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### EVANGELICALS UNDER ATTACK

By David Phillips

In our national life education has become a battle ground in which the government attempts to mould people, social theorists conduct experiments and world-views clash. Within the Church theological education has likewise always been an area of contention because it is so crucial to the future health and direction of the Church.

In the past Evangelicals recognised that their convictions were neither shared nor always welcome within the Church and thus set up their own training institutions. Despite attempts, the wider Church has not been able to close nor control these colleges, though this does not stop many trying.

Our training system is far more centralised (a command economy) than it once was, reflecting the ideological views that infected the church a generation or two ago and which still linger. The evangelical colleges weathered that storm because they are independent foundations. More recently the Hind report sought to create regional based training which would have undermined theological distinctives in training. This failed partly because it was a bad idea, partly because it was far too costly to set up and partly because of the independence of some colleges.

The other tactic has been to threaten to withhold funding, or to prevent students from attending, those colleges with which some Bishops and Directors of Ordinands disagreed. There is clear evidence that this has been going on and that Oak Hill in particular has been a target in recent years, but it is not a new phenomenon. Generally this policy has backfired since the best way to make someone want to go somewhere is to tell them that they cannot.

When I was looking at theological colleges, nearly 20 years ago, everyone knew that there were six evangelical colleges and that some of them were more evangelical than others. As the Scriptures say, 'there is nothing new under the sun'. Not long ago my *alma mater*, Cranmer Hall was under the spotlight when it refused to recommend Nick Howard for training. Cranmer was at best liberal evangelical in my day and it seems to have gone down hill since. In recent months the focus has been on two other colleges, and for different reasons.

Oak Hill has come in for criticism from Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, and this has been seized on by others to denigrate the college.

We thank God that Mike Ovey has been appointed as the next principal of Oak Hill. But it was greeted with dismay by others. In the last issue of *Cross†Way* we ran an article on a new book on the cross by Mike with Steve Jeffrey and Andrew Sach. Tom Wright does not like the book and wrote a lengthy piece on it for the Fulcrum website.

Fulcrum is the standard bearer for open evangelicals and it has taken on the task of battering classical evangelicalism as much as possible. Its website tells you much about the new evangelicalism. For example there is an article by Lucy Winkett which endorses 'sacramental confession through a priest' and a poem by Graham Kings in praise of the last Bishop of Rome.

Bishop Wright's piece was a critique primarily of two things, the recent comments by Jeffrey John and the Ovey, Jeffrey & Sach book. The piece on Jeffrey John is good and although it is firm it is gracious. Much of the piece on the book is genuine criticism, which may or may not be justified, but should at least be heard. Bishop Tom is closely involved because part of the reason for the

book was the controversy surrounding the views of Steve Chalke. Chalke claimed Tom Wright as a source for his thinking, and the Bishop in turn commended Chalke's book. In the article Tom gives a different interpretation of Chalke to that offered by Ovey and co. This is an interesting exercise in itself because it seems clear to me that despite his credentials as a Biblical scholar Wright's interpretation of Chalke is wrong. Moreover, later correspondence and conferences, which Bishop Tom fails to even mention, confirm the Ovey, Jeffrey & Sach interpretation as correct. This reminds me of the comments by C S Lewis in his essay '*Fernseed and Elephants*' (in the book of that name), which ought to be compulsory reading for everyone who undertakes biblical study. Lewis, reflecting on the interpretation of his own and of Tolkien's work concludes that the critics got it wrong, every time. He therefore placed little credence by the attempts of others to re-interpret the Bible.

What is distressing about Tom Wright's paper is that he moves quickly from critical remarks about the book to an attack on Oak Hill college and conservative evangelicals in general. The criticism could perhaps be summarised as, 'these conservatives are ill-educated', and this observation has been readily picked up by some as another brick to throw at Oak Hill. Now it would be possible here to focus on people and personalities. Instead I will offer some observations on why Bishop Tom and Oak Hill appear to be at loggerheads.

It seems to me that the greatest problem that Bishop Tom has with the Ovey, Jeffrey and Sach book is that he thinks they have not listened to him. This may be fair criticism, but I think not. Generally classical evangelicals have not accepted the work done by Tom and others on New Testament interpretation. Wright has been at the forefront of the 'new perspectives on Paul' which in turn has derived in large part from earlier studies of first century Judaism. It is clear from the writing of classical evangelicals that they not only reject the conclusions reached by Wright and others, but also a lot of the analysis which leads to the conclusions.

Excuse my cynicism but it seems to me that there is a clear pattern to these things in western academia and church. New ideas arise and scholars latch onto them. They write doctoral theses and books and get appointed to prominent posts. Novelty is prized in western academia. These ideas then get taught in universities and filter down to teacher training colleges and schools. The same thing happens in theological colleges, and eventually the new ideas shape the message week by week. Others pick up the ideas sooner and want to rework everything to reflect it. But, there are two problems.

First, there are those who never accepted the new ideas in the first place. They refused to teach them in seminary, school or church. These people are assumed by the majority to be backward and out of touch. This is the charge that appears to be being thrown at Oak Hill, and it is nothing new.

Second, by the time all this gets to the schools and colleges a new generation of scholars have arisen and have begun to challenge the now old ideas. Before long it is recognised the old ideas were wrong, or at least were only partly true, and the whole thing goes round again.

This is the meat and drink of academia which has been too influenced in wanting to see theology (and the same is true of history) as equivalent to the physical sciences where innovation and novelty are the name of the game.

My reading of Tom Wright, and others, is that they are so convinced that their new understanding is correct that anyone who disagrees with them must somehow be theologically backward.

## **Wycliffe Hall**

The other college which hit the headlines recently was Wycliffe Hall. Wycliffe is another college that has a clear and unequivocal evangelical foundation but which has, in the eyes of many, drifted from that basis in recent years. The appointment of Richard Turnbull as its new Principal has not been welcomed by some of those happy with the drift.

Again Fulcrum seems to have been the focal point for opposition and criticism and this recently spilled out further as documents were leaked to the national and church press.

Stephen Bates in the Guardian picked up the issue and decided to launch an attack on Richard Turnbull. If it were not so sad his chosen point of attack would be laughable. Richard was invited to speak to the Reform Conference in October, not because he is a member of Reform, or because he has identified with Reform, but just so that he could give some brief reflections on the Church of England and theological education. He made reference in this to the fact that there is a work of evangelism to be done because 95% of the population are going to hell. This is clearly an unpleasant fact, but it is a damning indictment on the Church today that when Jesus said so much about hell a modern commentator on Church affairs should think it so extraordinary to hear it spoken of today.

I don't know where the figure of 95% came from, but the comment has been used, not to engage with the issue, but simply to portray Richard as a thoroughly nasty man who should not be in charge of training sensitive and vulnerable ordinands to ministry. Thankfully the Council of Wycliffe Hall who appointed Richard have continued to fully endorse him.

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