

UK Evangelicalism: Optimistic?

ACL

by John Richardson

In 1993 John Richardson, the Anglican Chaplain to the University of East London, travelled to Sydney to study at Moore College.

ACL News published this analysis of Evangelicalism in the UK written while in Sydney. It presents a sobering picture.

During his 1993 visit to Moore College, Dr. Alister McGrath presented an optimistic view of Evangelicalism in the United Kingdom.

Dr. McGrath described a situation where Evangelicalism is sweeping the field. Not only is it alive and well at the grass-roots level, but increasingly Evangelicals are dominating the Ecclesiastical hierarchy, particularly in the appointment of Bishops. Liberalism is on the run. The future is most definitely 'Evangelical Shaped'.

During and after Dr. McGrath's visit, several people asked me whether I shared his point of view. I think the reason for this was that not only I but other visitors to and from the UK in recent years had painted a rather different picture.

In response I didn't particularly want to be a wet blanket, especially since part of Dr. McGrath's appeal is his sheer enthusiasm for the gospel. However, in all honesty I have had to say that I beg to differ with him, although I have found it useful to think through why he and I respond to the same data the situation in the UK so differently.

Was Corinth Evangelical?

One question I found useful in clarifying the issue was to ask whether the Corinthians were Evangelical. In terms of what we would hope for or endorse in church life, the answer would probably be "No". But if we asked, "Were the Corinthians a product of the preaching of an evangelical gospel?" the answer would clearly be "Yes".

The situation is similar in the UK at the present.

There are many signs that the gospel is alive and well and being preached effectively. However, the situation in the churches which is emerging as a result is, in my opinion, hardly one that inspires confidence.

The Church Papers

This was further underlined for me by the discovery in the College library of stocks of the UK *Church Times* and *Church of England Newspaper*.

Anyone who wants to form an opinion of what is happening in the UK at the moment could do worse than spend an hour perusing these journals. After four months in Sydney Diocese they came as a real shock to the system. The impression one gains is of a Church divided and squabbling, strong on opinions but weak on doctrine and lacking in a real interest in the salvation of that part of the world within which it is set very Corinthian in fact!

The Evangelical Exodus

What is worse is the Exodus of Evangelicals from traditional Evangelicalism.

The Church of England Newspaper itself has apparently, "ceased to be [the] Church of England evangelical party weekly, and opted for a more 'balanced' coverage of Christian news". (Quoted from a recent letter.) Previously the *CEN* would have been 'Evangelical and proud of it'. It seems hardly credible that in the traditionally struggling world of newspapers a journal would desert a growing target audience for a diminishing one.

Why, then, has the *CEN* ceased to be "the evangelical party weekly"? The same phenomenon is seen amongst Evangelical Bishops, not one of whom would qualify as a potential J.C. Ryle.

Instead, they seem to accept the notion of Anglican 'comprehensiveness' with 'Collegiality' (i.e. sticking together) being apparently more important on the bench of Bishops than doctrinal orthodoxy.

Ecclesiastical Piracy

Meanwhile, Oak Hill, which is one of the last traditionally Evangelical colleges, has been under threat of closure. Even Dr. McGrath called this an act of "Ecclesiastical piracy", but it is hardly being fought against 'tooth and nail' by either Evangelicals or their Bishops.

Behind the proposed closure was the need to get rid of three Theological Colleges. A Commission set up under the Bishop of Lincoln decided to be 'even handed' and instead of simply closing those colleges which were empty decided to close one each of the Anglo Catholic, Liberal and Evangelical Colleges. Oak Hill's relative conservative stance actually seems to have made it the most vulnerable of the Evangelical colleges and therefore the one which was easiest to threaten.

Doctrinal Laxity

Meanwhile, there is amongst UK Evangelicals an appalling laxity of doctrine and spirituality. As a result, people who start off as Evangelicals drift into Catholic or Liberal practices and teachings.

Yet this is not seen as leaving Evangelicalism but rather as 'broadening' it. (The 'in' term apparently is "Open Evangelical".) Dr. McGrath described this broadening process as one of the strengths of modern Evangelicalism and a sign of life.

He said that an older Liberal Evangelical group had died out because no one was interested in it. One suspects, however, that the reason is rather that no one recognized it as distinctive any longer.

Ordination of Women

The problem has been exacerbated by the debate on the ordination of women and its aftermath.

Evangelicals were entirely wrong-footed in this debate which had hardly begun to deal with the theological issues before the crucial vote last November. (Witness the sudden flurry of letters on the meaning of *kephale* [Greek word for "head"] in the church press.)

The decision itself was reached on pragmatic and sociologically driven grounds in a Synod where Evangelicals were divided and hamstrung.

Now the debate has become even more pragmatic, moving from Theology to Ecclesiology with increasing bitterness over the way the victors will divide the spoils.

A notable result has been the formation of an 'unholy alliance' between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics in the so-called "Forward in Faith" group. For Anglo-Catholics this seems to mean masses of Masses. For Evangelicals it is the *1662 Book of Common Prayer* and the King

James Bible. All of this hardly suggests imagination, insight and clear theological thinking, let alone a movement 'forward'!

Supernova

My own view is that Evangelicalism in the UK is sick to the point of death.

There was indeed an explosion of life in the 1970s. But this was like a star turning Supernova. It created a lot of light and heat and blew off an expanding ring of gas. But the star at the centre which powered the whole display is collapsing and dying.

The failure of Evangelicals to respond adequately to key issues, an embarrassment about old allegiances and the search for new 'labels' to redefine Evangelical identity all point to a movement in crisis.

Causes and Cures

In thinking about the situation at home, I have tried to answer for myself the question as to how we got into the mess we are presently in.

It seems to me that the causes of our problems were, in many ways, also the causes of our success. For Dr. McGrath is quite right in saying that in terms of numbers, influence and morale Evangelicals are the most significant Christian group not only in the Church of England but in the whole of the UK.

It seems that the roots of success lay in the 1950s with the emergence of a new intellectual Evangelical leadership. Reading the spines of the older Tyndale Commentaries will give you a good idea of who many of these people were but they included the likes of Jim Packer, John Stott, Alec Motyer and so on.

Evangelicalism at the time was embattled and defensive, but these men built on a firm historical, doctrinal and even liturgical foundation represented at the grass roots by the typical 'CPAS' (Church Pastoral Aid Society) Parish. They can be credited with turning the tide in favour of Evangelicalism and beginning what genuinely turned into an Evangelical revival.

From Keele...

In 1968 I went to Keele University. What is rather more important is that in 1967 so did John Stott at the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress.

He took with him many Anglicans who affirmed their commitment not only to traditional Evangelical principles but also to working them out within the Church of England. Keele '67 represented the high-water mark of traditional Post-war Anglican Evangelicalism. However, a new religious phenomenon was about to dominate the landscape in the form of the Charismatic Movement.

...to Nottingham

It is hard to believe now, but in the 1960s the Charismatic Movement in the UK was strictly an 'under the counter' organization, talked about in hushed whispers.

However, it was about to bring to the UK scene an injection of life which would spark the Evangelical Supernova, largely through the efforts of David Watson at St. Michael Le Belfry, York. By the second NEAC, at Nottingham in 1977, the 'worship' agenda was dominated by the Charismatics with David Watson's team playing a major role.

The intellectual agenda, meanwhile, was dominated by the political

left.

Much of the momentum for this had come from Francis Schaeffer and the L'Abri Fellowship, but UK Evangelicals, lacking his Continental rigour in philosophy, had produced an uneven mixture of politics and sociology, with the Old Testament being quarried largely for paradigms of social reform.

For all its faults, NEAC '77 was a massive event, both in terms of numbers and its impact on the wider church.

The Anglican world now centred on Evangelicals and (if you had been there) St. John's College, Nottingham. The movement was not merely confident but unstoppable. However, NEAC '77 was another high water mark, for the theological agenda, whilst thin, was still underpinned by the assumptions of an earlier Evangelicalism.

All this would change in the next ten years.

Expansion

From 1977 onwards, Evangelicalism in the UK expanded rapidly.

Crucial to this was the domestication of the Charismatic Movement and the increasing respectability of the House Churches. By the early 80s the Charismatic Movement could no longer be described as 'Neo-Pentecostal'.

The emphasis moved away from a distinctive 'Baptism in the Spirit' accompanied invariably by 'Praying in Tongues' to a more general belief in the supernatural activity of God with an emphasis on physical and emotional healing.

At the same time, the House Churches, which were by now too big to fit into houses, moved not only into schools halls and cinemas but into mainstream church life.

Their theology was no longer that of earlier Evangelicalism and their appeal was to the new generation of younger Christians.

The Intellectual Crisis

The key question, however, is why Evangelicalism, whilst growing in numbers, failed to grow in depth.

The answer lies, I would suggest, in what was happening in the Theological Colleges in face of the sociological challenge of the '60s and the theological challenge of the Charismatic Movement.

The '60s was not a period of time but a phenomenon of culture during which life was revolutionized in the UK. Liverpool was the world centre of pop music, thanks to the Beatles. London was the centre for fashion and photography *via* Mary Quant, David Bailey, Twiggy, Kings Road and so on. Crucially, however, anything pre-1960 was seen as irrelevant which included, of course, the theological and ecclesiological heritage of the Packers, Stotts and Motyers.

Meanwhile, the Charismatic Movement was claiming, contra another debate in the '60s, that God was not merely "not dead" but alive and kicking and able to do all the things he did 2,000 years ago.

However, the Charismatic Movement was conscientiously *discontinuous* with traditional Evangelicalism. Its roots were in 19th Century Pentecostalism and specifically the Asuha Street Revival, so that even Montanists could be claimed as fellow travellers.

Moreover, the Charismatic Movement provided a rationale whereby God could speak and act today without recourse to 'theology' which was an area still dominated by German Liberals. The result was to produce a generation of candidates and staff at Theological Colleges who had every reason to abandon both the formularies and intellectual rigour of past generations.

Consequently, people continued to be converted but the pastors were not doctrinally equipped to instruct them.

The Way Ahead?

As the '70s turned into the '80s matters worsened.

The Charismatic emphasis has moved from healing to prophecy. It is no longer necessary to read the Bible (much less study it) to hear a word from God. God speaks directly, through vision and word of knowledge.

Anglican theological education, meanwhile, is under threat not merely from the closure of Colleges but the shortening of training to two years and the shifting of responsibility to University departments of Theology. Evangelicalism is metamorphosing into something which would be unrecognizable to the men of the '50s.

Furthermore, I personally wonder whether, on its own, an organization like Dick Lucas' Proclamation Trust is able to save the day. Some see it as relatively wedded to the class structures of English society. Whatever the answer is, it will require a profound change in the intellectual climate amongst traditional Evangelicals, coupled with a commitment to the gospel which allows a radical challenge to the sociological and ecclesiological trends of the present.

You cannot head off a stampede by calling the cows to come back. If the present debacle in English Evangelicalism is to be arrested it will require people of courage and vision who are prepared to go out ahead of the herd, to kick, to shout and to make a noise, so that those who are genuinely Christian, but who are so much like sheep without a shepherd, may be brought back to the good pastures.

John Richardson, Sydney, August 1993.

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John has written [three books](#) in the MPA Books Biblical Application Series - *Get Into the Bible* (1994); *God, Sex & Marriage* (1995) and *Revelation unwrapped* (1996).

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and in the UK from **St Matthias Press**, PO Box 665, London SW20 8RL, Tel. 0181 947 5686.

Since this article was written, Dr. David Peterson, formerly Senior Lecturer at Moore College, has become Principal of Oak Hill Theological College.

Visit John's website at

<http://www.btinternet.com/~j.p.richardson/index.html> for some very useful resources.

Last updated 27 October 1997