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Engaging with Liberalism

Melvin Tinker

Introduction

It has been argued previously that liberalism understood as the theological manifestation of the Enlightenment has, by and large, been corrosive and injurious to the cause of Christ. However, not all who would own the label ‘evangelical’ would share this view. We can go back nearly twenty years to consider some dissenters from this thesis which, we hope to show, simply confirms it, namely, that evangelicals have been influenced by a liberal ‘mindset’ more than some would dare to admit.

In the wake of the suicide of Dr. Gareth Bennett, the anonymous writer of the notorious *Crockford’s* Preface in which the liberal ascendancy on the Church of England under Archbishops Runcie and Hapgood was roundly criticised, George Carey wrote an article entitled “Parties in the Church of England”.¹

In this paper he took Anglo-Catholics to task but also Evangelicals for their ‘party spirit’. He writes—

As I owe to evangelicalism my very soul, I can stand within the tradition and criticize it from a position of love. What unites evangelicals is their love of Jesus Christ, their experience of salvation as something deeply personal and life changing, their love of the Scriptures as God’s word for them, their worship as essentially simple and in which teaching from the Bible is paramount, and their deep desire for others to share their faith.

This almost ‘phenomenological’ description of evangelicalism contrasts with the confessional evangelicalism we espoused earlier. He then engages with Michael Seward’s book *Evangelicals on the Move* noting Seward’s failure to consider the influence of the charismatic movement and then writes—

Furthermore, Seward does not make room for people such as myself, whose heart beats in time with the evangelical love of Jesus and a deep devotion to the biblical tradition, but whose head cannot go along with received evangelical teaching.

Thus Carey clearly moves within the rational/experiential/institutional areas in

terms of authority rather than Scripture. Not surprisingly he is very positive towards liberalism: evangelicalism tends to distrust critical scholarship, clinging to pre-Enlightenment positions concerning Scripture, even to the extent of inferring that it is impossible to have a critical attitude to the Bible and be a real Christian. What nonsense! A few years ago I wrote a comment in a booklet questioning the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles and received no small criticism from evangelical friends, who made it clear that my real crime was to side with liberalism. Truth did not seem to matter. Thus when David Holloway protests against liberalism, which he calls the ‘cuckoo in the nest’, ‘he fails to appreciate that for many of us in the Church liberalism is a creative and constructive element for exploring theology today’.

His attack on those who are critical of liberalism goes even further.

According to Bennett, theological liberalism as we have it in the Church’s leadership is a serious threat to the life and health of the Church of England. However, as we have already seen, liberalism in the sense of the tradition of intellectual scholarship which has always been an important and serious element within Anglicanism is not something we can suddenly terminate. It would ‘constitute the end of Anglicanism as a significant force in worldwide Christianity if we lost this vital ingredient. What is obviously more fundamental to the criticism from Bennett, Holloway and others is their conviction that there is a destructive and willfully negative liberalism in the Church which is strangling the Church and enabling its witness. David Jenkins is the obvious fall guy, but the Archbishop of York is often marked out as its high priest and spokesman. Frankly, I find this hard to accept. Both thinkers are reasonable men who will listen hard to opposing points of view, and if their views are gaining ascendancy in the Church (which I again question) it must be because many find their arguments compelling, not that they are leading people forward like a lot of sheep.

A few comments are in order

First, Carey is guilty of what we can call the ‘genetic fallacy’—that is, the fallacy in thinking that a person’s *present* theological position is to be understood primarily in terms of their *originating* position. Thus Carey says that because he owes his ‘very soul’ to evangelicalism he can stand ‘within the tradition’ to criticise it. But his experiential and minimalist understanding of evangelicalism,

as well as his admitted rejection of its ‘received teaching’ (although he doesn’t say which teaching, presumably some of its central defining beliefs) and his embracing of some aspects of liberalism means that he has placed himself *outside* that tradition. What he *was* in no way defines what he *is*.

Secondly, his portrait of evangelicals ‘clinging to pre-Enlightenment positions regarding Scripture’—presumably like a drowning man clinging to the wreckage—is a parody. What would the pre-enlightenment positions be? Believing in the divine origin of Scripture? Its infallibility? Its perspicuity? One can hold those views not because they are pre-enlightenment or post-enlightenment anything but simply because they are thought out theological positions and believed to be true. If the positions of the post-Enlightenment are to be taken as defining belief, then presumably Carey would have to abandon belief in miracles which he does not. Why is it only pre-enlightenment views of *Scripture* ‘which are to be held with suspicion’, why not *anything* to do with the supernatural? Also, this smacks of what C. S. Lewis called ‘chronological snobbery’, *viz.* that those of a later period are intellectually superior and can look down their noses on those of earlier generations as if they were nincompoops, when clearly they are not.

What is more, there are gradations of liberalism and not all things are of equal theological importance. To question the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles is one thing, to question the bodily resurrection of Jesus is another. Of course evangelicals recognise the differences and would not lump them altogether. Evangelicals do welcome insights of some critical scholarship, like the Reformers who benefited from the scholarship of the Renaissance hence the call ‘*ad fontes*’—back to the source—rather than relying upon corrupted church dogma. Today, however, there is a tendency to rely upon corrupt liberal dogma. The benefits of textual criticism, literary criticism and certain aspects of redaction criticism are utilised in the service of biblical interpretation, but they are done so with discernment and without buying in to all the critical presuppositions which themselves should be subject to criticism.

Even if it were the case that the teaching of Jenkins and Habgood were gaining ascendancy because many find their arguments ‘compelling’ that does not justify church *leaders* teaching doctrines contrary to Scripture. We may be sure that the reason why many of the Galatians were being ‘bewitched’ to use Paul’s terms, was because of clever arguments (as was the case with many of the early

false teachers); they still call down upon themselves the apostolic anathema. So Carey concludes, 'It is difficult to find any real ground for the contention that the enemy of the faith is liberalism.' If what is being promoted by liberalism is 'another Gospel', then there is every reasonable ground for such a contention.

In the same year a book was published entitled *Essentials*² which was a dialogue on basic beliefs between John Stott as an evangelical and David Edwards, a card-carrying liberal and then provost of Southwark Cathedral.³ What was interesting at the time was not simply the exchange between the contributors, but a review which appeared in an editorial of *Themelios*, the UCCF journal for theological students. The review was by Dr. David Wenham.⁴ Wenham makes four main points about the Edwards/Stott dialogue. He says: (1) the issues at stake between evangelicalism and liberalism are serious; (2) we must not be dismissive of others; (3) the book gives us a lesson in humility and (4) its loving, respectful tone is praiseworthy. In themselves the four points are not in dispute. But what underlies the editorial is an assumption that key doctrinal beliefs are not essential to salvation. Dr. Wenham deplores 'a tendency among evangelicals' to treat 'liberal Christians ... virtually as non-Christians'. This raises a more fundamental question than the one we touched on earlier which was when is an 'evangelical' not an 'evangelical' for here the issue is when is a 'Christian' not a 'Christian'?

David Edwards, rejects the Fall of man and the need for atonement by a divine Redeemer, rejects also the need for belief in Christ's physical resurrection and, need it be said, sets aside the whole concept of the truthfulness of Scripture as the Word of God. Everything in the Gospel of John, says Edwards, 'must be questionable'. He would, he also tells us, 'rather be an atheist' than believe in hell. Despite all of this Dr. Wenham is 'impressed by David Edwards's sincere Christian profession' and is insistent that it is unworthy of evangelicals to entertain a 'lurking suspicion that this cannot be genuine Christianity because of the doctrinal issue'.

It also comes as a surprise that Dr. Stott, whilst accurately pinpointing essential differences between liberal and evangelicals, allows that those who deny the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ, do not 'forfeit the right to be called Christians' (*Essentials*, p. 228). Let it be clearly granted that the thief on the cross who simply cast himself upon the mercy of Jesus to whom were given

the reassuring words, 'Today you will be with me in paradise' knew nothing of the Virgin Birth and resurrection, and many death bed conversions, as well as plenty of other conversions, would be in the same category.

However, that is not the situation we are dealing with here. This is the case of those who have considered orthodox Christianity and rejected it, and have adopted beliefs which are incongruent with that position. What is more, they are in leadership teaching positions within the Church. If Paul described Hymenaeus and Philetus as those who have wandered away from the truth' because they taught that the resurrection has already taken place (at least they believed in a resurrection!) and this destroyed the faith of some, a teaching which is likened to gangrene (2 Tim. 2: 17 18), can you imagine what he would say of modern day liberals as we have them in the form of Edwards, Jenkins and Habgood? Bishop Charles Gore, who many liberals would consider one of their own, insisted that his clergy believe in all the articles of the creed.

We must be very gentle with scrupulous and anxious consciences. We must be very patient with men under the searching and purifying trial of doubt. But when a man has once arrived at the steady conviction that he cannot honestly affirm a particular and unambiguous article of the creed, in the sense that the Church of which he is a member undoubtedly give to it, the public mind of the Church must tell him that he has a right to the freedom of his opinion, but that he can no longer, consistently with public honour, hold the office of ministry.⁵

This is no mere intellectual assent but a true heartfelt belief—*assensus* and *fiducia*. Such leaders and teachers are dealt with differently to those whom they are leading astray. Those who oppose the true gospel teacher are to be 'Gently instructed with the hope that they will come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil who has taken them captive to do his will' (2 Tim. 2:25ff). Those who are doing the leading astray are described as 'men of depraved minds, who as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected' (2 Tim. 3:8). There isn't much room there for considering them as not forfeiting the 'right to be called Christians'.

The early church certainly did consider doctrine to be defining as to who was a Christian and so who will be saved. Eusebius, the early church historian, tells us of how the apostle John and Polycarp viewed professing Christians who

were errorists: ‘not even to have any communion, even in word, with any of those that thus mutilated the truth, according to the declaration of Paul: ‘An heretical man after the first and second admonition avoid, knowing that such a one is perverse, and that he sins, bringing condemnation upon himself.’ Athanasius warned ‘the faithful’ to ‘shun those who hold the impiety of Arius. We are specially bound to fly from the communion of men whose opinions we hold in execration.’⁷

The Homily on Justification, which is singled out in the 39 Articles of the Church of England for special commendation, says—

This doctrine advanceth and setteth forth the true glory of Christ and beateth down the vain glory of man: this whosoever denieth is not to be counted for a true Christian man, nor for a setter forth of Christ’s glory, but for an adversary of Christ and His Gospel, and for a setter forth of man’s vain glory.

If one is going to be consistent in viewing liberals as fellow believers when basic saving doctrines are denied then the separation of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now UCCF) from the SCM was a mistake, for it promoted the separation of Christians and shut out all speakers who would not adhere to a strictly evangelical basis of faith. What is more, the present day members of CU’s should be encouraged to join up with whatever Christian society there is on campus as well as invite speakers who do not adhere to their doctrinal basis. Obviously the setting up of a new ‘Word Alive’ shouldn’t happen either!

The Reformers of the sixteenth century and the evangelical leaders of the eighteenth were also mistaken in thinking the truths for which they stood so steadfastly were worthy of being adhered to, despite the divisions they caused between themselves and others who claimed to be fellow Christians. Furthermore, we should be making every effort to having visible unity with *all* those who claim to be Christian regardless of their actual doctrinal beliefs. The test which can be applied is quite simple to see whether we can live with this. If someone were to come to our church wanting to be baptised or confirmed and who nonetheless said, ‘I don’t believe that Jesus was the unique Son of God, that he died for my sins on the cross or that he really did rise from the dead’ would we baptise or confirm them? If the answer is ‘no’ why should one accept as a ‘Christian’ someone else who is in exactly the same position but

who happens to be a church leader? The loving thing to do surely is to seek their conversion.

How are we to engage with liberalism?

First, we are to have confidence in God. That may seem rather pietistic, but it is crucial. In the midst of the mixed-up teachings that were appearing in Ephesus where Timothy was doing his level headed best to sort things out, Paul writes: ‘Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are his”. Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.’ (2 Tim. 2:19). On the one hand, God’s saving truth is firm, he knows who are faithful and will keep them secure. On the other hand this does not mean we become passive and retreat into a holy ghetto, for we are to be active in proclaiming the saving truth to those who presently *deny* it, so those who confess the name of Christ, turn from wickedness and stop being hypocrites. For 2,000 years the apostolic evangelical faith has been subject to every form of attack and it is still here and thriving. One is reminded of G. K. Chesterton’s comment that five times the church went to the dogs and each time it was the dog that died.

Secondly, whilst not downplaying the corrosive effect of liberalism on the life of the church, by virtue of its corrosive nature, it is in the long term self-destructive. Essentially liberalism is parasitic. It has no life or dynamic of its own; it owes its existence to the very thing it denies orthodox Christianity. If Jesus is merely ‘the man for others’ or, as some of the members of the ‘Jesus Seminar’ would have him, a mere Palestinian sage, it is difficult to see how Christianity ever managed to get launched at all, let alone continue to grow 2,000 years later. But the continuing existence of liberals trades off the ‘Christian memory’ and the lingering association in the minds of many that Jesus is God incarnate and that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be avoided.

Interestingly enough some in the 1960s who went down the road of the ‘death of God’ theology of Alistair Kee and others, did see the logic of their position and instead of becoming ordained as clergy decided to become social workers instead! However, the liberal vision for the church is a clear and bleak one. One such liberal advocate, John Whale, in *The Future of Anglicanism* writes—

Because of certain attributes of the parent Church of England, is already unhostile to departures from doctrinal orthodoxy. Alongside doctrinal

orthodoxy it will increasingly accommodate the idea of a God who does not act, and a Unitarian God at that. It will be explicitly uncertain about an afterlife and unassertive about the exclusive rightness of Christianity as against other faiths. In the Church of England, at any rate, old forms of worship will continue to lose ground to the new, and perhaps a little faster than is wise. Old churches, meanwhile will go on being sold for secular purposes like garden centres, or demolished, or incorporated into secular building; but perhaps more slowly than is wise.⁸

Sadly much of what Whale predicted has come to pass and owes not a little to liberal activity and evangelical accommodation.

We are forced to ask; are liberals reaching anyone else but a small proportion of the intelligentsia and the ‘chattering classes’? Are their churches growing? The figures suggest not. But the demise of liberalism will be slowed if (a) the advocates of liberalism are given positions of leadership in the church thus providing a platform from which to espouse their views and so continue to disenchant believers and (b) money is given to prop up churches and teachers who are enemies of the gospel. Both need to be resisted. It was Karl Barth who once described liberalism as ‘talking about Man in a loud voice’. For that is the essence of liberalism—man—theology collapsed into anthropology. Man is already disillusioned about himself after the twentieth century and so to present him with a religion which is simply about himself only exacerbates the despair. Man needs a word from outside himself to save himself and that word has come in the gospel.

Thirdly, we need to be less reactive to liberalism and more proactive. Being reactive can take many forms. There is the element of simply responding to liberalism in terms of scholarship which means that the agenda has been set by the liberals and we are more or less forced to play the game according to their rules. There is the response of ignoring liberalism, both the pietistic and pragmatic sides of modern evangelicalism lean in this direction. We form our own subculture which we pretend is hermetically sealed from the influences of liberalism; we retreat from any debate and isolate ourselves institutionally in order to get on with the job of evangelism. Whilst we must be careful that we are not sucked in to endless and fruitless discussions, we need to be wise in the use of our time and talents—nonetheless to effectively pull away is to give too much quarter to the enemy.

At some point if members of our churches are not given the wherewithal to be aware of liberalism and challenge it, then they will be weakened by it. Either they will take on liberal attitudes and values unreflectively or there will be the compartmentalisation which was characteristic of an earlier generation and which weakened the evangelical cause immensely. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones was very critical of what he saw as the ‘muscular evangelicalism’ of the Bash camps with what he thought was an insufficient diet of camp talks. That is a weakness which may be in danger of resurfacing if we are not careful with some models of ‘expository’ preaching which are being promoted at present.

In some cases there is no serious engagement with a culture that has been influenced by liberal perspectives and as a result many evangelical sermons may be sound, but have no cutting edge for the simple reason there is no real engagement taking place between the Word and the world. The problem with liberalism is that it has sold out to the world; the problem with pietistic evangelicalism is that it retreats from the world, shouting at it from a distance or simply ignoring it. Maybe it is in reaction to this that some former evangelicals have moved on to become liberals, catholics or mystics.

In terms of scholarship there has been since the Second World War tremendous advances in evangelical scholarship. This does not mean that such scholarship has always been readily welcomed by the liberal guild, but not all attempts to sideline evangelical work have succeeded. The establishment of Tyndale House in Cambridge and the formation of the TSF have been vitally instrumental under God in the resurgence of evangelical scholarship.

We should thank God for raising up generations of academics who have served the church well since then—John Wenham, Jim Packer, Alan Stibbs, Howard Marshall, Don Carson, Kevin Vanhoozer, Alister McGrath to name but a few; there are many others. Our theological colleges should be encouraged and enabled to spot such scholars for the future so they can serve the cause of Christ in this unique capacity. We are also grateful for our pastor teacher scholars who from within the context of coal face ministry have also enabled the gospel to be commended and defended most ably—John Stott, Michael Green and Francis Schaeffer. Others have sought to engage with culture as laymen and women, for example, C. S. Lewis, Os Guinness, and Donald MacKay. Institutions have been set up to develop the Christian mind and to

help Christians wrestle with issues with intellectual integrity and rigour—Christians in Science, The Oxford Centre for Apologetics and The Cambridge Centre for Apologetics and the like. Good stewardship requires that we prepare people thoroughly.

But within the local church liberalism can be pervasive not because it enters via the pulpits, but via public worship—a softening of the mind and a lowering of the defences through the songs sung, the prayers prayed and the liturgies used. If liberalism is ‘talking about man in a loud voice’ legitimate to assess some of our songs being precisely that with their focus on us and espousing doctrines which have little relation to the Bible. This does not mean that we cannot sing anything post 1830, but some quality control should be exercised to ensure that what is sung reflects and reinforces biblical truths. If not, then we are giving the message that liberalism is correct after all—man is the measure of all things.

Similarly with liturgy. It is nearly eighty years since our forebears fought to ensure that the 1928 Prayer Book would not be accepted into the Church of England. Compared to Common Worship, that book appears to be a compendium of soundness! The *ex opere operato* view which is pretty well explicit in the baptism service is simply astonishing. This is where at the Synod level evangelicals need to resist such trends and at the parish level refuse to capitulate. We cannot be saying one thing from the pulpit and then contradict it by what we say from the pew. Could it be that under the steady influence of liberalism, by active accommodation or pietistic retreat, some of the evangelical churches to which we belong have become quite frankly Laodicean? In Revelation 3 this church is described by the ascended Lord Jesus as being ‘neither hot nor cold’. This doesn’t mean that they were spiritually ‘lukewarm’.

The social context of the church is being drawn upon to make a chillingly important point. In nearby Colossae also in the Lycus valley, cold fresh water was enjoyed. Further along in Hierapolis hot springs provided spas. But Laodicea had water channelled in through stone pipes with the result that the water was more or less undrinkable, it was mineralised and foul tasting and so virtually useless. The Christians in the church, says Jesus, had become like its water. If they were hot and useful like Hierapolis, or cold and useful like Colossae, all would be well. But they are neither, like the water in the town they were useless and provoked the same response in the risen Christ as did the

water in the citizens of Laodicea, they make him want to throw up (Rev. 3:16). To collapse into liberalism or to retreat from it results in the church being ineffective and useless. Sure, the show will be kept on the road for a while, but the drift will continue to occur until it comes to a halt altogether. Ultimately, our need is for a renewed vision of God as he has revealed himself. Yes, we must think, argue and contend. But all of these things will be of little worth if we ourselves are not renewed.

Here is David Wells having surveyed the effects of liberal modernity upon evangelicalism—

not be able to recover the vision and understanding of God's grandeur until we recover an understanding of ourselves as creatures who have been made to know such grandeur. This must begin with the recovery of the idea that as being made in God's image, we are fundamentally moral beings, not consumers, that the satisfaction of our psychological needs pales in significance when compared with the enduring value of doing what is right. Religious consumers want to have a spirituality for the same reason that they want to drive a stylish and expensive auto. Costly obedience is as foreign to them in matters spiritual as self denial is in matters material. In a culture filled with such people, restoring weight to God is going to involve more than simply getting some doctrine straight; it's going to entail a complete reconstruction of the modern self absorption pastiche personality.⁹

Liberalism is a form of worldliness—theological worldliness. It is not that the rational is wrong, it is a gift of God; it is *rationalism* which begins and ends with man's thoughts moving outwards so only what falls within his horizons has validity. The hubris of modernity is post-modernity, where the quest to make sense out of his existence has been abandoned and man is still left by himself but sitting among the fragments with no means of fitting them together because he not only believes it is not possible, but pointless. Modern liberalism too has slipped over into post-modern liberalism. But our calling is not to define ourselves over and against negative liberalism, rather it is, under God, to unleash the most powerful principle on the planet—the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. To that end we say a great 'no' to all forms of liberalism in order that we may declare a great 'yes' to God's grace revealed in his Son, who is the same 'yesterday, today and forever'.

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ENDNOTES

1. George Carey, 'Parties in the Church of England', *Theology* (July, 1988): 266-73.
2. David L. Edwards & John R.W. Stott, *Essentials: a liberal-evangelical dialogue* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).
3. The critique by Iain Murray, 'Who is a Christian?', *Evangelicals Now*, April 1989, is of great value.
4. David Wenham, 'Evangelical and liberal theology', *Themelios* (Editorial), October, 1988.
5. Quoted in W. Oddie, 'The Crockford Files', (London: Hamilton, 1989), p. 122.
6. *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus, Bishop of Caesarea*, C. F. Cruse (trans.), 1884, pp. 130-31.
7. *Letters of Athanasius, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, 1891, p. 564.
8. Quoted in W. Oddie, 'The Crockford Files', p. 128.
9. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of adding Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 115.