions, and to ministers in the field so that these students may participate in the exchange also.

The other point that I wish to make is that this lone experiment points the way to repeating the experiment in other great centres for the study and teaching of theology. We have a "truth" to share, and need to learn the "truth" as well from others who have been given that task from God also. Tackling up this Strategic Witnessing will mean that we must cross other language barriers, cultural barriers, ecclesiastical barriers and any other sort of barrier to share our "truth", both academically and in the Church fellowship.

CONCLUSION:

On a visit to Australia, promoting the concepts of Church Growth, Dr. Win Arn told an interesting little story. In a small fishing village a tour party made their way down to the fishing jetty and there they found a few of the local folk fishing. Their attention was attracted to one particular fisherman. He threw out his line and when he caught a fish, hauled it in and measured it against his measure. If the fish was smaller than his measure he placed it in his bag, but if it was larger than his measure he threw it back. The tourists were puzzled. Caught a big one - threw it straight back. At last one of the tourists could stand it no longer so he went over to the man and asked him why he threw the big ones back and only kept the little ones. "Why, that's simple," he answered. "I only have a ten-inch frying pan."

If you want to know who that fisherman is, then let me tell you that you see him each morning in the mirror. Who of us have not had a small dream that we knew we could bring into being, we put that in our bag; but the big dreams that God gives us - don't we throw those back as not able to be accomplished!

The dream that the European Evangelistic Society has is big one - can we, dare we, try to put it into our bag - or do we throw it back in God's face as beyond us to accomplish, even with his help?

END NOTES:

1. W.E. Garrison and A.T. DeGroot, The Disciples of Christ A History, (St. Louis: The Bethany Press), 1958, p.147.
2. *ibid* P. 147
3. *ibid* P. 147
4. Owen Chadwick, The Reformation, (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books), 1968, P.42
5. Robert Banks, Going to Church in the First Century, (Chipping Norton, N.S.W., Australia: Hexagon Press), 1980, P.6.
6. _____, Paul's Idea of Community, (Homebush West, N.S.W., Australia: Lancer Books), 1979.

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