



State of the Union

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Abstract

My termly round-up on the mood of the CICC. An attempt to gauge the feeling and texture of its members. A joy that this term for the first time I am immensely pleased with its direction.

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This is a post which gives me great joy to write. In a rough way, it mirrors some posts or emails I have sent after the last couple of GenComms, reflecting my perceptions of the state of the (CICC) Union. This time I am especially happy though.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ!¹ I am amazed by the feeling and new ambiance within the CICC over the last year. We have been amazingly blessed! The two things I most desire in a meeting actually happened, sort of. Firstly, we had a chance to appraise our outlook, which for the first time in several years I am entirely happy with, and the GenComm mood reflected that. Secondly, we were given a chance to assess our message. There was not really any feedback there, which was a shame, but that is something I have been suggesting for a while we really should gauge in GenComm.

1. The nitty-gritty (from our circle)

Prayer: several good ideas passed on the exec. Ideas for a DPM rotating round the colleges suggested, and we seemed closer than we have for a while. Prayer drive was good, but served its purpose and will not be such a heavy focus every term. Helping reps put on prayer meetings—Is ML's prayer guide still used or worth tweaking?

Treasury: Hard to assess Geraldine; happy to take her word that there are no concerns the GenComm could prod on. External giving fine. FROGs—wonderful growth; could mix in Central reps' prayer rota; website help(!)

Training/Reps/LGs: What a great HP, and Central teaching still good even if fillers. LG return greeted with gladness; a natural outflow of exec realising what a large outlook the CICC really has. Jonah showed that going through books especially helpful for reps in CG. Argument about reps leading BS getting mellow; more bought over by slant that reps can feel like they really own CG [I now reckon it would have been good for me repping to lead a bit

1. As Edenites know, this must always be to the YMCA tune.

more, though Carsten et al. were great; still slightly unconvinced it is right for all CGs]. Central balance—more later.

Outreach: Not much comment. ME good. Usual marginally helpful comments on slanting titles (usually to questioner's personal taste).

International: iCafe worth investigating, but caution from old Globe memories. Jews worth meeting with more and discussing.

Events: re the joint events discussion—some back and forth, but for me crucial question is “What will we do after the next joint event where it doesn't go our way/we ‘lose’/opposing speaker too effective or behaves badly?” We keep saying we are happy to let truth win out and be seen for what it is, but we should be realistic and know what it could look like to do an event with an organisation whose aims are against ours. Go into it with eyes open, thinking of what we say to members at next Central. Do the thought experiment: we ought not to be putting on these events if a bad one would prevent us doing more. On the other hand, if we feel we could still pray rightly, that membership would still be on board with inviting for more, and we could carry on past a disappointment, then perhaps we would have the right attitude to take on things like that. Subsidiary question: “What exactly are ‘aims opposing ours’?” What is it exactly about CUID which makes it OK to take on non-DB speakers with them? Make sure thinking is crisp, so we can keep doing whatever outreach is right for us, because I heard CUID talk was great. We want to be able to do more, but be ready as a body for all the liabilities that these events could entail.

ME: some Qs asked and discussion about pitching the gospel; how we phrase things; what our preferred presentation is. More below.

2. The trends and emphases

Excursus. I have a continuing search for language which really describes the theology of the heart. I have gone through various phrases, calling it trend, disposition, inclination, flavour, shading, shape, form, and currently, texture. Doctrine is what we teach to the whole heart, from the highly cognitive debates about lapsarianism, to this very wishy attempt to describe our patterns and modes of feeling about things. Often we divide or differ based on very cognitive things, the doctrines we can get a handle, when actually what is really going on is a much more holistic theological difference. How do we really see the Spirit touching our hearts? How do teaching, zeal, sanctification, preaching, evangelism, really fit in to the broadest outlook and attitudes we have? This is the sense in which I use the word *texture*.

2.1. BREADTH OF OUTLOOK

The question we ask ourselves here is, “What then is the texture of the CICCUCU, and how it to be?” If I may be allowed to reminisce, the broadest understanding we have had of this in my time was under John Young (or alongside, as he might have put it). A bit before that, and since then, we have tended to drop a valuable part of that texture, in the name of tightening down on our aims, in some form or another.

Almost all the debates between churches, within churches, and within the CICCUCU I feel come down to this point, that of dropping part our outlook or vision because it is unnecessary, and that of fostering and growing it because it is wonderful and true. On the one hand, we can fall prey to the temptation to reduce our outlook, like churches with an un-nuanced view of working for Christ and ministry, or taking very narrow stands on matters of interpretation, or slimming fellowship down to focus on encouragement and exhortation. On the other hand, we have the uphill battles of teaching the fullness of grace, of building a fellowship that acts in every way as God's people, of living and expressing Christ's rule in every

place in every way, or of seeing the richness of built up as God's people and teaching each other to desire more in teaching and heart. I'm touching on a lot of big issues for some churches now and even in Cambridge, but it would take a lot of my vague whiffle to point out some of the references perhaps and explain how I perceive them to touch our feelings. (I have used the terminology 'the *size* or *extent* of a worldview' in conversation before.)

This same issue of texture runs through all the CICCUC's traditional spats, from houseparties, Central books and length, college group organisation, whether CICCUC is there to build up the 'not-keen', right down the way each moment we go about exhorting to evangelism, or pitching prayer meetings. We debate on points of application, going over the same arguments again about how different people receive sermons of different length or content, but it is this texture which underlies our actions which we really need to palpate.

God's hand is mightier than ours, his thoughts greater than ours, his plans vaster than ours. We should think of Christianity as being the maximal worldview, the most enlarged and containing not just only true things, but everything which is true. It is not enough to be consistent if we do that by cutting off the areas where we do not see God's action.

In the CICCUC, we are God's people, who are bought by him, taught by him, shaped by him. The richness of his outlook is ours, and shapes every move we make. Each and every action of every Christian must be part of that context. Zooming in on one face in a picture and cropping it there means we no longer have a group photo. Chucking out the fullness of our expansive worldview is not an option.

In some way, there has never been any danger of the CICCUC massively losing this. We could all see the madness of cutting out singing in Central, or dropping international mission to the world, simply to focus in on our core aims without distraction.

That trend, though, has come up time and time again in every year I have been in the CICCUC, through four years of GenComms. God's world has an extraordinary hugeness of meaning, his people a grandness of purpose, and that is where we live and who we are. It is not possible to turn up at college group just as an evangelist and not as a whole Christian intending to focus on evangelism, nor is it possible to forget how it is that Central affects us as whole Christians. Even though we can consider a focused aim, we have to keep the context of that aim in view.

This is my joy this term: more than ever before, the whole CICCUC has been growing this dense texture. We are aiming to treat reps as brothers and sisters and not just college outreach stimulators, and in a small and subtle way they are working more closely with college groups as God's co-people. We take delight in having together the character of God's people at Central, and the calls for downgrading it in one way or another have gone. The terrible mentions a couple of years back about making the CICCUC more of a place for the keen, and that we could even encourage the others to move on from college groups because discipleship was not our goal; those factions have moved on a bit and we have a different sense now that we are united as a GenComm, not split, in seeing that whole character of God's people inform and shape our attitudes to college groups. We want good teaching in Central which does not focus exclusively on evangelism because we have now a grasp of that texture which clothes God's church.

I will moderate my message a spot, because we are not all there yet. We always need to fight to keep what we have, and grow it more and more in the areas of outlook on relationships, or our degree work, or the many more immediate concerns of evangelism. I am amazed though how far we seemed to have come, so quickly. The hazy way the (now old) exec seemed to be struggling with these same old issues has cleared up very rapidly, as we can read off from the thermometer of traditional points of dispute, like LG training, CG book, and so on.

The defining moment of GenComm was when Matt Wells, an Edenite, asked whether our Centrals on prayer had strayed too far from our evangelistic aim, and we heard a CICCUC president, for the first time I can remember in years, defending it on the grounds that we needed a holistic appreciation of what it was that we were doing. What a reversal of some previous years! Praise be to God for either fixing my outlook or moving the CICCUC closer to his good ways!

2.2. FOCUS OF MESSAGE

It is right as a union of God's people for mission and witness to think especially of our message. There are lots of ways of slanting the gospel, and different units we can slot into our presentation of the message. Do we start with creation? How much about judgement do we need to put in? There is no one right way of fitting the pieces together, and different talk titles and different speakers follow different lines, sometimes putting the same truths over with only different words, others arranging the pieces genuinely differently. We have to sit back sometimes and ourselves whether the trends and patterns in the CICCUC's language and flow in presenting the gospel are right for our time, place, and audience. It is not entirely clear to me where we should be going, which I can slightly escape from by pointing out the GenComm's vagueness here. I still want to see how well we can do in stimulating discussion along these lines and building an awareness of that process of feedback, so that in future in selecting and briefing speakers we can be conforming the texture of what we teach publicly to what we want to be coming out. There was more movement towards that as a leadership this time than before, so the encouragement to the new exec is to think about what the mood is in the CICCUC regarding the slant and tone of our talks, about how to draw out useful feedback, and what we might need to be doing to nudge the outward emphases and contours of our message towards what is right for our hearers.