

Editorial

Ecumenical discussions have taken a new turn of late, with the growing recognition that Evangelicals have been underrepresented in them. This is a development which must be welcomed, particularly when the omission is rectified by so excellent a document as *The Evangelical—Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977–1984* which has recently been published by Paternoster. Here at last is a document which takes seriously the theological differences which separate Evangelicals from Roman Catholics, which expresses differences in a charitable and eirenic manner, and which seeks to find a way forward without compromising the basic principles of either side. One does not have to agree with everything the report says to recognise that here is real progress which ought to be encouraged and extended to other areas of ecumenical dialogue as well.

The fundamental difference between the Evangelical and the Catholic approach to Christianity is simply that Evangelicals believe that a personal relationship to God in Christ (i.e. justification by faith alone) is the essential foundation of the Church's spiritual life. Without that, sacraments, hierarchies and even doctrines avail us nothing. Roman Catholics, on the other hand, put less emphasis on the personal, which they regard as too subjective, and concentrate on the objective truths which they believe the Church possesses, even if they are not always fully manifested in every individual or local congregation. These differences come out most clearly when we are discussing the depraved state of fallen man and the nature of Christian assurance—is it in the heart or in the Church?

These differences are fundamental and will not go away, however, polite we are to one another. It is the failure to understand this which has caused so much grief in the wake of the ARCIC discussions and which will continue to sow seeds of dissension, even among convinced Evangelicals. It is therefore all the more heartening to realise that there are many people who, though they are not Evangelical by conviction, share the same fundamental misgivings about the ARCIC agreements as we do. As Paul Avis has pointed out in his recent book *Ecumenical Theology*, published by SPCK, the ARCIC discussions suffered from a failure to get to grips with the reality of the Church, both Protestant and Catholic. Instead of facing the facts as they are, the partners in dialogue preferred a quasi-mythical ideal model of the Church, which has no real existence. ARCIC is an extended exercise in wishful thinking which is bound to come to grief sooner or later. The tragedy is that those who insist on looking reality in the face will be accused of 'wrecking' a grandiose

Churchman

scheme, when in fact they may really be preparing the ground for authentic discussion of real problems and differences of outlook.

Evangelical Anglicans have a peculiar responsibility, in the present circumstances, to plead for a realistic approach to other Churches, and in particular to the Church of Rome. We are not wreckers, tied to an outmoded theology, but witnesses to vital truths which have been obscured (or simply not understood) by those who have engaged in ecumenical dialogue. It is in this spirit that we must continue to press for fair representation in the councils of the Church, and not weaken in our resolve to see that essential spiritual principles be proclaimed for the benefit of Evangelicals and Catholics alike.

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