

Reflections on Theological Education and the Future of Independency

I don't often chat to archbishops but a conversation I had with Peter Jensen of Sydney a few years ago left a significant impression upon me. I had been explaining to him about Affinity. He listened patiently and then the conversation took an unexpected turn as he asked, 'Where's your training institution?' 'So you don't expect us all to pile into Oak Hill?' 'Not if you care about the future of Free churches' was the gist of his answer.

A squandered heritage

Then he wanted to know what had happened to the non-conformist conscience over the last fifty years. It was clear that his explanation for the collapse of significant Free Church leadership within conservative evangelicalism in the UK lay in our failure to produce men of sufficient calibre. And that was because we had failed to provide the means. We had squandered our heritage and surrendered the leadership of conservative evangelicalism to a new breed of Anglicans who had eagerly and efficiently picked up the baton. In his eyes, what we needed was patently obvious: a seminary of international standing, a centre of excellence in theological education and ministry training, which was unashamedly Bible-centred, gospel-focused and culturally-engaged, and yet had its roots deep in the soil of our historic Free Church tradition.

I was wrestling with the thought of coming to WEST at the time and that providential exchange helped seal my decision. I care passionately about ecclesiology. In a sense it's a secondary issue, in a sense it's not. 'Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5:25). Nothing in the universe matters more to God. We would therefore expect that, even if there is no blueprint, the New Testament should at least outline the shape that the Church should take. On that basis, if I had to adopt one of the traditional models that have been handed down to us, I would choose Independency over Episcopalianism or Presbyterianism. But traditional Independency is still not, in my view, a very seaworthy vessel – and it certainly leaks like a sieve whenever the gospel demands wide-scale, particularly *national*, co-operation between Bible-centred churches.

Regional training schemes

I have always been a fan of regional, part-time, leadership training schemes. Back in the late 80's we began one at Carey Baptist Church, when the idea was still something of a novelty. We stopped it in the early 90's in order to host the FIEC *Prepared for Service* programme, which has run successfully ever since. Over this period, the undoubtedly biblical concept of 'training' has been generally rediscovered. Everybody seems to be doing it! Mid-range, Bible-handling courses have proliferated, both within and outside the excellent Gospel Partnership movement. It's great when likeminded churches pool their resources and get together in this way. Many churches and individuals have benefitted enormously. But whatever needs they meet, they are not answering the question I am asking here.

The difficulty I have is with the assumption that these mid-level courses can provide an adequate preparation for men wishing to embark on a lifetime of univocational, Bible-centred ministry – for those who want to be the church planters and builders of the future. I am not suggesting that those who run these courses necessarily make this assumption. Those of us who supervised *PfS* were constantly embarrassed when men passing through our two-year, part-time course were immediately snapped up as church pastors. That had never been the intention. Similarly, the current brochure of the prestigious *Cornhill Training Course* makes the point that, having successfully completed the programme, those bound for pastoral ministry should now apply to a good theological college – like Oak Hill, Wycliffe or WEST...

Avoiding the trap

Leaving aside for a moment any consideration of doctrinal soundness, it is highly unusual for anyone to enter the pastorate in most mainline denominations without a high level of theological education. But, almost uniquely, UK Independency seems not to value or even to appreciate the need for a comprehensive, theological, biblical, practical and spiritual preparation for those who will lead its churches. We may well insist that our doctors and even our plumbers have the best possible education and training, but we often appear not to be so concerned about those who instruct us regarding our eternal destiny. There is, of course, a complex history of political, cultural and ecclesiological reasons for this attitude which, you'll be grateful to know, I've no intention of going into here!

The trouble is that our constituency shows few signs of learning to avoid this trap. Even progressive Independency can still suffer from traditional weaknesses which do not help in this area – for example, the notion that small is necessarily beautiful or that church-centredness always implies a focus on the individual congregation. Leadership training is therefore best done by an individual church, or at least by a regional network of churches, as though true fellowship cannot extend beyond limited geographical boundaries – not a concept that hinders Anglicanism or Presbyterianism, with their instinctive grasp of the global nature of Christ's Church. Surely the truth is that if a small number of likeminded churches in a region can work together to steer and support the kind of mid-level courses we have been talking about, then a large number of like-minded churches, working together at a national level if necessary, can do the same for one or more centres of excellence.

Connecting the dots

However, here's the bottom line, as far as I'm concerned. From a purely human perspective, whatever the cause, the generally low level of theological training within Independency in the UK has contributed *more than any other single identifiable factor* to the progressive marginalisation of our constituency within conservative evangelicalism over the last century. With one or two glorious, but misleading, exceptions, the truth is that we are not producing the key, Word-and-Spirit-saturated preachers, thinkers and writers who will capture and mould the imagination of the next generation of believers. The result is that we have become theologically parasitic. By which I mean that we have become largely dependent upon the resources produced by others. To give a blunt example, the students who pass through our numerous mid-level training courses are unlikely ever to write the books their successors will be required to read. We are well off the pace. And if we continue as we are, then our constituency will continue to decline. It is little wonder that we are at best graciously accommodated and at worst totally ignored by those who set the agenda in the wider evangelical world.

I have spent much of my life working for the cause of biblical church unity. No one is happier than I am at the progress that has been made in recent years in healing historic breaches between various segments of conservative evangelicalism. I believe we are witnessing a work of God. But we must remember that true ecumenism transcends 'secondary' differences, it does not obliterate them. The keenest proponents of gospel coalition within the Anglican and Presbyterian folds are not longing for the day when their seminaries will lose their ecclesiological and denominational distinctives! Nor should they, as long as they believe they have Scripture on their side. That is why the Archbishop's question is neither odd nor out of place. Those of us who see more radical and organic models of church government revealed in the pages of the New Testament really do need to connect the dots – before it is too late.

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