

The Influence of Liberalism upon Evangelicalism— 'the Curate's Egg'

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Introduction

Here is a modern day parable with apologies to Lewis Carroll.

As Alice was walking down the road, she saw, sitting high up on a fence, a strange looking creature rather like an egg.

'How curious you look,' she called up to the man. 'What kind of person are you?'

'My name,' said the egg, 'is Humpty Dumpty. And what, pray, is yours?'

'Alice,' said Alice. 'And why do you sit so high up on that fence?'

'My task is the protection of the truth of evangelicalism through the preservation of fellowship and peace between the people who live on either side of this fence.'

'That is very interesting,' said Alice. 'Tell me, what exactly do you mean by evangelicalism?'

'I mean all those from whatever country who agree on the basics of Christianity, that God is sovereign, humanity fell in Adam, justification is by grace through faith via the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Stuff like that.' Humpty sniffed and looked up to the sky. 'Such childish questioning!' he muttered to himself.

'Curiouser and curiouser,' said Alice. 'I have never heard of these things. Perhaps you would like to explain them to me.'

'Hmm,' grumbled Humpty, not used to being subjected to such shameless interrogation. 'I am most exceedingly busy, little girl, but, as you are so ignorant, I shall try to lighten your darkness. To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is in complete control of all that goes on, that he knows the past, the present and the future. It is also, I am glad to say, a definition broad enough to include the claim that God is not in complete control of things and that, while he knows the past and the present he has some severe blind spots when it comes to the future. As for the Fall, it means that when Adam disobeyed God in the Garden, the whole status of

humanity was changed, that he was driven from the Garden and that all those descended from him are subject always to avoiding God's presence at every opportunity. Upon this, we are all, I am pleased to announce, completely agreed—except, of course, for those who think that Adam never existed and that humanity is essentially sound. Still, the basics of the position are held in common by dwellers on both sides of this fence. As for justification by imputation, it means that we stand before God clothed only in the righteousness of Christ and that it is only as we trust God that we are given this status of righteousness. There is absolute unanimity on that—except, of course, that no intelligent reader of the Bible on the far side of the fence really believes it any more. Nevertheless, this does not undermine our unity on the issue.'

Alice, somewhat perplexed, looked at the strange egg-shaped man. 'But is it not nonsense to say that those in such fundamental disagreement can agree to a formula of words? Does it not require that words can mean one thing and also their complete opposite?'

'My, my, you are a naive child, aren't you?' said Humpty. 'Has nobody ever told you that meaning is only in the mind of the reader, not the text?'

'I confess, sir,' said Alice, 'that I have heard such arguments but have always felt that, in the realm of Christianity, holding as it does to the idea of the God who has spoken, and of a loving heavenly Father who is of a kind that will not give his children a stone if they ask for bread, such a two-faced position was less than biblical. Indeed, is it not the case that for anyone, especially a Christian, to affirm public belief in something in which they don't actually believe, is an act lacking in personal integrity? What you propose indicates that there is a moral void at the heart of your position.'

'You forget,' laughed Humpty, 'that one man's personal integrity is another man's narrow-minded fundamentalism! And what you so offensively call "a moral void", I call "biblical Christian breadth" or, better still, "a sound attempt to revision Christian theology for the postmodern world of Generation X". You really must not be so bigoted, you know! The important thing is to act like a Christian. Now, please, take your self-righteous fundamentalist extremism elsewhere.'

Alice, deeply upset by the last jibe, shouted up at the egg. 'Sir, you play games with me. Does acting like a Christian not involve first and foremost being honest about what one believes, about not saying one thing and

doing another in order to gain a platform, audience or credibility? You are not using these words with their proper meaning.’

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’

‘And who is master?’ cried Alice. ‘To whom are you accountable?’

Humpty Dumpty leaned down as far as he could without losing his seat on the fence and patted Alice on the head. ‘My dear, dear, young girl, rest assured that I am master and certainly not the words themselves. And I and my friends are accountable to no-one—and certainly not to such a naive and impudent young thing as yourself.’

‘Be careful, Humpty,’ Alice warned. ‘That fence is exceedingly narrow and you might well find yourself falling off it if you insist on trying to do justice to those of us on both sides.’

‘Nonsense!’ cried Humpty. ‘Whatever you mean by “narrow”, I see it as exceedingly wide with plenty of room for all.’ Then, leaning closer, he hissed in her ear, ‘But, if I do happen to fall, have no fear—I have no intention of coming down on your side of the fence. Your view of words is so exceedingly narrow and your view of integrity so antiquated, so bibliolatrous, so—so—rationalist, that I fear I should never find a fence to sit upon in your land.’ Alice felt a shiver go down her spine. ‘On that,’ she said, ‘we can both agree.’

Alice waited a minute to see if he would speak again, if he wished her to stay, if he would come to a realisation of the basic incoherence of his position but, as he never opened his eyes or took any further notice of her, she said ‘Good-bye!’ and, on getting no answer to this, she quietly walked away; but she couldn’t help saying to herself as she went, ‘Of all the unsatisfactory people I ever met...’ She never finished the sentence, for at this moment a heavy crash shook the forest from end to end.

So writes Dr. Carl Trueman¹ and the point of that little parable will soon become plain if it isn’t already. Our aim is to consider the influence of liberalism upon evangelicalism. In order to accurately assess what that has been, we first need to understand what we mean by the term ‘evangelical’.

The difference as to whether one is an Evangelical by conviction and not simply by affection is significant. The latter can be no more than a matter of taste and preference; the former, however, is a matter of truth and commitment. We may think of it like this: people's taste in ice-cream varies—some like chocolate, others mint. It may be that upbringing has been a major factor; mother used to make wonderful vanilla ice cream and the flavour has stuck. But in the main it is a matter of taste, and in the end not much is at stake. The important thing is that it is still ice cream. That is the way some treat the different 'brands' of Christianity. The tendency today, especially within Anglicanism, is to speak of the 'evangelical' tradition alongside the catholic/liberal/charismatic/orthodox traditions. All of them make a valid contribution and we are all the richer because of the variety so the argument goes. But if the term 'Evangelical' denotes a truth system making truth claims (which historically it always has) then you cannot relativise it in this way. George Carey, writing as Bishop of Bath and Wells, certainly thought you could: 'Evangelicalism is more like a tribe of likeminded families grouped around an experience of salvation than a cohesive body united in faith and doctrine.'²

George Marsden suggests that there are 'three distinct though overlapping' senses to the word evangelical.

First, evangelicalism is a conceptual unity that designates a group of Christians who fit a certain definition. Second, evangelicalism can designate a more organic movement. Religious groups with some common traditions and experiences, despite wide diversities and only meagre institutional interconnections, may constitute movement in the sense of moving or tending in some common directions. Third, within evangelicalism in these broader senses is a more narrow, consciously 'evangelical' trans-denominational community with complicated infrastructures of institutions and persons who identify within 'evangelicalism'.³

In 1970 John Stott wrote: 'It is the contention of evangelicals that they are plain Bible Christians, and that in order to be a biblical Christian it is necessary to be an evangelical Christian.'⁴ This we affirm—fully orb'd evangelical Christianity at its best is the finest, fullest, most authentic expression of the Christian faith. That is quite a claim and in this pluralist age when it is not PC to make such exclusivist claims, it is not going to be popular. G. K. Chesterton once said, 'Pluralism is the privilege of those who have no convictions.'

There are certain entailments which flow from this position, *viz.* that other ‘forms’ of Christianity are at best inadequate and lacking, ranging from perversions (with different degrees of perversity) through to not being Christian at all, although Christian terminology may still be used. Accordingly so it was Gresham Machen’s contention that full blown liberalism was an entirely different religion altogether.

The Evangelical Identity Problem

When a term is used frequently enough it can become over used and so end up being abused. We may think, for example, of the word, ‘awesome’. A mobile phone can now be described as ‘awesome’ and pretty soon everything is awesome which means nothing is so. We have a similar problem with the term ‘evangelical’. It can now mean little more than indicating that one prefers guitars to organs in public worship. The word itself is derived from the Greek *euangelion* which means news—gospel. One of the first people to use it in a way which was a form of theological identification was Tertullian around AD 140 to defend biblical truth against the heretic Marcion. Martin Luther shocked the church in 1519 when he described himself as ‘altogether Christian and evangelical’. Thomas More took hold of the word as a term of abuse to hurl at William Tyndale and his associates by referring to them scornfully as ‘those evangelicals’! In his magisterial book on Thomas Cranmer, Diarmaid MacCulloch argues that this is the term which captures perfectly the thought and practice of the Reformers far better than the term ‘Protestant’ for it takes us to the heart of their concern and authority—the gospel. It was a term of abuse when applied to the eighteenth century preachers like Whitefield and Wesley and was hardly a term of endearment in the Church of England in the nineteenth century with antipathy towards evangelicals being captured by Anthony Trollope’s character Obadiah Slope who is portrayed as an odious conniving Bishop’s chaplain in *The Barchester Towers*. This continued right through into the 1950’s and the Billy Graham crusades when it was often linked to another theological swear word—‘fundamentalist’. In more recent years it has become more acceptable and less a title of opprobrium.

If we take what Marsden says in his analysis that there are three overlapping senses of the word ‘evangelical’, then priority should be given to the conceptual, that evangelicalism is defined confessionally rather than sociologically, for it is ultimately the belief which shapes the behaviour—or at

least should do. D. A. Carson has convincingly argued that this should be done with reference to what lies at the centre rather than the periphery.⁵ There are at least five key beliefs which lie at the heart of evangelicalism, each of which has negative entailments as well as positive ones.

1. The supreme authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Put simply, what the Bible says, God says. There may be secondary authorities, e.g. in matters of church order, but secondary authorities are not to contradict or be in competition with the Bible.

2. The sinfulness of human beings. The terms the Bible uses to describe the spiritual and moral state of mankind is dire—‘dead’, ‘slaves’, ‘under God’s wrath’ and so on (e.g. Eph. 2:1). Negatively this means that man cannot save himself, he requires a supernatural work to respond to God. This rules out any form of synergism in salvation—God does his bit and we do ours. There is nothing to commend us in terms of works or potential works.

3. The penal substitutionary atonement of Christ. Penal in that Jesus bears divine judicial punishment; *substitutionary* in that he dies in the place of sinners as their collective representative; *atonement* so placating the wrath of God towards his people. Negatively this means that Jesus’ death is not a mere example. Nor can it be added to by sacramental actions or good works. His death is final and sufficient. We may speak the penal substitutionary ‘model’ in the sense that it is a theological construct and a representation of a reality which is not easy to articulate—and so in this way it is like the double helix model of the DNA molecule in science. But it is not a model if it is construed merely of a picture which if you find helpful fine, but if not you can discard it or relativise it by conceiving it as one picture alongside others. There is a close correspondence between this doctrine and the reality it expresses.

4. Justification by faith alone. Luther’s central problem was, ‘How can I find peace with a holy God?’ The answer is that it is God who justifies those who put their trust in Christ. The verdict of the last day is brought into the present—this is justification. Negatively, this means that we do not achieve a positive divine verdict by adding to our faith good works. Positively, it is the proper response to God’s Word. He makes promises and we his creatures trust those promises to be true, anything less is unbelief and rebellion.

5. The necessity of the new birth. Jesus words to Nicodemus in John 3:3 are taken with the utmost seriousness, there must be a ‘birthing from above’ for anyone to ‘see’ the kingdom of God, let alone enter it. This is the sovereign work of God’s Spirit through his Word (1 Peter 1:23, ‘You have been born again...through the living word of God’). Word and Spirit belong together and constitute God’s great ‘speech acts’ which we have in Scripture—breathed out by the Spirit and applied by the Spirit. Mark Thompson writes: ‘This is precisely why evangelical theology cannot be described as abstract or merely intellectual. It is profoundly experiential, for it recognises that the beginning of the Christian life is the experience of new birth brought about by the Spirit of God.’⁶ But what of Marsden’s other two senses of the word ‘evangelical’?

There is the organic movement whereby people come together who would share a common heritage, looking back to Simeon, Whitefield and the like or past membership of the IVF (UCCF) and University Christian Unions. There is also the ‘narrow evangelical community’ which has more of a resemblance to a political party—and sometimes is formalised as such; so within Anglicanism there is the CEEC and associate organisations like CPAS, SAMS, Church Society and others.

David Holloway has argued the identity problems arise when ‘Someone is doctrinally evangelical and within the evangelical tradition but says they see no value or point in the evangelical parachurch structures. They occur when someone personally identifies with the ‘common traditions and history’ and wants to be involved in the ‘agencies and institutions’ but is not fully evangelical in doctrine.... But there is a new problem. This is when someone is doctrinally evangelical, yet has no interest in the evangelical tradition let alone evangelical parachurch structures.’⁷

The problem of liberal influence occurs in the second instance with those involved in agencies and structures who have an ‘evangelical history’ but are not fully evangelical in doctrine. The upshot of this is that the agencies themselves will be influenced in due course.

A Question of Authority—Sources of Truth

We have spent some time trying to identify evangelicalism in order to provide some point of reference whereby we can assess the influence of liberalism. But

we also have the task of trying to identify liberalism which is not as easy as it may first appear. In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, theological liberalism would have been understood in terms of the triumph of reason over revelation and tradition and so would have been seen as but one expression in the ecclesiastical sphere of the movement known as the ‘Enlightenment’ in the philosophical sphere. Immanuel Kant defined the Enlightenment in these terms: ‘It is the movement by which man emerges from his state of inferiority which made it impossible for him to use his reason without submission to the direction of others.’⁸ Accordingly, liberalism in theology was seen as an attempt to replace divine revelation with human reason, for to submit reason to revelation is precisely the ‘submission to the direction of others’ that Kant railed against. The motto of the Enlightenment was ‘Dare to use your *own* understanding’. Rationalistic human reason became the Procrustean bed upon which all theological statements were placed. What did not fit was lopped off. Miracles were against reason according to Hume and so were to be explained away as ‘myth’ and later reinterpreted existentially by Rudolf Bultmann. Jesus could not be divine *and* human, this is an oxymoron to autonomous reason, and so he becomes ‘the man for others’.

With the rise of lower criticism and later higher criticism, the Bible became viewed less and less as the source of revelation *from* God and more as an account of man’s various attempts to express his religious convictions *about* God, specifically his own religious experience. Thus theology—study of God—slowly began to collapse into anthropology—study of man. In some cases the motivation was noble, as with Schleiermacher, the so called father of liberalism, for his was an attempt to carve out a niche for Christianity in his book *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. As today, Christianity was under attack. Intellectuals, like Lessing, cast doubt upon the necessary relationship between faith and history, for him an ‘ugly broad ditch’ existed between faith and the purported events upon which that faith was said to depend. Hence Lessing’s celebrated dictum: ‘the accidental truths of history can never become the necessary proofs of reason.’ Schleiermacher in effect said, ‘No problem. You don’t have to worry about such things.’ What he actually said was that the essence of religion can exist without ‘miracle, inspiration, revelation, or supernatural intimations’. He argued that the practical part of life was the concern of morality; the factual part of life lay within the realm of

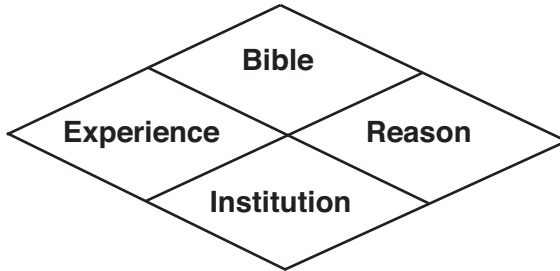
science. Where did that leave religion? Religion, he said, was concerned with pure ‘feeling’. It is subjective and personal and so not open to criticism. God was accordingly described as ‘That sense of absolute dependence’.

It has recently been argued by Professor Oliver O’Donovan that the nineteenth century liberal project was to reconstruct Christian doctrine by reference to ethics. Doctrines were investigated and re-embodied to express the highest and noblest of ethical ideals.⁹ Much of this, too, can be traced back to Kant’s view of ‘true religion’—‘True religion is to consist not in knowing or considering of what God does or has done for our salvation but in what we must do to become worthy of it...and of its necessity every man can become wholly certain without any Scriptural learning whatsoever.’ And ‘Man himself must make or have made himself into whatever in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become.’¹⁰

It is obvious that if you are going to have such high ideals for man, that ‘ought’ in ethics implies ‘can’, the ability to do what is commanded, then the second hallmark of Evangelicalism is going to take a serious knock, namely, the belief in original sin, and following on from that the doctrines of atonement and regeneration. This will always be one of the great distinguishing features between conservative and liberal. Pelagianism was a form of liberalism with its high view of the moral ability of man. A conservative has been described as a liberal who has been mugged! In other words, conservatives believe in evil and absolute moral standards, affirming both the nobility of and the depravity of man and so the need for a Saviour. Whilst it is experience which corroborates this belief (why do we carry a set of keys if we believe that most people are good and can be trusted?) it is the Scriptures which unflinchingly focuses for us the problem (Ps. 51, Rom. 3, and Rom. 7) let alone the teaching of Jesus in Mark 7 that the heart of the problem is the human heart.

The point of disagreement between orthodox Christianity and ‘liberalism’ of whatever theological stripe is over the question of authority and the source of truth. Since the days of Gresham Machen the expression of liberalism has changed. In the 1920’s and 30’s it was predominantly rationalistic, today the influence of rationalism is still present but there are other expressions of ‘liberalism’ of a less rationalistic hue. However, what makes the influences ‘liberal’ is the alleged source of authority *other* than the Bible.

Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne have helpfully provided a diagrammatic representation of the four sources of truth and authority which operate within the church today, which uses the helpful acronym—BRIE.¹¹



Evangelicals operate in all four areas. Reason is used in biblical interpretation, following the logic of an argument, taking into account historical background, the nature of the type of literature, etc. If one takes ‘institution’ to include what others would call ‘tradition’, again this is taken into account a consideration of the wisdom of our forefathers on matters of theology and practice. Experience too plays its part—like the practical experience of applying lessons of the Christian life, the subjective element of conviction of sin, the joy of a restored relationship with God. The deciding issue revolves around the question of *primacy* in matters of faith and conduct. When thinking and debating has been done and there is a conflict between what the Bible clearly teaches and the counterclaims of experience, the institution and reason, which has priority? If it is anything other than Scripture, *that* is a form of liberalism. It may be institutional liberalism or experiential liberalism—but the effect is the same—the replacement of the word of God with the traditions of men (cf Mark 7:1-23; Matt. 22:23-33). It is the age old question raised in the Garden of Eden, ‘Who is to be King?’ ‘Has God spoken or has he not? And has he spoken clearly?’

The Liberalisation of Evangelicalism

Obviously, we have to be careful not simply to label as ‘liberal’ any viewpoint which doesn’t happen to coincide with ours. Neither is it helpful to use the term ‘liberal’ as a blanket term to describe (or denounce) someone who, even on a significant point of doctrine, is propounding a liberal position, arising out of liberal presuppositions and which stands in conflict with Scripture. There are degrees of liberalism. At what point does a so-called ‘liberal evangelical’ become a ‘conservative liberal’? It may not be our place to make such a

judgement, but on certain issues we can and should as charitably as possible point out error, especially if the one concerned claims to be a fellow evangelical — after all, we are very much aware of the fate of Humpty Dumpty!

Let us look at some examples of the expressions of the different forms of liberalism upon evangelicalism and evangelicals.

1. **Rational liberalism.** We have seen that the doctrine of penal substitution has always been a hallmark of evangelical belief. It has never been short of its detractors and these have traditionally come from the self-identifying liberal camp. Thus the comments of the Dean of St. Albans, Jeffrey John in his 2007 BBC Lent talk may not be welcome to some but can hardly be surprising. Speaking of his upbringing and what he learnt of the cross he exclaims: ‘What exactly does that mean—‘Jesus took our place’? Does it mean, then, that we are back with a punishing God...and that the Cross is somehow to be understood as God’s ultimate punishment for sin? That’s certainly what I was told in my Calvinistic childhood. The explanation I was given went something like this. God was very angry with us for our sins, and because he is a just God, our sin had to be punished. But instead of punishing us he sent his Son, Jesus, as a substitute to suffer and die in our place. The blood of Jesus paid the price of our sins, and because of him God stopped being angry with us. In other words, Jesus took the rap, and we got forgiven, provided we said we believed in him. Well, I don’t know about you, but even at the age of ten I thought this explanation was pretty repulsive as well as nonsensical. What sort of God was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created, and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of his own Son? And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing somebody else? It was worse than illogical, it was insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this we’d say they were a monster.’

Of course this is a parody of the evangelical teaching, although sadly, some have given presentations which come pretty close to this. However, what a self-professed liberal writes now hardly differs from a self-professed evangelical. Steve Chalke writes—

The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed [as the

doctrine of penal substitution makes it out to be]. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement ‘God is love’. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.¹²

One of the leaders of the American Emerging Church movement, Brian McLaren, says that Chalke’s book ‘could help save Jesus from Christianity’, This has led Carson to comment—

I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel. Perhaps their rhetoric and enthusiasm have led them astray and they will prove willing to reconsider their published judgements on these matters and embrace biblical truth more holistically than they have been doing in their most recent works. But if not, I cannot see how their own words constitute anything less than a drift toward abandoning the gospel itself... As far as I can tell, Brian McLaren and Steve Chalke are the most influential leaders of the emerging movement in their respective countries. I would feel much less worried about the directions being taken by other emerging church leaders if these leaders would rise up and call McLaren and Chalke to account where they have clearly abandoned what the Bible actually says.¹³

In this case, Humpty Dumpty has decidedly fallen off the wall and landed on the liberal side of the garden with a loud crash.

2. **Experiential liberalism.** This can appear under the guise of the all encompassing term ‘spirituality’. A recent example of this which has entered the evangelical movement’s blood stream is to be found in the book *The Pressure’s Off* by the Christian counsellor, Larry Crabb.¹⁴ It is only fair to say that over the years many of us have benefited immensely from Larry Crabb’s approach to biblical counselling. His well-grounded understanding of human nature as presented in the Scriptures, his presentation of the way in which we develop ‘protective layers’ and the search for significance and security have

provided valuable and lasting insights. But in his more recent book we see Crabb departing significantly from the ‘old paths’ as he claims to have discovered ‘a new way to live’.

The ‘old way’ is the way of ‘striving’ which results in ‘enslavement’. It is described as the way of Moses; following principles in order to procure blessings and keeping at it. This, he refers to as the ‘law of linearity’. The consequence, according to Crabb, is self-inflicted pressure. This way of life is programmatical; follow such and such a way and blessings will come, deviate and they won’t. On the other hand, the new way is described as the new way of Christ which is the desire to be ‘near to God’. This is achieved by pleading mercy, discovering grace and experiencing rest. The result is that the pressure is off. Thus ‘the law of linearity’ is replaced by ‘the law of liberty’.

At first, this appears to be no more than basic Christianity. But appearances are deceptive. Crabb ends up presenting something which is a new form of the very thing he is condemning. By a combination of woolly thinking, sloppy argument and bad exegesis, Crabb is substituting mysticism for biblical Christianity. He engages in creating false and absolute antitheses. For example, he lumps prosperity ‘health and wealth’ teaching with the good and godly desire to live in a Christian marriage and raise a Christian family, as if the main motivation in the latter is following biblical principles in order ‘to achieve blessing’ (something seen as selfish and to be deplored), when in fact it might be doing these because (a) God calls us to, (b) it is right and the best, and (c) it brings glory to God. These are not to be set against the ‘higher desire’ to ‘experience God and enjoy him for who he is’. It could be argued that this desire could also be motivated by less than worthy noble elements namely, to ‘have an experience’.

This appears to be what Crabb wants most of all. It is not so much God that is the focus but a particular *experience* of him. This amounts to a remarkably similar *visio Deo* or beatific vision beloved of Catholic mystics. It is therefore no coincidence that such mystics are quoted with approval. To argue, as does Crabb, that people like John of the Cross and Teresa Avilla were advocating the same as that advocated by John Owen, Jonathan Edwards and John Bunyan is astonishing. The latter’s spirituality was ‘Word-centred’, the former’s experience-centred.

Ironically, the ‘new way’ of Crabb is nothing less than the ‘old way’ of works—orientated mystical Catholicism with its use of spiritual directors, techniques and the like. This invariably raises such questions as: What is the experience of God that Crabb craves? How will he know he has achieved it? Will he want to again? Presumably the answer to the latter will be ‘yes’ and so he will need to employ more techniques, more emotional intensity, and more ‘wanting to not be wanting’ anything but God. The result? The pressure will definitely be on! The very thing Paul condemns in Galatians (which Crabb refers to but misunderstands), the loss of liberty in Christ, is the destination to which Crabb is heading and leading others.

Crabb handles Scripture badly throughout his book. For example, he quotes 1 John about the ‘anointing of the Spirit’, and argues it is something we should seek, while John is reminding Christians that this is what they already have. To be sure Crabb’s desire is a noble one (to put God before all things), but it is being misdirected. It is an *experience* of God (not quite defined) which he is seeking above all things—which in reality may not be the same thing as experiencing *God*. To live out our lives in holiness, seeking to raise a Christian family, working for Christ according to his Word can result in an experience of God just as real (maybe more authentic) than the apparently exciting devotional way of the mystics being advocated by Crabb. What he has done is to allow the authority of experience to usurp the authority of Scripture.

3. **Institutional liberalism.** Here we have in mind the way in which commitment to an institution which has been shaped by liberal theology can have a seducing effect on evangelicals leading to unacceptable compromises which reinforce and so further perpetuates the institutionalised liberalism. There are two particular areas where this is evident—the academy and the church.

Several years ago R. T. France wrote a paper entitled, “Evangelicalism and Biblical Scholarship”.¹⁵ He engages with James Barr but capitulates to Barr’s association of fundamentalism with those who hold to ‘inerrancy, infallibility and other accompanying features’ and who do not engage in critical study in the way Barr thinks they should. So France writes—

The question remains, however, how much of current evangelical biblical scholarship does in fact fall within Professor Barr’s definition of “fundamentalism”, however much we might dislike the term—or at any rate how much residual “fundamentalism” there is within the work of those of us who think of ourselves as evangelicals operating within the mainstream of critical scholarship rather than against it. Or, to put it the other way, how real is our commitment to critical study? Are we in fact willing to follow standard critical method only so far as our evangelical tradition, and the expectations of the evangelical constituency, will allow? Are we really playing the game by the accepted rules? Can we justly expect to be received as *bona fide* members of the scholarly guild?

France’s complaint is not that some evangelicals have distanced themselves from scholarly study (which some have) and this should be reversed; rather it is that in order to be acceptable to some ‘scholarly guild’ evangelicals play by the rules drawn up by guild—often shaped by liberal presuppositions—which invariably means a surrender to such liberalism. Is France therefore willing to surrender belief in, say, substitutionary atonement, even though one is convinced of this by rigorous study if the scholarly guild considers it naïve and unacceptable?

With increasing inroads of postmodern epistemological presuppositions into theological study—deconstructionism and the like—are we to abandon belief in a biblical metanarrative in order to play ‘the game by the accepted rules’ which would mark the death of biblical theology? One is acutely aware of how the rules of the game soon become outdated. It was a ‘given’ fifty years ago that John’s Gospel was late and had hardly any historical value whatsoever—that is within the guild, not evangelicalism as represented by Tyndale House. Then the late John Robinson—himself a theological liberal of the new post-Barthian school wrote a book arguing that it is one of the earliest of the Gospels if not the first, and is exceedingly valuable as a source of historical material. What is more, he gave the guild apoplexy by arguing that most of the New Testament was written before AD70! Carl Trueman astutely comments on such enticements, ‘For scholars, the need to get on in the academic community can be...seductive, especially today when evangelicalism can, with just a little modification and moderation, become in some contexts a good career move and buy itself a place on the postmodern table.’¹⁶

It has been remarked of academics like Stibbs and Packer that they sacrificed their place in the academy for the sake of the gospel. Now we are seeing a new phenomenon, evangelicals sacrificing the gospel for the sake of their place in the academy. It may be worth considering whether a similar ‘sacrificing’ has occurred to secure some evangelicals a place within the church. No one can be envious of anyone being appointed to the episcopacy today within the Church of England. To onlookers it appears to be an invitation to oversee decline, to ponder the setting of the sun on a collapsing institution. There will always be protestations that there are many encouragements on the ground. These need not be denied, but in terms of diocesan institutions the tide is running out. It is at the episcopal end—and to a less extent the archidiaconal and diocesan end—that it becomes almost impossible to retain evangelical consistency.

How does one with a clear conscience institute a man into a living who you know is not going to proclaim the gospel? This issue has been around a lot longer than the question of instituting women into such positions. How does one work in a ‘senior staff’ team with people who deny fundamentals of the faith or add traditions which amount to a subtraction? The answers are not easy. One common ploy is to adopt what can be called the Anglican fairytale; that despite our apparent differences, deep down we are all one and on the same side. A more moderate rationalisation is conciliation or compromise for the sake of influence. This is not very different from the sell-out to the academy. There does, however, seem to be the need to deny reality in adopting either approach. Regarding the former, it is manifestly not the case that the likes of Jeffrey John and John Stott are on the same team. Relating to the latter, the increasing number of ‘evangelical’ names added to the episcopal list has hardly resulted in a more orthodox and spiritually vigorous national church as evidenced by dwindling congregations and ordinations.

Conclusion

The modern evangelical ‘Humpty Dumpty’ is perched precariously on his wall and is rather supercilious towards ‘Alice’ considering her questionings rather tiresome. But the constitution of this Humpty is that of a curate’s egg, good in parts, but also bad. In 1984, Dr. Francis Schaeffer made a passionate appeal to the world evangelical constituency to stop its ‘worldly accommodation’. In its place he called for ‘loving confrontation’, not for its own sake but for the sake of truth and the glory of the God whose word is

truth and the ultimate well being of the people he has made.¹⁷ The need for such confrontation remains, more so than twenty years ago. Liberalism in the threefold form we have identified has made significant inroads into Western evangelicalism and more specifically Anglican evangelicalism. Confusion results on matters of belief and behaviour when there should be clarity; compromise where there should be conviction with a resulting fragmentation and drift. Perhaps the fragmentation should continue and realignment around the centre needs to occur for a more authentic and robust evangelicalism to arise. It is certainly time that the ill-fated affair that evangelicalism has been having with liberalism should end and for the movement to regain confidence in its defining convictions once more.

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ENDNOTES

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