

Evangelicals and History

Churchman 106/3 1992

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In recent years, something has happened to cut off evangelicals, particularly in the Church of England, from their historical roots. This has done enormous harm to the cause of evangelicalism, and made it particularly weak and vulnerable in the face of some modern movements and deviations, such as, liberalism, ecumenism and the charismatic movement. The renunciation of our history took place at Keele in 1967 and the significance of it has been brought home to me afresh by my recent reading of the biography of Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones published in 1990.

In writing of the Keele congress John Stott stated:

Keele expressed the formal public, penitent, renunciation by evangelical Anglicans of that pietism which for too long had marred our life and our testimony. And by pietism, I mean an exaggerated religious individualism, a withdrawal from both the church on the one hand and the world on the other, into a personal godliness and a tight-closed ecclesiastical 'in' group, a retirement into a self-made security with God and with one another, a contracting out of our responsibility both to the visible church and to the world...

Pietism is an immature protective attitude of those who have not yet attained their majority. I don't think therefore it is an exaggeration to say that the Keele Congress marked the coming of age of the current generation of evangelicals. Keele was the conscious emergence of evangelical Anglicans into maturity in the wider life of the church and the world. Keele marked for many of us our conversion from the negative and the defensive...

The opposite of pietism is involvement. We must say, therefore, that pietism is not the hallmark of true evangelicalism but rather a denial of it. Historically evangelicals have often been pietists but when they have been pietists they have not been true to their nature and calling.¹

There are two things to be said about this statement. The first is that I believe it to be a misreading of earlier Evangelicalism. It was not cut-off from the life of the Church of England in the way described. Evangelicals were involved in its structures, and involved deeply. I am reminded of a leading Evangelical who said to me, that he was unable to attend the Keele Congress because that week he had to attend a meeting of the standing committee of the Church Assembly. Others could have testified to similar commitments. The supposed isolation was largely imaginary. Secondly, this is a classical case of throwing out the baby with the bath water. By the renunciation of the so-called pietism of the past evangelicals were, in fact, writing off evangelical history as well. To describe all evangelicalism prior to Keele as pietist was both unjust and untrue. Such a rash judgment was bound to set up an alienation of contemporary evangelicals from their heritage and a separation from their history, which was to have the most serious and damaging results.

Martin Lloyd-Jones had himself used occasionally the word 'pietism' to describe a certain type of evangelicalism of the quietistic type, associated with Keswick, but he regarded the application of the word in a pejorative sense to all earlier Anglican evangelicals as a confusion of the issue now in controversy.²

If we think about it, it is a total and utter confusion to write off Ryle and Griffith Thomas, the activities of the Church Association and the National Church League, and the formation of the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society, and so forth as 'pietistic'. The men who championed classical evangelicalism inhabited no 'ghettos'. They were in the main stream of the Church's life. But what stuck in the throats of the New Evangelicals, which made them want to dissociate themselves from that kind of evangelicalism, and to begin again *de novo*, was that it championed an understanding of the Church of England which they considered was no longer acceptable or tenable. The arguments of the older evangelical constitutionalists was that the Church of England was limited by her own standards to a Biblical and Protestant religion. John Stott had himself formerly taken that position and had appealed to it as late as October 1966, when he had spoken at the Westminster Central Hall meeting of the Evangelical Alliance. But the old position of such men as Bishop Ryle and, indeed, all thinking men that would not allow commitment to ecumenical fellowship, was now considered 'pietism'. That was how the harm was done. By arbitrarily drawing a line, and denominating all evangelicalism prior to Keele, and which adhered to a classical position 'pietism', a watershed was created of pre- and post-Keele evangelicalism, which effectively cut evangelicals off from their history.

Consequences

This had two consequences which were foreseen and intended by the architects of Keele.

1. To give evangelicalism a clean slate to begin all over again. There was a great deal of that kind of thinking and jargon about at that time in the 1960s. There was an essay in *Soundings*, a symposium edited by Alec Vidler, published in 1962 which had the pretentious title 'Beginning all over again'. The phrase 'coming of age' was popularized by the publication around that time of the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and people generally were thinking that they had a mandate for breaking the mould and starting afresh, both socially and theologically. Some of that naive optimism seemed to be present at Keele. One of the consequences of such a serious break with past evangelicalism was to create a problem of evangelical identity, with which we have wrestled throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and which is still with us today. It is a question which has not, and indeed cannot, be resolved, as long as there is an unwillingness to recognize evangelical history for what it is. The significance of Keele was to cut evangelical moorings and cast evangelicalism afloat on a sea of modernity without any shore in sight. Ever since then the shipmen have been taking soundings and surmizing that they might be drawing near to land, but none has yet set foot upon it. The result is that contemporary evangelicalism has presented a picture of flux and uncertainty, unable to define itself over against other traditions.

2. The second consequence of Keele has been to leave evangelicalism in the Church of England exposed and at the mercy of fashionable movements and theologies which have little Scriptural warrant about them. Historical waymarks are of great assistance in determining the right road to follow, but these were swept away by those who were intolerant of history. We have no need of them, was the cry; we have no need of the Thirty-nine Articles, we have the Bible and that is enough. But Bishop Ryle in his wisdom thought differently and warned many years ago of the danger of taking such a position. In his paper 'The Importance of Dogma' he wrote:

It is not enough to say, 'We believe the Bible'. We must distinctly understand what the leading facts and doctrines of the Bible are; and this is exactly the point where Creeds and Confessions are useful. Those who care to study this subject will find it admirably handled in a Scotch book,

entitled 'Dunlop's uses of Creeds and confessions of faith'. Burke's speech in the House of Commons, on Archdeacon Blackburn's petition, is also well worth reading ... He truly says, Subscription to Scripture alone is the most astonishing idea I ever heard, and will amount to no subscription at all.³

It seems to me that Bishop Ryle was clearly right and that, paradoxically, the appeal to the Bible apart from the Confessions really represents a flight from the teaching of the Bible. That was so in the case of Archdeacon Blackburn's petition, which was opposed by Burke in the House of Commons. That petition was presented on behalf of the Arian clergy who objected to the orthodox Trinitarian doctrines of the Thirty-nine Articles. They did not want to be bound by such teaching and so they wished to replace subscription to the Articles with subscription simply to the Bible. In this way they thought they would be free to follow their own beliefs. That was true of the Arian clergy of the eighteenth century, but why should evangelicals adopt a similar plea in the twentieth century? It seems to me that if you say you believe the Bible, sooner or later you must state what you believe the Bible teaches on God, man, sin, salvation and so forth. If you do that you will surely come up with something very much like the Thirty-nine Articles and the other Protestant Confessions of Faith. Why then should anyone seek to divide the confessions from Scripture unless in fact they are seeking to escape from the doctrines of Scripture, which are those of historical evangelicalism? By thus sweeping away those historical waymarks of evangelicalism the right path for contemporary evangelicals has been obliterated and the movement has been made vulnerable to the incursion of teaching from sects and heresies. I shall return to this matter later and mention more specifically what those dangers are, but I wish now to give my reasons for believing that as evangelicals we must take history seriously.

History and Faith

First, we find this principle enshrined in Scripture. For the Jewish people history and faith were inextricably intertwined. Faith arose from the faithfulness of God, and that faithfulness to his covenant people was demonstrated in history in all his mighty acts. That is why the greater part of the Old Testament is taken up with the history of the people of Israel, for in that history they found the source of their religious faith. The Psalms are full of history, setting forth in measured terms the mercy and goodness of God in delivering his people from Egypt, and bringing them through the Red Sea and the waste-howling wilderness and planting them as a choice vine in the Promised Land. Therefore, for the Jew the neglect of history would be the neglect of religion; the forgetfulness of the past would be the undermining of faith.

We find the same thing in the prophets, who when Israel had deviated from the commandments of God and from pure religion, reminded them of their espousals to God in the wilderness, when God was very near to his people, and they called them back to the old paths. Jeremiah 6:16 'Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls'. And again, Jeremiah 18:15 'My people hath forgotten me, they have burned incense to vanity, and they have caused them to stumble in their ways from the ancient paths, to walk in paths, in a way not cast up.'

The apologists of Keele who wanted at that time to disparage the Reformation and to weaken its influence over evangelicalism, said that we have no right to look back to a 'golden age' of the Church, such as the Reformation. There never was, they said, a golden age of the church, when everything was perfect. That is true, in the very obvious sense, that there was no age

when the church was perfect, not even in the time of the apostles. But it is not true in the sense that there were not undoubtedly times when God was very near to his people, when there were times of special blessing and accession of power. Nobody can surely maintain that all periods of the church's history were the same, a mere plain, and that there are not peaks and valleys, times of revival and times of declension. What evangelicals in the past said was, that the Reformation was a peak in the church's history and experience. They were generally agreed that the Reformation was, in fact, the greatest outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church since Pentecost. It was one of 'the golden periods' of the church's history, when God endued men with remarkable strength and with special understanding and perception of spiritual truth, and when great power and awe were present in the churches of Europe. We make a great mistake if we pretend it was not so, and seek to reduce every period of the church's history to the same level as our own. It is certain, as we have seen, that the prophets looked back to special times in Israel's history, when God was very near to his people, in a way that he was not at later times.

O God, when thou wentest forth before the people:
when thou wentest through the wilderness,
The earth shook, and the heavens dropped at the presence of God:
even as Sinai also was moved at the presence of God, who is the God of Israel.
(Psalm 68:7-8)

The same is true of the history of the church and God's dealings with it. There have been times when God has come down with power upon his people. The protestant Reformation was such a time, and so also was the eighteenth century Evangelical Awakening, but the Reformation was the greater of the two, and different in its character and influence.

History and Revival

The second reason why we should have a regard to history is that revivals have always arisen from a fresh appreciation of the history of God's dealings with his people, from seeing the past in a new light. When we talk about revival we are talking about restoring what is already there, but has been neglected or forgotten. That was the message to the church at Ephesus. 'Thou hast left thy first love. Remember from whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works' (Rev. 2:4-5). And to Sardis 'Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die' (Rev. 3:1-2). Reformation, similarly, is not the bringing in of anything new, but the recovery of ancient truth: 'earnestly contend for the faith, which was once delivered unto the saints' (Jude v. 3).

The Reformers repeatedly denied that they were beginning again or introducing new teachings. They were, they said, restoring to the church the gospel preached by the Lord and by his apostles. They were returning to what had been delivered to the church in the first place, and had been set aside in favour of novelties and human tradition. Their objection to the doctrine of purgatory, indulgences and much else in the Roman Church's system was, that 'it is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture', having the mark of innovation rather than authenticity.⁴

Precisely the same was true of the Evangelical Awakening. George Whitefield and John Wesley were at pains to insist that they were introducing no new teaching, though it seemed new and strange to those who heard it. They were merely preaching the doctrines of the church to be found in her own formularies, but which had been set aside and usurped by Deism and mere ethical religion. Justification by faith and election may have appeared as

great novelties to many eighteenth century churchmen but they had been the official teaching of the established church for two hundred years. Our evangelical fathers returned to these old paths not merely because they were old but because they were Scriptural. But so often the two go together, and as C.H. Spurgeon put, ‘What is true is not new, and what is new is not true’, as a general rule.

Long, long ago the truth was found.
A company of men it bound,
Hold firmly then that ancient truth.

So here we have a very impelling motive for having regard to history, for there can be no reformation or revival without this return to the truth.

I do not wish to labour this point, but it is an important one which needs to be underlined, as it is by Bishop Ryle in his book *Old Paths*.

There are few subjects about which English people are so ignorant as they are about the real doctrines of the Church of England. Many persons know nothing of the theological opinions of the English Reformers, and of all the leading English Divines for nearly a century after the Protestant Reformation. They call opinions old which in reality are new, and they call opinions new which in reality are old.

It would be waste of time to inquire into the causes of this ignorance. Certain it is that it exists. Few people seem to be aware that those doctrines which now are commonly called *evangelical*, were the universally received divinity of English Churchman throughout the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James I. They are not, as many ignorantly suppose, new-fangled views of modern invention. They are simply the old paths in which the Reformers and their immediate successors walked. Tractarianism, High Churchism, and Broad Churchism are new systems. Evangelical teaching is neither more nor less than the old school.⁵

There must be continuity with the apostolic tradition. When that has been neglected and overlaid with the accretions of novelty and false teaching, revival can only come from the fresh appreciation and discovery of those ancient truths which had been lost and forgotten. It will only come from digging again the wells of Abraham, as Tyndale put it, which had been stopped by the spiteful Philistines.

And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham; and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. And Isaac’s servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of springing [living] water. (Gen. 26:18-19).

He dug the *old* wells and he called them by the *old* names and he rediscovered a source of *living water*. Such was the experience of the Reformers and the Evangelical fathers and such will be our experience today, if we do not despise the past and neglect the testimony of good men, who act as ‘a voice *behind* us saying, this is the way, walk ye in it’. (Isaiah 30:21).

Evangelicalism endangered

Now it seems to me that the consequences of the neglect of history are very great. By severing its roots in the past and alienating evangelicals from their history and their heritage, it has left evangelicalism a prey to novelty and passing fashion. It is for this reason that the charismatic or neo-Pentecostal movement has made such marked inroads into evangelicalism. That, I believe, would have been impossible prior to Keele, for the fundamental principles

and teachings of classical evangelicalism would have acted as a bulwark against it. But now, in the absence of any clear criteria to distinguish them, many have fallen into the confusion of calling charismaticism or pentecostalism evangelicalism and *vice versa*. To anyone who knows anything of these movements, historically, it is clear that they are distinct and separate, and quite different in type. Evangelicalism is rooted in the objectivity of God's Word and grounded in the doctrines of total depravity, election, justification by faith and final perseverance. Grace is meant to be experienced by the individual, since faith is a personal thing, and is to the sinner as sight is to the blind. But experience does not itself become the criterion for judging truth. Feeling is always related to doctrine, and genuine conversion and a real work of the Holy Spirit must be distinguished from that which is counterfeit. But in the charismatic movement we see no such doctrinal control, but rather a free-wheeling emphasis upon experience, often induced by psychological methods, together with an absence or neglect of those doctrinal themes of justification and sanctification which are the hallmark of evangelicalism. There is also an unhealthy emphasis upon phenomena—miracles, visions, 'signs and wonders', which has never been a part of the evangelical movement, as such. With the severing of evangelical roots, evangelicalism has itself become a prey to this kind of thing. In many areas the two have merged and coalesced with the consequent decay of evangelical doctrine and its replacement by that which is shallow and ephemeral.

Similarly, the neglect of historic evangelicalism has resulted in a confusion over its boundaries with liberalism, and led again to an incursion of such thinking which has radically weakened the stance of many evangelicals. The area where this weakness shows particularly is that of the unity of Scripture, and the true unity of the church.

If we believe in the plenary inspiration of Scripture, we believe not only that the words which the sacred writers used were inspired and infallible, but also that it was the same Spirit of God who inspired each of the writers, whether it was David, Isaiah, Paul or James. This brings to the whole canon of Scripture a unity which is supernatural, for despite the fact that many different human authors were used by God, in many different ages, to write the Bible, they were all informed by the same Mind, the Mind of God the Holy Ghost. We expect therefore to find unity in the Bible, not disunity: harmony, not discord. For this reason the Reformers thought it right to enshrine this principle in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion and to declare that no part of Scripture should be so interpreted that it is repugnant to another part of Scripture (Article 20), for that would be to offend against the doctrine of the unity of Scripture, which is a corollary of the doctrine of the unity of the Godhead.

But for long in liberal circles the unity of Scripture has been challenged and undermined, and the erroneous belief cultivated, that what you have in the Bible is not agreement but disagreement between the various writers. Paul, it is alleged does not agree with John, nor even with Jesus himself. This has been developed to the point where such views have now passed into the official doctrinal reports of the Church, where it is asserted that the Bible is really full of controversy from one end to the other! There are indications that some evangelicals have admitted too readily this view of Scripture, and have tended to go along with the current pluralism in the church, which maintains that there are many different interpretations of the Bible, according to culture and background, and that we cannot expect to find one objective truth in Scripture. This is, of course, all part of the climate of relativism that reduces evangelicalism to one particular insight or contribution. It seems now that some evangelicals are content with this position.

Accommodation and confusion

The drift into pluralism, both in the doctrine of Scripture and in the doctrine of the church, which is taking place amongst evangelicals today, would not have taken place had not our historical roots been severed at Keele. But the severance took place with precisely that object in mind, namely, to accommodate evangelicalism to the new unbiblical ecumenism in the church, and to distance itself from the historical stance of evangelicals who insisted that the position they held was the only right and proper interpretation of the Thirty-nine Articles and the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The Church Association, [amalgamated with the National Church League in 1950 to form Church Society] particularly under J.A. Tomlinson, had conclusively won that battle of the formularies in the last century and the beginning of this. It had satisfactorily been demonstrated that the Protestant and evangelical understanding of the Articles and the Prayer Book were the only legitimate interpretation of them. This had forced the Anglo-Catholics to adopt a different strategy. Instead of claiming the Articles and the Prayer Book as their own, which they had sought to do in the nineteenth century, they began to call for change. This led to the attempt to introduce a new Prayer Book in 1928, which again failed owing to the firm and spirited stand of evangelicals [particularly the National Church League]. But this stance of our evangelical forebears was an embarrassment to some of the post-war evangelicals who masterminded the Keele Congress. They wanted something more flexible, and they got it when they succeeded in persuading the Congress to describe previous generations of evangelicals as ‘pietistic’ and occupying ‘ghettos’, and thus consigning their contribution to the dustbin of history. No one can doubt the effects of this exercise in revisionism. There is now amongst younger evangelical clergy a sense of incomprehension—sometimes impatience—when the names of Ryle or any of the Reformers are mentioned. There was once in Oxford a ‘Jewel Society’, formed by evangelical students and so named as a mark of their respect for that great Elizabethan Protestant bishop and apologist of the Church of England. It is no more. There were similar student bodies in other universities named after evangelical worthies; they are no more. All these things are incontrovertible signs of our retreat from history and the rejection of the voice that sounds behind us saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it’.

Finally, this historical weakness has led to confusion in our relations with Anglo-Catholicism. It is not an uncommon sight nowadays for ‘evangelical’ bishops to be seen leading their people on pilgrimages to Walsingham, attending masses and wearing all the trappings of Anglo-Catholicism; mitres, mass vestments, and so on. These things no longer raise eyebrows. If such confusion is possible on the part of leaders, what must be the state of doctrinal incoherence amongst the rank and file of the evangelical constituency today? It reveals that since Keele there has been the steady erosion of the principles of churchmanship and doctrine which were common knowledge amongst previous generations of evangelicals. Without that foundation we become ‘children, blown about by every wind of doctrine’. That is why I say that the harm done by the severance of our historical roots is great indeed.

What then are the prospects for recovery? I cannot pretend that these are encouraging. We lack any machinery for this. We are largely deprived of the theological colleges, which would be the means of the recovery of these teachings amongst the clergy. Little attention is now paid to the Protestant Reformation or the classical doctrines of evangelicalism. If the clergy are not instructed, it is difficult to see how we can have an informed laity.

But what I think is most disturbing is not simply the lack of machinery or institutions to propagate these teachings, but the coldness and lack of love of these things today, even amongst those who call themselves evangelicals. There is little desire to know or to read. This I find most disconcerting, for if there were the desire to know, and a love of the truth, the practical difficulties could be overcome, as they have been in the past, when people have been seized with a passion for the truth. Movements will make their own channels and institutions, and nothing can stop them. What we seek and what we need today is the kindling of the flame. A return to our first love, the realization amongst a new generation that the Old Paths are the True Paths, that a return to these great fundamentals of Christianity, enshrined in evangelical doctrine is the only way to Reformation and revival in the church. ‘Son of man, can these bones live? O Lord God, thou knowest.’ This must be a work of the Holy Spirit. It was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Reformation that brought about that great work and the same was true of the eighteenth century Awakening. And it must be a work of the Holy Spirit today. When he works, none can let.

O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them,

O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thine honour.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Quoted in *The Fight of Faith 1939-1981*, Iain H. Murray, Banner of Truth Trust 1990, p. 555.
- 2) *Ibid.*
- 3) ‘The Importance of Dogma’ in *Principles for Churchmen*, Bishop Ryle D.D., (4th edition), Chas. J. Thynne, London.
- 4) Article 22 of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion.
- 5) *Old Paths*, Rev J. C. Ryle, M.A. (2nd Edition) William Hunt, London, 1877.