

REVIEWS

Liberal Evangelism

John Saxbee

SPCK, London, 1994; 118pp., £7.99; ISBN 0 281 0461 3

This short paperback is presented as a 'flexible response to the decade of evangelism'. It contains a 'determined presentation of biblical Christianity as having a vital contribution to make in the propagation of the Gospel which is not to be regarded as merely the province of evangelicalism'. Chapter 1 however acknowledges 'the sheer enormity of the gap which has widened between liberalism and evangelism'. The first task is to propose how this gap can be bridged. Thus it is necessary to have some clear understanding of the nature of liberalism, which is largely set out in the second chapter 'The Liberal Tendency'.

For Bishop Saxbee, liberalism understands that while Christ is the source of all truth, such truth is not merely revealed through Scripture. The Bible has its part to play, and there are indeed many more truths to be observed through Scripture as techniques of criticism advance. But these are to further discoveries in knowledge at large, in all of which we are to identify the face of Jesus to present to others. Culture has its own contribution to make to theology, but not in the way modern Evangelicals would see it, as a means of presenting old things in new ways. Liberalism can never be satisfied with a static Christianity, but one which, as it discovers new things, develops, changes and with openness and honesty is ready to reject some of the tradition. 'Liberalism in theology is that mood or cast of mind which is prepared to accept that some discovery of reason may count *against* the authority of traditional affirmation in the body of Christian theology.'

It is Saxbee's view that in liberal evangelism, the evangelist does not have to be someone who is first of all the possessor of a well-worked-out theology. A cardinal virtue, in this concept, is being practical. Whoever is involved in any kind of care has already become involved in evangelism, such as being a good neighbour for example. Thus the reader who prefers practice to theory is invited by the author to start the book half way through and still get the gist of it, although it is to be hoped that most readers will want to engage with the theological scene-setting in Chapters 1 and 2.

In the closing chapter Saxbee admits to being willing to adopt evangelical methodology as expounded by Alister McGrath: 'The art of

effective apologetics is hard work; it demands mastery of the Christian tradition, an ability to listen sympathetically, and a willingness to take the trouble to express ideas at such a level and in such a form that the audience can benefit from it.' However, he is not willing to accept what he calls 'McGrath's inflexibility with respect to truth'. Other world views, he maintains, are 'potential allies within the quest for meaning and not implacable rivals'. The book gives an interesting insight into the mind set of a classic liberal.

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New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology

Edited by David J. Atkinson and David H. Field

Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1995; 918pp., £27.99; ISBN 0 85110 650 1

This *Dictionary* will be of interest to readers holding a wide range of theological and ethical opinions. Readers of a more conservative bent are likely to be alerted by the list of topics mentioned on the front dust-cover, 'Reproductive Technologies; Transplant Surgery; Health and Health Care; Psychoanalysis; Issues of Economic and Social Justice; Genetic Engineering; Single Parenthood; Suffering'. Others of a more liberal tendency, not normally drawn to conservative evangelical publications, may suspect that this *Dictionary* is unlikely to enter into much real dialogue with today's issues. For all readers, there is a challenge to think again – to the more conservative, to take seriously contemporary problems, and to the more free-thinking, to give due attention to the theological foundations upon which we are to base our ethical judgements. Here we have 'Christian Ethics'. This is not an independent ethic, which has no authority other than subjective opinion. This is ethics grounded in the Christian faith. Moreover, this is 'Pastoral Theology'. This *Dictionary* is not for the armchair theologian reluctant to get down to making difficult and demanding decisions. Our ethics 'must be firmly grounded in doctrine' (33). Our theology must be 'essentially practical' (42). We may hope that this work will help the ethicist to take a greater interest in theology and the theologian to become more involved in ethics. The adoption of a theological starting-point need not entail an arrogant authoritarianism. The article on 'New Testament Ethics' describes the New Testament 'moral tradition' as 'diverse and pluralistic, not simple and monolithic', stressing that it would be 'impossible and impoverishing' to 'force this variety into

one systematic whole'. This recognition of variety within the New Testament need not throw us into ethical confusion. With our faith fixed on Jesus Christ, 'crucified' and 'raised from the dead', we are to 'form conduct and character and community into something "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27)' (64).

If the whole of life is to be lived in the light of the gospel of Christ, there needs to be both 'a Christ-centred spirituality' and a 'passionate social concern' (86, 107). The *Dictionary* displays both breadth of outlook and a real concern for depth of relationship with God. The importance of prayer – 'our central means of communicating with God' – and meditation – 'attentive listening to the gospel' (70) – is emphasized. There is a vital connection between the two – depth of spirituality and breadth of social concern. There is still something of a 'Martha and Mary' situation in today's church (Luke 10.38-42). Some are deeply concerned about social issues with less interest in spirituality, while others, majoring on spirituality, show little inclination to get involved in social issues. No one can be a Jack of all trades. Some have a particular responsibility for expounding God's Word. Others, such as doctors and social workers, find themselves right at the frontline of some very complex ethical and social issues. This *Dictionary* will prove invaluable to a wide range of people, concerned in some way or other with improving the quality of human life. It is to be hoped that preachers will learn from the social articles, broadening their understanding of human experience and extending the range of their practical applications of God's Word. Other readers, drawn to it because it contains articles related to their own field of expertise, would also learn much from the more obviously theological articles. By placing such a wide range of material within a single reference book, the publishers have produced a valuable resource which could contribute significantly to making spiritually-minded people more socially aware and socially concerned people more biblically and theologically informed.

Any selection of articles for special comment would vary from one reviewer to another. I will highlight some contemporary issues which illustrate well the *Dictionary's* concern with maintaining biblical standards while taking account of the complexity of modern society with its many and varied problems.

Abortion: 'The prophetic proclamation of the principle of the sanctity of life must be matched by concern for those who do not and cannot accept that standard.' There is here neither a theological authoritarianism which runs roughshod over people's feelings nor an easy-going approach which treats abortion as a purely medical matter without any moral implications.

AIDS: Emphasising the importance, in pastoral work, of 'a firm, vital and personal commitment to Jesus Christ, the Resurrection and the Life', this article calls for 'a sensible and sensitive pastoral approach'. Carefully avoiding 'a thoughtless judgmentalism', we recognise that AIDS is often bound up with other problems emerging from humanity's 'moral and spiritual chaos'. Acknowledging that our response to this complex set of problems must be medical and social as well as spiritual, we must not lose sight of God's ultimate answer – 'the gospel of hope from a God of love and grace'.

Capital Punishment: This subject is discussed with sensitivity. Observing that some defend the death penalty on the basis of Genesis 9:6, the article points out that 'If an innocent person is mistakenly executed there is no remedy. Life's value is the very reason that the death penalty raises such troubling questions.' Staunch defenders of the death penalty may raise their eyebrows at this, claiming that Scripture is not being taken seriously. This article also cites John 8. The scribes and Pharisees were desperate to enforce the death penalty. Jesus said, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.... Has no one condemned you?... Neither do I condemn you.'

Pacifism: A balanced approach emphasizes the strengths and weaknesses of the pacifist position: 'Pacifists will continue to raise serious questions about the efficacy and validity of violence for Christians. At the same time they will increasingly recognize that they do not possess pat answers to difficult questions posed to them by other Christians.' The important point is this: We need to be willing to listen to one another. This point is emphasised further in the closely related article on *Violence*.

Pluralism: There is a real concern with affirming 'Christianity's claim to be unique' while maintaining 'pastoral sensitivity to other religions'. Particular attention is drawn to 'the fact that all men and women are created in the image of God and have some awareness of God's law written on their hearts (Genesis 1-3; Romans 1-3)'. In our mission and evangelism, we ought not to forget this.

Pornography: We have here a positive statement which provides a helpful perspective from which to view other subjects related to sex, e.g. *Cohabitation, Homosexuality, Prostitution, Transsexualism, Transvestism:* 'It is not sufficient simply to express outrage or personal distaste, or even to invoke moral platitudes. A serious response involves theological reflection on the nature of man and woman and the divine purpose of sexuality.'

Science: Often, there have been two monologues going on side-by-side – a scientific one and a religious one. Scientism dismisses religion as pre-scientific. Religion proceeds as if it has nothing to learn from science. Here, we have some wise advice: ‘A dialogue must therefore take place between our interpretation of God’s creation (science) and our interpretation of God’s Word...and we may well get the content of neither part of the dialogue right if we ignore the other part.’

Secularization: The tone of this article is neither compliant – ‘These days are so different from the good old days’ – nor complacent – ‘We’ll just have to move with the times’. There is here the challenge of presenting ‘historical Christian commitment with integrity and contemporaneity...without the superfluous cultural baggage of earlier times’. If this challenge is taken seriously, there can be no place for either opting out, retreating into the past, or going with the flow, giving up on Christian faith and Christian living.

Technology: Should we do all that we can do? This article calls for ‘biblical commitment...appropriate for these times’. Biblical commitment must be maintained if technology is not to be ‘severed from ethical constraint’.

Urbanization: For some, the urban world has been their life-long experience. For others, it is something with which they are distinctly uncomfortable. Whatever our starting-point, we can learn from this article’s realism – ‘The urban world may have rejected God’ – and its hope – ‘God has not rejected those who dwell in it’. There is an urban mission. With realism, we must recognize candidly that it will never be anything other than difficult. With faith, we must believe that there is hope.

Unemployment: From the biblical viewpoint, we must stress that work is not everything – ‘human worth does not depend on work’. We must not forget this if our hope for the future is to be based on spiritual resources and not merely social policies. But to draw attention to the spiritual dimension is not to play down the seriousness of the social problem. We must work with the unemployed, developing ‘training and job creation projects’ and ‘providing sensitive pastoral support for individuals who are out of work’.

One final thought about looking for your own personal interests and moving beyond them. Living in Northern Ireland, I looked for an article on sectarianism and found that the *Dictionary* moved from *Secrecy* to *Secularization*. (There is an article on *Toleration, Religious*.) In Northern Ireland, we hear a great deal about sectarianism, mostly from those who are part of the problem rather than the solution, but it does not appear to be

such a major problem outside it. If our own interests are too narrowly defined by particular circumstances which are constantly calling for our attention, we may find that we are left behind, fighting yesterday's battles while the rest of the world has moved on to other issues, the emergence of which we have hardly even begun to notice. This *Dictionary* will help many to move on – to a deeper understanding of Scripture and a more relevant application of its message to today's world and tomorrow's world.

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Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan

John H. Walton

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Few Evangelicals would dispute the fundamental importance of the covenant in Scripture. At the same time there is a great diversity of opinion concerning the way in which covenant is to be understood. This book attempts to find ground for an evangelical consensus. The author's approach is influenced by his commitment to biblical theology. His principal thesis is that the covenant, while clearly redemptive, is essentially revelatory. He argues that when the covenant is viewed primarily as a means of revelation there are significant implications for our understanding of the continuity and discontinuity of the covenant, the conditionality of the covenant and the people of God.

The eleven chapters in the book are clearly written and the author often helpfully summarises the thrust of his argument at the end of each chapter. A number of useful diagrams and tables are included. The author begins by asking why the covenant was made and he summarises the variety of views that have been advanced. His own view is teased out in the second chapter, 'The purpose of the covenant is to reveal God', a view that is advanced with copious textual proofs. Chapter 3 discusses the number of the covenants and the author concludes there is 'one covenant in two major stages'. The first stage is to be found in the Old Testament and this in turn can be broken down into phases, which are teased out in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 investigates and compares the parallels between these phases. The jeopardy of the covenant in each of these phases, with its implications for conditionality, provides the subject matter of Chapters 6 and 7, while Chapter 8 explores the relationship of the covenant to the people of God – and asks, with particular reference to Romans 11, what place ethnic Israel has in the purpose of God. In Chapter 9 the author

turns his attention to the unifying concept of the covenant and asks if we should not be looking for a 'common purpose' rather than a 'central theme' which will bind the biblical teaching on covenant together. This should not surprise us since he is attempting to remove the discussion of covenant from the field of systematic theology. Chapter 10 assesses the part which the law plays within the covenant framework; was it intended to save in the Mosaic phase? What is its relationship to the New Covenant? The final chapter contains the author's summary and conclusions. He attempts to show that his stress on the revelatory purpose of covenant provides common ground for Evangelicals from different polarities, drawing together both covenant theologians and dispensationalists. He is also concerned about those who attempt to escape from a theologically controversial subject by limiting their teaching and preaching to character studies of Abraham, Moses and David. But, he argues, we can become so preoccupied with the relationship of such individuals with God and believe that this is the key to deepening our own relationship with God, that we miss out on the covenant as a mechanism by which God has chosen to reveal himself. 'Knowing Abraham, Moses and David does not provide the key to a successful relationship with God – knowing God provides the key to a successful relationship.'

John Walton has the humility and grace to accept that his is not the only right approach to a proper understanding of the covenant. And the reader may not be persuaded by the thesis. However, this book will make us think about an important subject and the author's helpful and invaluable insight into the biblical text does in itself make the book worth reading.

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