

AFFINITY

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“Dozing fitfully on the UK evangelical scene for the last two or three decades has been a creature that is just beginning to wake up and smell the coffee.” With these words, Jonathan Stephen prepares his readers for a revamped British Evangelical Council under a new name (*The Briefing*, September 2003). We now know that the Council has turned into Affinity. But what was this “dozing creature” and what has it woken up to become?

The British Evangelical Council (BEC) was founded in 1952 by G.N.M. Collins, Murdoch Macrae, T.H. Bendor-Samuel and E.J. Poole-Connor (who also in 1922 founded what became the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches). BEC provided gospel churches with a means of cooperation and a vehicle for unity: “a haven and an identity.” Eventually consisting of 12 Constituent Member church bodies and over 45 Associate Member local churches, it represented some 1,200 local churches containing (in 2002) about 80,000 members.

After the 1960s, the BEC gained new impetus through the advocacy of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. His leadership clarified for evangelicals doctrinal orthodoxy and true church unity. He continued the stand previously made by C.H. Spurgeon and E.J. Poole-Connor. Spurgeon combated the Higher Criticism infesting the nonconformity of his day. Poole-Connor opposed the *fruit* of that liberalism: the Ecumenical Movement. And Lloyd-Jones’ powerful preaching rallied us to fidelity to Scripture and separation from ecumenical compromise. He endorsed the BEC as providing the unity and fellowship needed in critical days.

Since Lloyd-Jones’ home-call in 1981, BEC has made a noble contribution to evangelical witness in the UK and beyond. However, in recent years some became frustrated with it, maintaining that things have moved on and BEC was moribund in its current form. Chief among its critics has been Jonathan Stephen, minister of Carey Baptist Church, Reading and former President of the FIEC. He maintained that BEC was “too narrowly Reformed, culturally disengaged and defensively negative” (Interview in *Evangelicals Now*, August 2003).

Come the Spring of 2004, chiefly through Jonathan Stephen, the “dozing creature” woke up for the 21st century and was re-launched as Affinity. A year on it will be quite well-known to our readers, but what are we to make of it? Bible League supporters will be interested, not least because E.J. Poole-Connor (a founder BEC and of FIEC) also edited this magazine from 1954 until 1961, shortly before his death. In his day, he was an astute judge of these matters. If he were with us now, what would *he* make of Affinity? What should *we* make of it? The Bible League believes that Poole- Connor would - and that we should – have some concerns about this new body.

1. We should be worried about Affinity’s pedigree.

Judging from the series of events leading to its launch, it seems that Affinity has evolved from something that was tried before and failed: Essentially Evangelical (EE).

This initiative started in 1998 when "80 Christian leaders met ... for an informal two-day consultation at High Leigh, to consider the need to work more closely together than they have done for many years. They came from a variety of groupings, including Anglican (Reform), Grace Baptist, FIEC and Free Church of Scotland, and from a range of Christian agencies" (*Evangelicals Now* article, August 1998). The Steering Committee included Jonathan Stephen, Brian Edwards and Melvin Tinker. The latter is an evangelical Anglican, and in his book *Evangelical Concerns* (Christian Focus), he rejects the literal six-day creation of Genesis 1. This indicates how "essentially" evangelical one could be. We suspect that a low common denominator would have done.

However, by January 2003 *Evangelical Times* reported that, "Essentially Evangelical ... has been wound up as an active organisation. The aim of the initiative was to bring together diverse groups who could recognise one another's ministries as containing the essentials of evangelical doctrine. However, many felt ... uneasy about the apparent willingness to include Charismatic leaders, with their commitment to ecumenism, within the 'essentially evangelical' fold" (Italics mine). If EE had materialised, it may well have become the modernised BEC we now know as Affinity.

As it was, strong discontent with BEC continued, notably from Jonathan Stephen. In March 2002, at the suggestion of FIEC, a conference was held at Cloverley Hall, Shropshire. Some 35 people representing most of the BEC's constituent members gathered to,

"[Look] at the present structures, activities, resources and aims of the BEC, asking what was of lasting value and what needed to be rethought.

What do we do well, and how could we do it better? How can we best relate to the outside world, and to other Christian institutions?

How can we improve our public image (it was generally agreed that a change of name was desirable)? How should we relate to those making a clear biblical stand within the denominations? And so on" (*Evangelical Times*, based on *In Step*, Spring 2002).

One result of the conference was to make Jonathan Stephen the BEC's newly-created Director, with a brief to initiate changes envisaged at Cloverley Hall. The goal was, in his words, a "re-invigorated, re-focussed and re-presented BEC" (*In Step*, Autumn 2003).

By Spring 2004, Affinity had arrived. John Benton, editor of *Evangelicals Now*, reported,

"The British Evangelical Council (BEC) has re-invented itself. Its re-launch took place on March 25 at a smart London hotel, with a swish DVD presentation and reporters from national daily newspapers present.

It has a new name - 'Affinity,' with a subtitle, 'Church-centred Partnership for Bible-centred Christianity.' It also has a new director - Jonathan Stephen. With over 1,200 congregations already involved, the future possibilities for Affinity are promising ...

The mission statement of Affinity covers five broad areas: to promote unity and godliness across churches and Christian organisations; to support the planting of Bible-centred evangelical churches across the denominations; to engage publicly with government and the media from a biblical perspective; to advance theological understanding and the acceptance of biblical Christianity in the nation; and to express unity and fellowship with like-minded churches worldwide" (EN, May 2004).

With Affinity it seems that the EE vision, and more, has been realised. In *this* form, the "essentials" of evangelicalism will be represented in a similar body with another name. We fear that Affinity is the EE cuckoo in the BEC nest that will follow its agenda - an agenda that we are entitled to view with misgivings.

2. Affinity seems to lack clarity and robustness.

The well-produced publicity material has slogans aplenty. Affinity is described as "Church-centred Partnership for Bible-centred Christianity," its stated aim is to "declare and demonstrate the unity of Christ's church for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom," and it claims to be "Bible-driven and Church-focussed." As well as a "Mission Statement," it has a Doctrinal Basis consisting of seven brief statements: the Bible, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, man's ruin and salvation by grace alone, the resurrection and final judgment, and the spiritual unity of true believers.

This all appears fine, but given today's climate is it sufficiently detailed and distinctive? Modern evangelicalism is vastly different from when the old BEC served like-minded churches so well. From 1952 onwards, the twin-headed enemy was theological liberalism (with its ecumenical dream) and popery (with its blasphemous pretensions). To be Bible-centred and evangelical in those days was a clear-cut matter: it involved rejecting this enemy and cleaving to biblical truth; it marked people out unambiguously.

Now, however, although liberalism and popery are still with us, the battle lines are differently drawn. The twin-headed enemy has grown extra heads. Therefore, the statements of belief that differentiated true evangelicals are no longer sufficient. They are so stretchable that charismatics and even ecumenists can claim to be Bible-centred and evangelical these days. The Alpha Course says it is evangelical, but the latest we hear is that it is "Gayfriendly," much to the delight of the Gay and Lesbian "Christian" Movement; it is also endorsed and used by the Roman Catholic Church. The Evangelical Alliance has a doctrinal basis and mission statement, yet it has churches that are members of ecumenically favourable denominations, and individuals who are liberals.

The current scene has made some churches and evangelical bodies re-evaluate their statements of faith and principles of practice. Terms that were clear enough in the 1950s onwards are not clear enough now that they are interpreted differently or stretched to mean almost their opposite. Therefore, extra clauses are added to tighten up their position on the Charismatic Movement, the downgrade in Bible translations, literal six-day creation, the eternal *conscious* punishment of the wicked, co-operation with other churches/Christian

societies, justification by faith, and so on. If we are to earnestly contend for the faith in our day this is the least we should do.

Roger Fay, in the *Evangelical Times* for May 2004, perceptibly noted this. Reporting Affinity's launch he wrote,

"No reference was made during the hour-long press conference to former leaders of the BEC movement, such as E.J. Poole-Connor and D.M. Lloyd-Jones. Minimal definition was given to Affinity's doctrinal stance. The overall impression was of much enthusiasm, sincerity and good will on behalf of the Lord's people - but also of theological un-preparedness. Not only is it a dangerous world 'out there' but Evangelicals today must be prepared to fight enemies who infiltrate their own camp. Affinity and its many constituent bodies will have to keep their wits about them to avoid receding into theological oblivion as the 21st century unfolds..."

The following month's issue carried a letter from one of Affinity's supporters, Mike Plant, who expressed his "disappointment at the rather cool welcome in ET to the re-launching of the British Evangelical Council as Affinity." However, like ET, the BLQ shares the reasonable concern expressed, and doubts that Affinity will be able to give clarity and strength to the confused evangelicalism of our day. It may well become just another part of the problem.

3. Many doubt Affinity's separatist credentials.

The old BEC, despite its shortcomings, had a rugged clarity about its stance re false ecumenism. In the late 1960s Dr. Lloyd-Jones had enough confidence in it to urge churches under its umbrella for fellowship and witness not to be found elsewhere. Its ministry extended beyond that, including special meetings addressed by men on subjects of vital importance, and publications addressing the issues of the day.

This clear stand regarding separation from error and errorists is needed more than ever today. Yet the teaching that has prepared the way for Affinity lacks the credibility of the old BEC. When EE was mooted, the FIEC invited Jonathan Stephen to write a booklet clarifying its position on unity with others. The result was *Bible Churches Together, A Plea for True Ecumenism*. Its 48 pages prompted Peter Masters and the late David Fountain (in the *Sword and Trowel*) to accuse FIEC of "a break with founding principles, because Pastor Stephen calls for unity with evangelicals in compromised denominations through the new association named *Essentially Evangelical*." We afterwards published these articles, with an added appendix by David Fountain, providing further evidence for this changed position (see BLQ July-September, 2001).

Then, in *Evangelicals Now*, from November 2000 to January 2001, three articles appeared entitled "Hyper-separatism (or contracting the circle)" by Jonathan Stephen, Brian Edwards and John Rosser. These attempted to answer the allegations of Messrs Masters and Fountain. In doing so, the three writers dismiss the *Sword and Trowel* as "a magazine that represents one constituency within British evangelicalism" and of promoting a hyper-separatism belonging "more to the peculiarities of early 20th century fundamentalism."

In the same paper, in February 2001, an alarmed Stuart Olyott wrote: "The three articles on 'Hyper-separatism' by Jonathan Stephen, Brian Edwards and John Rosser have caused me a great deal of distress. I know of many others who have had the same reaction. I believe that anyone who follows what my three friends have recommended will be making a very big mistake indeed ... So what distresses me about the three articles? It is that they do not tie up with Scripture."

We have no space here to examine all this in detail. However, if older men felt it necessary to take the architects of EE to task like this, it does not encourage us to believe Affinity will be all that BEC was in its separatist stance. When we remember that *Sword and Trowel* represents a considerable swathe of reformed conviction in the UK and beyond, and Stuart Olyott can write of "many others who have had the same reaction," should this not suggest to us that something new is afoot, rather than a continuation in the old paths? Even John Benton of EN sensed this: "...it was good to see many leaders, both Free Church and Anglican, giving their backing to Affinity. Jonathan Stephen said that he very much wanted to 'develop the Anglican dimension.' This is not a totally new departure, but *does represent quite a change from the early days of BEC*" (May 2004, italics mine).

4. Affinity does not appear to be in safe hands.

We have no wish to criticise individuals, but we must say that the leading players in the creation of Affinity are well-known for other initiatives that have been controversial and dismaying. For instance, there is the FIEC. So changed from Poole-Connor's day, its member-churches include those with charismatic, entertainment-style "worship." It was largely behind the infamous *Praise!* Hymn book, replete with charismatic ditties and ecumenical songs. Affinity's Director, Jonathan Stephen, was on the Editorial Board of this hymnal.

Then, Brian Edwards has publicly stated, in a sermon on unity within the local church, that certain matters have an importance that is only imaginary. A writer in *Protestant Truth* for July- August 2004 attended a meeting where "He (Edwards) put forward the theory of three levels of truth, the first being 'essential truth,' by which he means such things as are essential for salvation. Then there was 'significant truth' which covers things like church government and the mode of baptism. His final category was 'phantom truth' which was undefined, but we were left to assume it included things like styles of worship, hymnody, and perhaps Bible versions." Such teaching implies that these important issues are merely cultural or matters of personal preference. Again, not very reassuring.

Most worrying of all are the words of Messrs Stephen, Edwards and Rosser in their articles on "hyper-separation." For example: "The hyper-separatist mindset has a no-tolerance (or low-tolerance) policy ... its defensive instincts tend to think of inter-church fellowship as operating rather like a drawbridge, which is either up or down. It believes that fellowship should be either wholehearted or non-existent. For the hyper-separatist any suggestion of shades of fellowship conveys the impression of woolly-thinking and compromise. The measure of agreement required at every point therefore has to be extremely high" (EN November 2000).

We can only deduce from this that convictions regarding Bible translations, the character of divine worship, co-operation with charismatics, carnal methods of evangelism, etc. are seen

as hindrances to the unity now envisaged by Affinity. If this is the case, who is really guilty of keeping others at bay? For many people, Affinity's criteria for fellowship and co-operation will be wider than is biblical and more inclusive than is acceptable. This point was made in passing by W. John Cook in a letter to ET: "I share your concerns about the nature of Affinity, and it seems to me there is an unwillingness to stand clearly for the doctrines of grace and too much sympathy for 'charismatic' views" (ET, January 2005).

Given that this is so, we can only foresee Affinity being another factor in the downgrade that we are witnessing on every hand in today's evangelical/reformed scene. It seems ironic that Jonathan Stephen should describe the Evangelical Alliance as "doctrinally weak, ecumenically compromised and charismatically dominated" (EN, August 2003), when that may well be the way Affinity itself will go. Co-operation between the two bodies seems likely, judging by Joel Edwards, General Director of the Evangelical Alliance,

"I applaud anything that brings evangelicals together. I have talked with Jonathan Stephen. I think it's courageous of Affinity to have dropped the label 'evangelical,' and I understand in some ways why they could afford to do that more than EA. I hope for increasing support and complementarity between us, while at the same time being able to challenge one another as colleagues" (EN, Interview, September 2004).

5. Affinity will not provide the platform for the unity that is needed today.

Such confusion and ignorance abounds, that more than what Affinity envisages is needed to form a basis of belonging and shared witness. This is highlighted by Peter Glover: "Setting forth just a few central doctrines of the faith as the only non-negotiables is undoubtedly what has kept the old BEC from the same doctrine-less mire that the liberal Evangelical Alliance today wallows in. But by having the same basic, minimalist approach as the old BEC and EA, with vague claims to being 'Bible-centred' while not requiring confessional standards of itself or for its member churches, Affinity can only, at best, promote the vaguest, indeterminate kind of biblicism. At worst, it must allow its churches a considerably liberal approach to Scripture, including the promotion of Wordfaith Pentecostal and charismatic beliefs – just as the BEC allowed membership to the Apostolic Church, with its highly non-evangelical system of beliefs" (article "Why Affinity is not the answer to evangelical woes").

Clearly, a confessional and principled approach to unity is the only realistic one. The ideal basis for coming together should consist of the "three R's" – Reformed doctrine, Regulative Principle and Received Text. Put another way, it would be *adherence to confessional Christianity*, as in the Westminster, Savoy and Baptist Confessions; *adherence to worship sanctioned by Scripture only*, and not to modern trends; and *the use of the Authorised Version*, as opposed to paraphrase Bibles or those based upon critical New Testament texts. Such a basis will seem narrow and exclusive to the mindset of Affinity: "insulated in our own familiar circles - spiritually unbalanced, impoverished and culture bound." However, it fairly represents much of the consensus in the historic evangelicalism of better days.

In fact, such a unity and co-operation already exists among churches that represent the "three R's." Without the need to formally join in a body or be always organising things, these churches and individuals enjoy deep and fruitful fellowship with each other. Such bonds are cherished and furthered among us, whether we are Presbyterian, Church of England Continuing, Baptist, etc. – biblical and Reformation verities being what we have in common. While Affinity seems to want to break with the past (and according to Peter Masters, re-write the past), this unity is simply a continuity of all that was best represented by our forefathers.

A gulf is opening up between modernisers and those who walk the old paths. The times require us to be clear on this. Evangelicalism is heading down a different road from the days when BEC did its best work. The creeping virus of new worship and the mania for contemporariness threatens our very existence. Affinity will be another engine for change and will help accelerate the new direction. That the times call for Christian unity and solidarity we do not deny. That biblical ecumenism is a commanded blessing we would not dispute. That Bible churches working together for the extension of the kingdom is necessary we readily agree. But that Affinity provides the means to do these things we sadly doubt.

May the Lord help us to be discerning and vigilant in these strange days, and enable us to serve our generation aright. We need wisdom and courage to resist the pressures and follow our convictions. That alone will entitle us to be called "they that ... build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in" (Isaiah 58:12).

POSTSCRIPT: We have the greatest respect for Rev. Peter Beale, Chairman of the BEC since 2002 and now Chairman of Affinity. Also, for the churches who now find themselves members of this new body through their previous membership of the BEC. In nothing we have said do we wish to reflect upon friends and churches whom we esteem highly in the Lord.