

A FUTURE W I T H HOPE

BIBLICAL FRAMEWORKS



pathways

INTRODUCING PATHWAYS

The situation in Northern Ireland raises many difficult - sometimes controversial - issues for Christians. However, we believe that God's word addresses these issues and that God's people need to engage with this word and with the community.

In another situation that raised many difficult and controversial matters, the prophet Jeremiah called on God's people to search for the ancient paths - the good way - and to walk in it. This series of PATHWAYS booklets is our contribution to that search for our time.

We invite others to join with us in understanding God's word to Northern Ireland.

As Evangelical Christians we confess the historic faith of the Gospel as it is revealed in the Bible. We affirm that the Bible, which is the Word of God, reveals God's plan of salvation, that it has been breathed into existence by the Holy Spirit; and that through it the Holy Spirit continues to speak. We therefore hold the Bible to be truthful, authoritative and, in both the Old and New Testaments the only written Word of God.

We want our thinking and behaviour to be governed by these Scriptures, as our only infallible rule of faith and practice. In the complexities of Northern Ireland it is of paramount importance that we subject all our ideologies to the test of the Bible and order our lives according to its teachings.

Our primary aim is to address our fellow Evangelicals in order to encourage a continuing process of relating the Bible to our confused situation.



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A
FUTURE
WITH
HOPE

BIBLICAL FRAMEWORKS
FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

WITH STUDY GUIDE

PREFACE

This booklet was first produced in the context of a specific situation. In early 1995 the people of Northern Ireland were coming to believe that the recently announced cease-fires could indeed be the opportunity for a new future - a future based not on the exclusion and violence of the past, but on accommodation and hope.

The last three years have seen that hope prevail despite great difficulties. However, in the process, the underlying community polarisation has become evident for all to see. The Unionist community, informed by its Protestant convictions, has been sceptical of a process that seemed to place the morality of making peace and ending the violence over every other moral consideration, particularly the public requirements of justice. Nationalists have emphasised the traditional Catholic imperatives for the common good and their leaders have taken considerable risks to this end, risks that have driven the process forward.

The question for us all remains whether we will secure our future by offsetting the demands of powerful tribes or by co-operation based on a common political principle. Do we base our future on the delicate balance of demographic numbers, the brutal balance of violence or the enforced balance of cultural and political domination?

It is important that Evangelicals carefully consider the biblical framework within which they must engage with the political realities of the wider community. In doing so we must remember that a public morality based on Christian faith is a matter of choice and not coercion. Equally, the future must be based on consent - a consent that is won through necessary change so that all may feel at home.

Ultimately biblical faith is best served from a position of powerlessness and not domination. This is a lesson that we must learn if our witness to Christ is to have any credibility in a divided society.

David Porter
ECONI
July 1998

A FUTURE WITH HOPE

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BIBLICAL FRAMEWORKS
FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland is a broad coalition of evangelical Christians from throughout the Protestant churches in Northern Ireland. Since its inception in 1987, ECONI has sought to understand and apply biblical principles to the divided community in Northern Ireland. Its primary function is to address its own constituency, and challenge evangelicals to ask questions concerning their life and witness in the community. Central to this is the necessity to allow biblical values to determine attitudes and actions in response to the issues facing a community in conflict.

ECONI does not represent any party political viewpoint, nor does it seek to present a case for Unionism or Nationalism. Those involved hold a variety of political opinions and may or may not be involved in expressing these personally through political involvement. However, we are united in believing that, for the Christian, all political thought and action must be tested by biblical values. While this allows for debate and diversity, we are agreed that in addressing the bitter divisions and hostile conflict of Northern Ireland, a Christian involvement in political debate and a Christian response to political developments, must be marked by a spirit of peace, justice and reconciliation.

ECONI over the last two years, has sought to engage openly with the search for peace in Northern Ireland. A number of public statements have been made in relation to the Downing Street Declaration and the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires. In the current debate surrounding the building of a permanent peace, we feel it right to reflect further and provide a clear statement of biblical perspectives on the issues that face us. This document is the result.

The primary purpose of these Biblical Frameworks is to provide a biblical guide for Christian people as they respond to developments and, in particular, to proposals concerning our future government. It is our hope that this will both inform and encourage their participation in the debate that will take place. The secondary purpose is to provide a clear indication of the essential Christian framework which we believe should inform all debates and decisions, and to make

it available to political and community leaders. Even if they do not accept the Christian premises on which it is based, we hope they will understand better the concerns and commitment of evangelical Christians who wish to contribute to building a future with hope for their community.

A) THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION

While no serious analysis would present the conflict in Northern Ireland as a religious war, it cannot be denied that religion is a significant factor in the relationship between the 'two communities'. One of the remarkable features of society in Northern Ireland is the high degree of Christian religious affiliation and practice among the population. In the 1991 census of population, 89% willingly recorded their religious identity - 38% Catholic and 51% Protestant. The indication that this is more than just an expression of communal identity is provided by the denominational statistics recorded in the Irish Christian Handbook of 1992. According to the handbook, 56% of the total population are involved in their denominations at a level such as to be considered members. Of this active religious majority, 37% are Catholic and 63% Protestant.

Influence

These different religious traditions have, over the centuries, influenced the cultural, social, moral and political values of the people of Northern Ireland, shaping the ethnic identity of the 'two traditions' in the community. While the problems of the community are many and complex and cannot all be put down to poor practice of religion, there has been a negative contribution by the religious traditions. This has reinforced the divisions in the community and fuelled the myths and stereotypes on which our community conflict has thrived. Positively, it has to be noted that some of the most creative and relevant initiatives for reconciliation in recent decades have come from those of sincere Christian faith.

However we may view the contribution of religion to the history of the community, the fact remains that a significant proportion of the community will continue to respond to developments in resolving the conflict from the perspective of a declared Christian commitment. Therefore, while we may not like to talk of the conflict as specifically religious, it remains a religious and spiritual problem for the church.

Conflict

Central to this problem for the Christian faith is the potent mix of religion and national identity. The most notable feature of this influence is the extent to which our conflict of culture and nationality has been interpreted by religious language and images - specifically by images of religious conflict. This interpretation has resulted in a religiously inspired sanctification of one community and a corresponding demonisation of the other.

While there may be a legitimate clash of values and interests related to religion, when aligned to a political or national agenda, it has become a basis for enmity and segregation. This factor of religious nationalism is a major spiritual force to be countered within both Protestantism and Catholicism, not only for the sake of a better future for all the community, but primarily for the sake of the Christian message as good news for all people.

Challenge

The clash of values between Christian faith and political commitments has led to God taking second place in the lives of many people. This elevation of communal identity and its attendant political ideology, on both sides, represents a form of idolatry that has resulted in a serious loss of spiritual impact on the part of Christians. Often the major denominations are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as chaplains to their own side of the ethnic divide.

If the profession of Christian belief by many in this island is to be credible, it must be seen to work in healing the broken relationships which lie at the heart of our conflict. In this regard the current process is a crucial test of Christian integrity for all who express a commitment to the Christian faith.

While this is a challenge for the churches, the religious and theological dimension should not be ignored by those who seek to resolve the political and national conflict through the current process. As A T Q Stewart has noted:

'...religion (is) the dynamic in Ulster, and not merely a cloak for other motives: historians have sometimes underestimated it, but politicians never.'

(The Ulster Crisis p 44)

B) THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EVANGELICALISM

Evangelical Christians are found throughout and beyond the main denominations and it is estimated that 33% of the active Protestant population would consider themselves evangelical. This is a conservative figure and some observers would put it as high as 50%. A small but significant number of Catholics would also consider themselves evangelical. This indicates a numerical strength of between 185,000 (12% of the population) and 270,000 (18% of the population). Beyond its numerical strength it is recognised that the evangelical ethos informs, and has an effect on, much of the life of the Protestant denominations.

Definition

Evangelicalism, like all movements, is diverse in its expression and embraces a wide spectrum of Christians, including those who are commonly referred to as fundamentalists. It is characterised by four central tenets:

1. A belief in the supreme authority and trustworthiness of the Bible.
2. A belief that the death and resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of the Christian gospel.
3. A belief in the importance of coming to a living and personal faith in Jesus Christ.
4. A belief that faith has implications for all of life.

Threat

As with all other Christian communities in Northern Ireland, evangelicalism has on many occasions succumbed to the potent mix of religion and nationalism. It has at times expressed its political preferences in terms of a religious crusade or sought to preserve its religious liberties by endorsing political dominance. For a significant number of evangelicals, remaining British is not just a political preference, but a matter of religious liberty and practice. It is the means of preserving the Ulster Protestant way of life. In this context, any proposed accommodation with the other community is a threat, not only to national and cultural identity, or to constitutional status, but to personal and public faith.

Authority

This perception needs to be questioned by evangelicals who claim to be committed to the Bible as the true and authoritative Word of God. Any attempt to address the questions of faith and practice which arise for evangelical Christians who are part of a community in conflict, must be based on this shared commitment to biblical authority. Therefore, the frameworks presented in this document are unashamedly described as biblical. We believe, as evangelicals, that all our political ideologies must be tested by scripture and that our response to any political proposals and settlements must be guided by an understanding of the biblical perspective, so reflecting the mind of Christ. This is the basis for change in values and attitudes which will promote a truly Christian involvement in building a better future for all in this community.

C) THE VALIDITY OF THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The question may be posed that if Christianity has failed to be effective in addressing the core issues which divide the people of Northern Ireland and of Ireland, what validity do biblical values have in the process of building a new future for all in the community? However, it was G K Chesterton who observed that:

‘Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.’

Honesty

We recognise that before Christian people can openly address these issues, there needs to be an honest reflection on our failure to live out the demands of our calling to be disciples of Jesus in this society. While we may not have taken up the gun or the bomb, we have shared in the fear, suspicion and hostility that have marked relationships between the communities in which we live. In some cases this has been openly expressed in unchristian words, attitudes and actions. In other cases, it has simply been a matter of keeping silent when we have known that we should have spoken out, or remaining within our comfortable boundaries by failing to reach across the divide. To us, God’s word comes as a rebuke and as a call to renew our faith and discipleship.

Relevance

We believe that biblical values are not only relevant to the growth of the church in faith and practice, but to the good ordering of society and government. God does have something to say to society and his word comes as a call to turn and follow Jesus as Lord of heaven and earth. However, the Bible does not provide a blueprint and there will be legitimate areas of debate among Christians in regard to particular issues of policy and practice. Yet, on many of the core issues facing this community, the Bible does have pertinent comments, directives and guidelines, not least because the fundamental problem concerns trust between people.

Central to our understanding of our historic conflict is a recognition that the problem is not exclusively political and constitutional, but concerns the nature of the relationships within and between the communities who inhabit this island. Partition and the current constitutional insecurity are more symptoms of this problem than its cause.

‘Partition is not a line drawn on the map; it exists in the hearts and minds of Irish people.’ J C Beckett

Therefore, the core of the ‘Ulster problem’ goes to the very core of our being. We believe that the good news of Jesus addresses this essential spiritual reality. The Christian message, rightly understood, transforms hearts and renews minds, producing a new lifestyle for which Jesus Christ is the model and the Holy Spirit the enabler.

Relationships

Were you looking to be held together by lawyers?
Or by an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?
Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing will so cohere.
Only those who love each other shall become indivisible.
Walt Whitman

In the current search for a resolution to the conflict, there is a danger of the relational dimension being ignored. The ability of the politicians to deliver an agreement does not rest solely on matters of economic, political and legal

accommodation, important as these may be, but on the creation of good community relations and understanding.

Politicians alone cannot be expected to create trust and good relations in this community. Certainly, they should do more to lead by example. But as Christians, we have a divine imperative to love our neighbours and our enemies. The impact of the church in the community should make the work of politicians less contentious as they take responsibility for the onerous task of negotiating compromise.

A long road to healing

In accepting the challenge of working to restore relationships, we need to recognise the long term nature of the exercise. Before our community, there stretches a long road to healing. It is encouraging to see that it is often those local communities most directly caught up in past violence that have stepped out most courageously along this road. It is wrong to assume that the disadvantaged and so called working classes alone have work to do in this regard. Behind the polite conversation of the professional and so called middle classes, the divisions are no less real. Perceived mutual economic interest does not address the underlying mistrust and suspicion. And while economic disadvantage needs to be addressed, throwing money at problem areas will not change people's attitudes and relationships.

It is to this wider understanding of human society that the Christian message speaks with validity and with hope.

1) CULTURE & IDENTITY

In a conflict that is characterised by a clash of culture and identity, we affirm that cultural diversity is part of God's purpose for humankind. As creator, God endowed human beings with the capacity to develop different forms of social organisation and the responsibility to interact creatively with their environment. This divine initiative is the origin of human culture and the basis for both its essential unity and creative diversity.

We must always test and judge cultures by God's standards. Because humankind is God's creation, some of its cultures are rich in beauty and goodness. However, because human beings have rebelled against God, all cultures are tainted and corrupt. Consequently, no culture should be held superior to another, but all should be evaluated according to biblical criteria of truth and righteousness, which insist on moral absolutes in every culture.

As an integrated system of beliefs, values, customs and institutions, culture serves to bind a society together and to give it a sense of identity. In affirming our communal identity we receive security. We establish a sense of continuity with the past and of shared aspirations for the future. Such communal identity provides value and dignity for those who are part of it.

In the context of our conflict, differing cultures and identities have become vehicles for sectarian division in which God is perceived to have favourites, and particular cultural patterns and identities are seen to qualify or disqualify people from belonging to all or part of this island.

In looking to a new future in which the diversity of our cultures and identities is respected, we acknowledge that:

- The extent and corrupting influence of sectarianism and bigotry in our cultures should not be underestimated. Sectarianism remains at the heart of the problem of relationships in Ireland and needs to be addressed as part of the peace building process. This is a long term task and resources must

continue to be directed to programmes and initiatives which seek to undermine sectarian influence at all levels of society.

- All people and every community must be free within the law to express their cultural identity and heritage. Further, we should all respect those whose culture and identity is different from ours. However, this must be qualified by the biblical principle that all our cultures are flawed and contain elements that do not merely express diversity, but are destructive. Such elements should be rejected rather than affirmed by all who are committed to respecting diversity.
- Our community is portrayed, misleadingly, in terms of two monolithic cultural traditions, the Orange and the Green. However, culture is dynamic and living. The God given creativity of human beings to adapt their cultures in response to a changing environment gives potential for the development of our culture and identity or the emergence of alternatives. Any agreement which formalises the two traditions in the fabric of society could deny this opportunity for change and in effect legitimise the sectarian apartheid which exists in our community.

2) LAND & NATIONALITY

The message of Jesus breaks through the temporal boundaries of nation and land. The people of God are now drawn from all nations, their defining characteristic being their relationship of faith in Jesus Christ. Their homeland is not to be in this world, where they remain aliens and strangers, but in the world to come. They belong to the Kingdom of God, a reality both now and in the future life, and their primary loyalty is to Christ and his values and priorities.

However, the biblical revelation comes to us in the context of concern over questions of land and nationality. God called Israel to be a distinctive people and he promised to them a land which they would inhabit as a light to all nations. However, it was, in part, their failure to grasp the universal intention of God's action on their behalf that led to a history of conflict and conceit, destruction and exile.

God called Israel to be a redeeming light to the nations. They were distinguished from the other nations by a covenant relationship with God, not by the apparel of statehood. Similarly, the nation state is something God's people

should hold to lightly. In response to Israel's rejection of God's kingship, God granted a king to Israel and provided for a monarchist state as a concession to their human frailty. The state is accepted as God given but, in human hands, has the potential to be an agent for good or for evil.

God's promise of a homeland was not without responsibility. Israel's right of tenure was bound to their covenant relationship to God which required both justice in human relationships and just stewardship of the land as a resource for all in the community. God and Israel had a unique relationship both in terms of the land and Israel's national life. Yet we can learn from their history, while recognising that, today, God's people are not tied to any land or particular nation.

In looking to a new future in which issues of land and nationality are no longer a cause of violent conflict between us, we acknowledge that:

- It is idolatry to limit God to any one nation, state or land. Constitutions and governments which legitimise the state with exclusive religious claims negate God's impartial concern for all nations, lands and peoples. This action is often prejudicial to legitimate minorities, and allows for the undue influence of the dominant religious tradition. This is equally true of leaders who present their political cause in terms of a religious crusade.
- We cannot identify either Unionism or Nationalism as inherently expressive of the Christian faith. While elements of a political agenda may reflect spiritual and biblical values, no political philosophy is divinely ordained. This recognition must allow for the possibility of compromise and consensus.
- God has given us this earth as a trust, requiring wise stewardship for the benefit of all. It does not belong to any nation, state or people, but to God, to whom we are accountable both for its use and for the quality of the relationships we develop with one another.

3) CONSENT & PARTICIPATION

Scripture does not endorse any particular model of human government. Nomadic tribes and feudal societies, city states and nations, monarchies and empires, all appear in the biblical record. In each case God's people have adopted a range of strategies for their involvement in such societies. The Christian church cannot state

with any biblical authority that any one pattern of government is essential to its existence and to its central task of witnessing to God's kingdom.

However, the Bible does present a particular understanding of humanity. Because we are created in the image of God, we have both the capacity and the obligation to make moral decisions. Because we are morally corrupted by our rebellion towards God, the lust for power and its tyrannical abuse is endemic to human society. This includes governments and the individuals who participate in them. In our civilisation, democracy has developed as a system in which, theoretically, the dignity of human choice is respected and the corruption of human leaders is curtailed and regulated. Consequently, the government has an obligation to consult the people concerning the nature of government and its structures. Further, the people have a vested interest in policy and should participate in the ongoing process of government, assuming their responsibilities as citizens.

It must also be said that governments have the capacity to manipulate and deceive, and majorities have the capacity to control and oppress minorities who hold alternative yet honourable aspirations. No government has the divine right to be obeyed without question. Moreover, the voice of the majority is not necessarily the voice of God. Neither does the voice of a minority have a monopoly on God's perspective.

We must acknowledge that central to our conflict has been the desire to dominate the other side, to control and curb them and, on occasion to destroy them or be rid of them. The responsible exercise of political power is a measure of our maturity as a community. This needs to be based not on domination or the progressive weakening of one side or the other, but on a shared responsibility to exercise political power justly and equitably for the benefit of all. An important part of this will be our ability to articulate our commitments and guarantees to the other side as well as to our own.

In looking to a new future which is based on consent and participation, we acknowledge that:

- Democratic principles, which respect the majority opinion and protect the interests of minorities, should form the basis for and be upheld by all new political arrangements. They should be given the chance to work and not be

undermined by political manoeuvring or violence, nor corrupted by tribal manipulation and fear.

- The agreement of the overwhelming majority of all in our community should be obtained on any proposed settlement and resultant structure. This is the only way the future good government of us all can be assured. Such a consensus, based on honourable compromise, is essential to stability and progress.
- New political models are required which address key challenges including the need to overcome the community's cynicism towards politics and politicians. They must also counteract the alienation of many able people from political life and encourage a wider participation of the community in every aspect of the political process. This will involve removing tribalism and sectarianism from party politics and promoting a more accountable and democratic system of government.

4) RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITY

The language of human rights represents one attempt to express the value of human beings. However, the Christian concern is founded on the Bible's affirmation that men and women are created by God and made in the image of God. This implies that every person, regardless of nationality, religion, race, gender, class or political belief, has an intrinsic dignity, and should therefore be respected. The Bible's presentation of Jesus as servant requires that all Christians likewise serve their fellow human beings as an outworking of their service to Christ. Any form of exploitation, oppression or unjust discrimination is a denial of human dignity, an offence to God and unchristian. It follows from this that the Christian ethic is not a demand for legal rights but a concern that the human dignity of each individual be protected and served. In a healthy community all should work to ensure that the human dignity of others be respected and maintained. Equally, all have a proper and reasonable expectation that their human dignity be respected and maintained by others.

In looking to a new future built on the affirmation of human dignity and the commitment to serve others, we acknowledge that:

- Fundamental to human dignity is life and the freedom to live. The rejection of

violence for political ends must be the basis for participation in the political process and in the ordering of society.

- That the areas in which we agree to respect and protect the human dignity and freedom of our neighbour to belief, aspiration and action should be set down in a written declaration and clearly established in equitable laws which are justly applied.

5) EQUALITY & SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Christian message of salvation proclaims liberty from the consequences of human rebellion against God through faith in Jesus, the Saviour of the world. This good news is for the whole person, body, soul, mind and spirit. It is also for the whole of society, addressing both the structures of society and our relationships in the community. God's salvation transforms us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities.

Jesus proclaimed that in him God had acted decisively on behalf of the poor, the weak, the marginalised, the alienated and the oppressed. His message of salvation is also a message of judgement upon every form of alienation, oppression and unjust discrimination which exists in our society.

In the Old Testament the prophets call upon God's people to promote the cause of the poor and disadvantaged, and to defend those who are powerless in a society of wealth and influence. Many of the challenges facing our community, particularly in urban areas, are those we share with other societies. Poverty, debt, unemployment and educational disadvantage often lead to social disintegration and despair, and contribute to the rise of violence, substance abuse, juvenile crime and criminal activity. It is into this context of social alienation and poverty that the salvation of Jesus should be proclaimed as good news for the poor.

Inequality and injustice are rooted in the profound sinfulness and selfishness of humankind, and demand from the people of God a radical response of compassion. This response must affirm the dignity of those concerned. God's people must work to provide the means for their effective empowerment as people and communities.

In looking to a new future where there is growing equality, and social justice is accessible to all, we acknowledge that:

- Sustained economic regeneration for the benefit of the whole community must continue to be a high priority for government and all in commerce and industry.
- Those responsible for the use of the 'peace dividend' must ensure that it is directed to those local communities and areas in most need. If economic development is to help overcome problems of social alienation it must take place at the local level and directly affect the lives of those currently disadvantaged. They too must be fully involved in the decision making process.
- We must continue to develop the potential of all in the community so that they are valued and can in turn feel they have a stake in society. In practice this means a commitment to create opportunity for people through meaningful employment, developing education and training, protecting minorities, providing resources for the disadvantaged, and ensuring support and health care for those who are weak. We must address the needs of our young people and should stress the value we place on the contribution of women at all levels of society, specifically in public life.

6) JUSTICE & MERCY

The God of the Bible is a God of justice. The God of the Bible is a God of mercy. While human judgements can be marked by vindictiveness, God's judgements are always merciful. God's justice and mercy are not incompatible. True justice is merciful in its intent and exercise.

Human rulers are granted authority by God to exercise justice. Through just legislation and the rule of law they are to punish evil and promote good. While justice in the hand of God is merciful and fair, in the hands of men and women it needs constantly to be safeguarded.

Biblical justice comes with a constant reminder of the value of those under judgement. God's standard of justice points to the dignity of men and women since it reminds them that they are morally accountable human beings, made in the image of God. Biblical mercy comes with a call to repentance. It requires that men and women accept moral responsibility, demonstrate true remorse and turn to the living God.

Justice is a prerequisite for a peaceful society. Where a society is built on injustice there can never be peace. Therefore, anyone concerned that society should be shaped by biblical values must be concerned with justice as a priority. To work for lasting peace means working for justice.

In looking to a new future in a society marked by justice and mercy, we acknowledge that:

- Justice must not be separated from mercy. Whether as individuals or as a society, our judgements must be shaped by mercy. All of us must examine our own consciences to see in what way we have contributed by our words, deeds or inaction to the creation of a climate in which a culture of violence has flourished.
- The difficult question of the future of prisoners in this community must be faced. Many people caught up in our culture of violence preserved their moral integrity by rejecting the way of violence. Others, often while young and motivated by articulate leaders and ideological causes, chose the way of violence. Some are now in prison. All of them are morally accountable human beings, made in the image of God. They are neither martyrs to be canonised, nor beasts to be demonised. All discussion concerning prisoners in this community must recognise these factors and must be informed by a concern for both justice and mercy.
- All discussion of the meaning of justice and mercy in this community must not lose sight of the importance of obtaining justice for and showing mercy to those who have suffered at the hands of the guilty.

7) TRUTH & TRUST

At the heart of the Christian gospel is the revelation of the truth of God. This truth is most fully expressed in the person of Jesus Christ, who proclaims himself the truth. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Bible is the only written Word of God, bringing the message of truth. In the Bible, truth is not just a question of right belief but is also personal and relational. To know the truth is to know God through Jesus Christ. To be truthful means not only believing the truth, or even speaking the truth, but manifesting the truth in every aspect of our lives, including our relationships with one another.

Jesus, who is the truth, calls us to enter into a relationship of trust with him. While Jesus is entirely trustworthy, human relationships are different. Trust in human relationships can be learned, but trust must also be won. Either process is difficult but is made easier by personal contact and a willingness to listen. Trust is particularly difficult to establish in the absence of truthfulness.

To worship the God of truth and to be obedient to his truth, is to be committed to speak and act truthfully in all things and in all circumstances, with humility and love; it is also to be committed to work at building trust, based on honesty, generosity and goodwill, regardless of the threat or fear of coercion and violence.

In looking to a new future in which our community life is shaped by truthfulness and trust, we acknowledge that:

- We must be truthful in our understanding of the situation and of each another. We must be willing to acknowledge the hurt and pain we have inflicted on each other in this community throughout our history, but particularly over the last 25 years. Condoning, excusing or ignoring such grievances is dishonest and undermines the building of trust.
- It is important to develop trust among the political parties and among people in this community generally. There are many barriers to trust - not least the retention of large quantities of weapons - but all should be committed to working for their removal.
- The negotiating process requires the greatest possible openness so that the people will know what is happening and can have confidence in their representatives and in any agreement they reach. Alongside this there must be integrity in public life, particularly from politicians. Specifically, it is wrong to take refuge in slogans, rhetoric or bureaucratic formulations.

8) FORGIVENESS & HEALING

The root cause of the conflict in this community is the division that exists in the hearts and minds of its people. While this manifests itself in questions of politics and partition, identity and culture, the fundamental gulf concerns the relationships among our people. These relationships have been deeply marred by violence and murder, death and destruction, hatred and bigotry. While there is legitimate hurt, pain

and anger as a result, there also lurks bitterness, vengeance and the desire to triumph over one another.

The Bible clearly teaches that such breakdown in relationships and the bitter divisions that exist, are the outworking of our sinful nature. As such, the problem of our division is essentially a spiritual one and requires a deep work of God's Spirit in our community to bring about the transformation of relationships that is required. The Christian good news is a message of grace and mercy, forgiveness and healing.

The strength to forgive and start out on the long road to healing does not lie in ourselves but in the life and work of Jesus. Jesus proclaimed God's deep desire to forgive those who had committed the greatest of all crimes. At the greatest of all costs he made forgiveness possible for us. To his disciples who, like us, found forgiveness a hard and unnatural thing, he taught the importance of an unlimited willingness to forgive injury. Those who have been forgiven must seek to be forgiving. Without this release of forgiveness in the community, there can be no healing.

In looking to a new future in which we may know both forgiveness and healing, we acknowledge that:

- All share responsibility for the problem. While many of us have not resorted to violence we have allowed ourselves to harbour enmity in our hearts and minds towards our neighbours. It is only when we honestly confront our failings and express our true remorse and sorrow for them, that we can bring them to God and our neighbour for forgiveness.
- To embrace forgiveness and healing we must consciously turn from the hatred and bitterness that has marred our community life. This also involves a turning towards the way of self-giving love, which is the hallmark of the Christian faith that many in our community claim to believe and practise.
- All of us need to identify with the hurt and pain of the victims of our violence. Great evil has been done. It is right to remember all who have suffered - those who have died, those who live with their injuries, those who mourn and those whose livelihoods have been destroyed. But, while remembering the past we must also be willing to leave the past behind. We must refuse to allow the wrongs of history to determine our future.

CONCLUSION

'The practical problem of Christian politics is not that of drawing up schemes for a Christian society, but that of living as innocently as we can with unbelieving fellow-subjects under unbelieving rulers who will never be perfectly wise and good and who will sometimes be very wicked and very foolish'.

CS Lewis

In presenting a document which relates biblical theology to the specific context of life in Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that there are certain limitations. Firstly, the Bible itself does not provide a blueprint of detailed policies. However, it does present a framework of theological and moral imperatives which must be taken seriously in any Christian response to our evolving situation. Secondly, there is the danger that, in applying the biblical imperatives, we move beyond their legitimate scope and begin to affirm as biblical our own perspectives which arise from our culture, politics and experience. In this context there may be those who will be frustrated at the lack of specific proposals in this document. Finally, and as a result of the above, it is wrong to assume that evangelical Christians will agree on every issue as they seek to apply their faith to the social, political and economic realities of our society.

As we discuss and apply these biblical frameworks, we must always have in mind the world of hurt, conflict, fear and hope which we need to engage. This is the context that will test the relevance of what we have to say and who we seek to be as people of faith.

A) TOWARDS PEACE & RECONCILIATION

It is the realities of this world that temper our expectations as we move towards peace and reconciliation. There is a danger that we invest too much in what is referred to as the peace process. Christians hold to the biblical concept of shalom, which is much more than peace, and embraces personal and social well-being and wholeness. It is the purpose and gift of God for humankind. Much of what is

involved in working out shalom, is a necessary and legitimate part of ongoing political discourse. This continuous process includes many of the areas raised in this document.

However, the current peace process cannot be expected to deliver a satisfactory settlement on the range of issues which have been attached to it, and should not be allowed to fall on this account. Its priority must be to resolve the constitutional and political insecurity felt by a Nationalist minority in Northern Ireland, and, equally, that felt by a Unionist minority in the island of Ireland. Its satisfactory outcome must be to permanently remove the threat or use of violence, so that in future all our battles will be political and our conflicts resolved by dialogue and debate. In so doing it will create the context for the building of shalom.

Reconciliation means the restoration of a good relationship between enemies. For the Christian, its primary meaning relates to how this good relationship is achieved in the confrontation between ourselves and God. In the death of Jesus, God removed the factors which produced our estrangement and alienation from him. It is God who takes the initiative and reconciles us to himself, restoring the relationship that we have broken. This pattern of reconciliation is the calling of all who follow Christ. Jesus expects his disciples to be the initiators of reconciliation, even with those who we believe have wronged us.

However, we must recognise that many of the factors which lead to our estrangement and alienation from each other, will always be with us. Wrong has been done and the hurt on both sides of our divide will remain for a long time. There will be ideological differences between Unionist and Nationalist. Profound theological differences will continue between Protestantism and Catholicism. Most Protestants will continue to be British, and most Catholics to be Irish. Republicans will want a united Ireland and loyalists will want to maintain the union with Britain. Reconciliation need not mean that we will remove these differences. It must mean that our relationships are no longer marked by fear, suspicion and hostility. In this we all have the responsibility to take the initiative, but especially Christians who believe that God has broken the dividing wall of hostility which separated us from him and from each other.

B) BUILDING A FUTURE WITH HOPE

At this time the world is watching Northern Ireland. For many years our strife has been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as an offence to the Christian cause. The opportunity now exists to remove that offence. Whatever created the negativity of mistrust, misunderstanding and malevolence of our conflict, Christians must now be a people of the future, where trust, understanding and goodwill are evident for all to see. We do this, not just for ourselves, but for the glory of God and for the sake of a new generation who will judge us harshly if we condemn them to the self-destructive patterns of our past.

To build such a future will require hard work by all sections of the community. For too long many evangelicals have withdrawn into their own comfortable religious world. Most of our churches not only face the task of engaging across the sectarian divide, but they need to re-engage with the communities within which they are living and from which they come. The commitment to serve this community in the struggle for peace, justice and reconciliation, can no longer be an optional extra for Christian people.

□For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you A FUTURE WITH HOPE□

Jeremiah 29 v 11

STUDY GUIDE

A FUTURE WITH HOPE

The sections in italics are taken from the text of *A Future With Hope*. Each of these is followed by questions for discussion. There are questions on the introduction and conclusion as well as the eight main themes.

INTRODUCTION

Central to this problem for the Christian faith is the potent mix of religion and national identity. The most notable feature of this influence is the extent to which our conflict of culture and nationality has been interpreted by religious language and images - specifically, by images of religious conflict. This interpretation has resulted in a religiously inspired sanctification of one community and a corresponding demonisation of the other. (8)

Try to identify some ways in which the language of faith is used in support of nationalism. Is this association in any way a feature of your own thinking or that of your church?

We recognise that before Christians can openly address these issues, there needs to be an honest reflection on our failure to live out the demands of our calling to be disciples of Jesus in this society. To us, God's word comes as a rebuke and as a call to renew our faith. (10)

Is it fair to suggest that we have failed as disciples of Jesus Christ in this community? If so, in what way? Can you identify specific areas in which God's word rebukes us and calls us to renewal?

However, the Bible does not provide a blueprint and there will be legitimate areas of debate among Christians in regard to particular issues of policy and practice. Yet, on many of the core issues facing this community, the Bible does have pertinent comments, directives and guidelines, not least because the fundamental problem concerns trust between people. (11)

Given that Scripture does not provide a political blueprint, what broader biblical principles are applicable to the political organisation of society? How, practically, should we conduct debate about the specifics of political policy in a distinctively Christian way?

CULTURE & IDENTITY

All people and every community must be free within the law to express their cultural identity and heritage. Further, we should respect those whose culture and identity is different from ours. (14)

What are the practical implications of this claim for assessing issues such as parades, the flying of flags, the playing of anthems? How can freedom and respect for other traditions be reconciled with the desire not to cause offence to others?

The God given creativity of human beings to adapt their cultures in response to a changing environment gives potential for the development of our culture and identity or the emergence of alternatives. Any agreement which formalises the two traditions in the fabric of society could deny this opportunity for change and in effect legitimise the sectarian apartheid which exists in our community. (14)

In what way can Christians positively contribute to the process of adapting their cultures in ways which are more in keeping with biblical principles? Do you think it is possible to reach an agreement that does not formalise the two traditions in the fabric of society? What shape would such an agreement have?

LAND & NATIONALITY

The people of God are now drawn from all nations, their defining characteristic being their relationship of faith in Jesus Christ. Their homeland is not to be in this world, where they remain aliens and strangers, but in the world to come. They belong to the Kingdom of God, a reality both now and in the future life, and their primary loyalty is to Christ and his values and priorities. (14)

Is this how you would define your primary identity? How does this impinge on your sense of national identity?

Constitutions and governments which legitimise the state with exclusive religious claims negate God's impartial concern for all nations, lands and peoples...While elements of a political agenda may reflect spiritual and biblical values, no political philosophy is divinely ordained. (15)

What should be the proper role of religious belief and believers within the state? What can Christians and the Christian community do to bring spiritual and biblical values to bear on the political agenda?

CONSENT & PARTICIPATION

The responsible exercise of political power is a measure of our maturity as a community. (16)

Judged by this criterion, how mature are we as a community? Have Christians as a distinct community and as part of the wider community brought a greater degree of maturity to bear?

New political models are required which address key challenges including the need to overcome the community's cynicism towards politics and politicians. They must also counteract the alienation of many able people from political life and encourage a wider participation of the community in every aspect of the political process. (17)

Do you agree that new political models are needed? If so, what kinds of models are they? Can you suggest practical ways in which the goals of overcoming cynicism and alienation can be achieved?

RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

It follows from this that the Christian ethic is not a demand for legal rights but a concern that the human dignity of each individual be protected and served. (17)

Given this, to what extent is the idea of a Bill of Rights compatible with the biblical perspective?

Fundamental to human dignity is life and the freedom to live. The rejection of violence for political ends must be the basis for participation in the political process and in the ordering of society. (18)

What are the implications of this for the role of political groupings which are associated with organisations that have used violence?

EQUALITY & SOCIAL JUSTICE

In the Old Testament the prophets called upon God's people to promote the cause of the poor and disadvantaged, and to defend those who are powerless in a society of wealth and influence. (18)

How do Christians fulfil their commitment to the weak and vulnerable in a society that is much more complex, and that tries to provide for them through the welfare system?

We must continue to develop the potential of all in the community so that they are valued and can in turn feel they have a stake in society. (19)

How can the Christian community contribute to developing the potential of all in the community? Is such an ambition realistic?

JUSTICE & MERCY

True justice is merciful in its intent and exercise. (19)

How do we overcome the assumption that mercy and justice are incompatible or paradoxical? What is the proper relationship between justice and mercy?

Whether as individuals or as a society, our judgements must be shaped by mercy. (20)

Does the assertion that judgement must be shaped by mercy have different implications for the individual on the one hand and society on the other? In what way does this impinge on the question of prisoners?

TRUTH & TRUST

We must be truthful in our understanding of the situation and of each other. (19)

Do you consider your own understanding of the situation in our community to be truthful? If so, has this always been the case? If not, what made the difference?

It is important to develop trust among the political parties and among people in the community generally. (21)

What is the role of Christian people in developing trust among politicians and in the community as a whole? What, in practical terms, can we do?

The negotiating process requires the greatest possible openness so that people will know what is happening and can have confidence in their representatives and in any agreement they reach. (21)

Do you consider the process thus far to be open? Do you think it needs greater openness? How is a balance to be struck between openness and the need for a certain amount of circumspection?

FORGIVENESS & HEALING

To the disciples who, like us, found forgiveness a hard and unnatural thing,

[Jesus] taught the importance of an unlimited willingness to forgive injury. (22)

Would your own attitude be characterised as one of “an unlimited willingness to forgive injury”? What difference would it make to the community if Christians displayed this attitude?

While remembering the past we must also be willing to leave the past behind. We must refuse to allow the wrongs of history to determine our future. (22)

How do we find a balance between remembering and moving on? Are there any practical examples from other contexts that could serve as models for us? Are there practical ways in which we could mark both a remembrance of the past and a hope for the future?

CONCLUSION

There is a danger that we invest too much in what is referred to as the peace process. Christians hold to the biblical concept of shalom, which is much more than peace, and embraces personal and social well-being and wholeness. (23)

What do you think are the realistic goals of the current process? What are your expectations from it? Beyond the current process what else needs to happen in this community for the goal of shalom to be brought nearer? What is the role of God's people in that process?

Many of the factors which lead to our estrangement and alienation from one another, will always be with us...Reconciliation need not mean that we will remove these differences. It must mean that our relationships are no longer marked by fear, suspicion and hostility. In this we all have the responsibility to take the initiative, but especially Christians who believe that God has broken the dividing wall of hostility which separated us from him and from each other. (24)

In what ways can we take the initiative to break down walls of hostility? If the things that divide us remain can new relationships not built on hostility actually make any practical difference?

For too long many evangelicals have withdrawn into their own comfortable religious world. Most of our churches not only face the task of engaging across the sectarian divide, but they need to re-engage with the communities within which they are living and from which they come. (25)

Are you in touch with the community from which you come? How can you get in touch with it? How do we move from reflection and good will to a practical engagement with our own community as well as the wider community? Does the church, can the church, play a role in the future of the whole community?

A FUTURE W I T H HOPE

BIBLICAL FRAMEWORKS

Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland is a broad coalition of evangelical Christians from throughout the Protestant churches in Northern Ireland. Since its inception in 1987, ECONI has sought to understand and apply biblical principles to the divided community in Northern Ireland. Its primary function is to address its own constituency, and challenge evangelicals to ask questions concerning their life and witness in the community. Central to this is the necessity to allow biblical values to determine attitudes and actions in response to the issues facing a community in conflict.

*"For surely I know the plans
I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for
harm, to give you
A FUTURE WITH HOPE."*

Jeremiah 29 . 11



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