

REDISCOVERING A (SCOTTISH) EVANGELICAL HERITAGE

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The theology of the twentieth-century evangelical movement in Scotland has been for the most part Calvinist. Although, as with virtually all generalizations, exceptions are not hard to find (the Baptists being the most obvious denominational one), most theologically-literate evangelicals would identify themselves with the broad current of Protestantism known as Reformed (to distinguish it from the Lutheran, Anglican and Anabaptist versions of Reformation Christianity) and deriving ultimately from Geneva and other centres like Zürich and Strasbourg.

But when evangelical Scots characterize their theological stance as Calvinist, they often seem to do so somewhat selectively. They probably have in mind a particular understanding of *topoi* such as election, grace and the effects of the Adamic Fall, and perhaps also of others like the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper, the sense in which the atonement is limited, and the ecclesiological crown rights of Christ, the king and head of the Church. But how commonly does the designation 'Calvinist' imply for the modern evangelical in Scotland the particular theological perspective which most obviously distinguished the Reformed from other varieties of sixteenth-century Protestantism? This was, of course, its vision of the godly ordering of the whole of society. It is likely to be a poor history of the Reformation that fails to single out the shaping of the total life of the community according to the will of God as perhaps the most distinctive mark of Calvinism. It is to Calvin, not Luther, that scholars apply titles such as 'the founder of a civilization'.

This should be familiar territory for most readers of this *Bulletin*. Such a commitment to 'the Christian society' placed a high premium on the Christian calling of the agents of government — the magistrates of the sixteenth century, the MP's, councillors and politicians of today. God in Scripture even calls them 'gods', says Calvin (referring to Exod. 22:8, Ps.82:1).

'Their judgement seat is like the throne of the living God — they are vicars of God', and hence must 'present to men through themselves some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence and justice.'

'There should be no doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also *the most sacred and by far the most honourable of all callings* in the whole life of mortal men' (*Institute* 4:20:4,6).

How often, one wonders, has such a quintessentially Calvinist note sounded from the evangelical pulpits of modern Scotland?

Such authorities were charged with a more positive remit than the restraint of evil. Augustine had assigned to civil power the limited role of restricting the damaging consequences of human sinfulness, and Luther never really outgrew his Augustinianism in this respect. But Zwingli and Calvin prophetically summoned the corporate life of ordered human society to acknowledge the kingly rule of God. Social justice was more important than peace. Like the prophets of Israel, Calvin would have led a quieter existence if absence of strife had been his goal rather than communal righteousness.

Twentieth-century Scotland is, of course, a far cry from the cities of the Reformation, and the past never carries all the keys to the present and the future. But do we deserve the honoured name of 'Calvinist' or 'Reformed' if we have fallen so far short of this central Calvinist distinctive? That this is a fair judgment on our contemporary evangelicalism (with the qualifications attendant upon all bold generalizations) is suggested by the following considerations:

(i) *the paucity of evangelical contributions on the broad front of Christian socio-political responsibility*

The Scottish Shaftesbury Project's newsletter *Advent* is a welcome exception to the lack of published material, but the dearth of articulate Scottish evangelical figures in so many areas of public life will take years to remedy. (It must have something to do with the low profile of prominent Christian laity, which is so marked a feature of the Scottish Church scene.)

(ii) *our non-involvement with wider evangelical developments in this field*

The major landmark in modern evangelicalism in this territory is the Lausanne Covenant's affirmation in 1974:

'Evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ.'

The Congress expressed 'penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive'. Lausanne was a powerful catalyst, and has stimulated a remarkable volume of evangelical thought, consultation and writing on the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility within the one mission of the Church. One important outcome was the report of a conference at Grand Rapids in 1982, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment*. (The conference papers have recently been published in *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility*, ed. Bruce Nicholls, Paternoster, 1985. They provide a very useful conspectus of recent evangelical thinking on the subject.)

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Although there was a Scottish contingent at Lausanne, it is difficult to discern any Scottish contribution to or involvement in this highly significant movement in world evangelicalism — for it has been essentially international, inter-confessional, and cross-cultural, with a major input from Third World evangelicals.

(iii) *the inadequacy of our common evangelical 'line' on socio-political issues*

We may not have been directly involved in post-Lausanne developments, but we could still have been aware of them. That by and large we have not been is suggested by several weaknesses in our standard posture on social and political questions:

— *a tendency to speak out only when there is something to protest against*, and normally when this is a matter of 'sin' rather than of the unjust ordering of society (cf. David Bebbington's article in *Third Way* for May 1983 for nineteenth-century precedents).

— *a reductionist approach to social and economic problems*, which regards them *really* as spiritual problems, and assumes that if the parties involved were godly Christians the problems would go away. This failure to recognize the integrity of politics and economics easily leads to voting for candidates rather than for policies. This individualizing fits in, of course, with the pervasive individualism of our piety. The naive assumption that changed individuals produce a changed society ignores the evidence of South Africa, the southern USA (read the writings of earlier evangelical leaders on slavery and votes for women!) and even Ulster.

— *a preoccupation with peace and 'law and order'* to the neglect of justice. We have largely forgotten that it was the Calvinists among the Protestants who in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries vindicated the right to resist and overthrow unjust governments. The Calvinist case for the just rebellion was advanced in France, the Netherlands, England and not least Scotland, where Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex* (1644) was one of its most forthright statements.

— *a persistent spiritualizing* in our interpretation of Scripture. Partly under the continuing influence of the AV (cf., for example, its misleading use of 'soul'), we instinctively spiritualize biblical references to the poor, oppression, judgment, the fruits of the earth, etc.

This critique will seem to some too harshly drawn. Its summary nature may have entailed an element of unfair simplification. It remains for us to examine ourselves, whether we be in the Reformed faith. The criticisms given above, if sound, carry their own prescription for the way forward. But to sharpen our common reflection, a few specific recommendations may be in order:

(a) we need to *encourage Christian vocations* to the political arena, local government, the world of the media, etc. Ministers might ask

themselves, for example, whether any vocation other than that of minister or missionary is ever commended to congregations from the pulpit.

(b) thought must be given to recognizing in congregational life *the special demands* made on Christians working in such frontline situations in social and political life.

(c) the evangelical movement has to complement its Church-centred renaissance with *a society-focussed commitment*. On the growing strength of renewed evangelical congregational life must be built a new openness to service in the local and national community.

(d) greater attention must be given to *applied theology*. We are surely stronger in doctrinal exposition than in applying Scripture to contemporary issues. Calvinism will not allow us to forget the relevance of the Old Testament! Remember that Lutherans accused Calvin of 'Judaizing' because his interpretation of the Old Testament was insufficiently Christocentric! What has the Bible to say about wealth and poverty, or about aspirations for Scottish nationhood, or about a host of other present-day questions?

The causes of modern evangelicalism's social and political quietism (which is often more Lutheran or Anabaptist than Reformed) are complex. In Scotland it will not be overcome without 'A Call to Historic Roots and Continuity' (the first summons in the Chicago Call of 1977). Donald Dayton's book *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* is a wonderful eye-opener on forgotten and suppressed episodes in American evangelical history. In a day of recurrent educational crises, we could do worse than return to the Scottish Reformers' *First Book of Discipline*.