

Stand Fast for Authentic Evangelicalism (Part 1)

Rev F. J. Harris (Cheltenham)

At the Fourteenth Salisbury Conference, held on 1st and 2nd October, 2010, the General Theme was "Stand Fast in the Faith." Our good friend, Rev. F.J. Harris, delivered the second address on that occasion and those in attendance found it most informative, challenging and beneficial. He has kindly given permission for it to be serialized in The Messenger and we are very pleased to include here the first part of his address. M.H.W.

I look around this congregation and I address you as my dear friends, many of whom I have known, loved and respected for many years. We have stood shoulder to shoulder in our struggles and desires to fight for that authentic evangelicalism which is under such attack today.

Others of you I do not know, at least not well, and it is most encouraging to see so

many of you here today who are young in years and no doubt young in faith. A very solemn responsibility rests upon you young ones to whom many of us who are older will have to pass on the torch of truth. My prayer has been that this Conference will help to equip you for that great task by giving you some understanding of the past, helping you as you live in and face the present and giving you confidence for the struggles that undoubtedly lie ahead.

I also want to say that I truly count it an honour and privilege to have been invited to speak at this 14th Salisbury Conference.

When I consider the godly and gifted men who have ministered from this pulpit during former conferences I must confess

that my heart quailed when Mr. Watts first asked me to consider giving this address. Yet I cannot truthfully say that I am here under duress for I knew that it would be a base and faithless thing to refuse to come, but I can say that there is at least one apostolic aspect to my feelings in that 'I am with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.'

I think that my main qualification is that of age for when Mr. Watts spoke he said to me, 'You've lived through all the years of declension.' I don't think he was referring to the Downgrade!

A brief summary of my life since I was saved in 1950 is that within a month I was called up to serve for two years National Service in the Royal Air Force. Then, after a few years in the Civil Service I was called to serve for eleven years in the London City Mission, which was followed by a call to the Christian ministry serving for twenty-six years as pastor of Uxbridge Road Tabernacle in London and for nine years as pastor of Providence Chapel, Cheltenham, retiring in 2002, aged 70.

One advantage of being older is the ability to remember the past first-hand. Some of the memories are not pleasant – living in London throughout the whole of the Second World War; living through the Blitz and having two brothers and a sister serving in the forces. During the 76 consecutive night air-raids on London

most of those nights were spent sleeping in an air raid shelter – and walking to school the next morning past houses devastated by the previous night's bombing was a sobering experience as was the knowledge that many hundreds of civilians were being killed each week and nearly a thousand during one terrible weekend in London.

I remember that school lessons were often interrupted by the air-raid sirens but in the providence of God not one of my family or any of my school-fellows were injured.

But it is the memories of another kind of warfare – a terrible spiritual warfare – that we are to consider today and just as war between nations leaves devastation in its wake, so this spiritual battle, led by Satan, that great adversary of Christ and His church, has left spiritual havoc in its wake and continues to bring ruin upon many formerly sound churches. Just as a cluster of bombs could destroy a row of houses so Satan's fiery darts have ruined many churches of Christ.

What I want to do first is to give you a broad overview of the state of evangelicalism in England in the years following the time that I began my Christian pilgrimage – that is from about 1950 onwards.

Then, secondly, I want to put before you some of the various factors which have resulted in the changes which have made

evangelicalism today to be almost unrecognizable from that which I and my contemporaries experienced during those former decades.

When the Lord graciously saved me in 1950 it was in an Evangelisation Society's Mission Hall which was called by the somewhat unusual name of The Sunbeam Mission. You may smile at the name but, if you think about it, are we not all called to reflect the glory of the Sun of Righteousness Who has risen with healing in His wings?

The Mission Hall was superintended by a godly London City Missionary. In those days you could have gone to any London City Mission Hall – or any other Mission Hall – and you would have heard the Gospel preached, the Authorised Version read and a company of people who were generally zealous and prayerful. Of course the A.V. was virtually the only translation available but it was read, loved and memorized by ordinary Christians without any difficulties.

How ignorant our nation has become! I read recently that when the New English Bible was published in 1961 one scholar welcomed it with the comment that you might as well expect the public to understand the original languages as to understand the A.V. What a fool! Generations of ordinary Christians had been saved under, read, heard, understood and lived by the A.V. – and

thank God that is still true today.

The hymns sung in those Mission Halls and some Churches would normally have been from the collections known as Golden Bells, Sankey's or Alexander's Hymns. Most of those hymns would have been what we might think of as old fashioned gospel hymns, generally lacking in strong doctrinal content, but certainly not the mawkishly sentimental hymns often associated with such hymnbooks.

Though not so generally true, one could have found a similar situation in many nonconformist churches of the day although sadly, a great number of them were infected with liberal theology. But in all of them there would have been structured services, God would have been addressed in prayer as 'Thee' and 'Thou' and hymns sung from the denominational hymnbooks.

The F.I.E.C. would have been different from other church groupings in those days in that every affiliated church would have subscribed sincerely to a brief statement of fundamental doctrines. Although many of the churches affiliated to the F.I.E.C. would have been of the Mission Hall type, there were larger congregations with faithful ministers such as Lansdowne Hall, West Norwood, where my wife and I were in membership after our marriage. Derek Prime was the pastor and the congregation of over 200 was well taught. That church was also exceptional in those

days in having an eldership.

The strength of these Mission Halls and the Churches which had remained untainted by liberalism was faithful preaching, prayerfulness, unity and warm fellowship. It is true that the preaching was generally of a devotional nature but the preachers loved the Bible and the gospel was consistently preached.

There was a popular Protestantism in the Churches, with Rome being everywhere recognised as a False Church. The Authorised Version would be used and holiness of life would be promoted. The Keswick Convention was very popular and many of the best known preachers of the day would regularly speak there. The particular theology of holiness that was characteristic of Keswick would not be that which we would consider wholly biblical today but many were moved to seek personal holiness and there was a great emphasis on missionary work and support.

Apart from the denominational missions, most missionary societies would have been soundly evangelical, though not usually reformed in doctrine.

In most Mission Halls and Churches there was also a thriving Sunday School and, with only one version of the Bible used, the memorization of Bible verses and passages was very much simpler for teachers to organize and many children grew up with Bible verses and passages

stored in their memories.

Another great difference from today is that when going on holiday, finding a Church in which one could worship comfortably was not the problem it is today when you have to be very selective in your destinations or be prepared to travel some distance to find a likeminded Church. So on the whole, without looking through the rose tinted spectacles of nostalgia, one could say that the spiritual condition of our land was considerably healthier than it is today.

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