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## *The Gospel in the Nineteenth Century*

**David W. Bebbington**

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The theme of this lecture is the Christian message as it was understood among evangelicals.<sup>1</sup> It concerns itself with the currents of popular protestantism as they flowed through many denominations, established and non-established. It is intended as a study not in institutional history but in social history, an examination of very widespread religious attitudes. The *period* chosen is the nineteenth century. The movements explored are those that stemmed from the Evangelical Revival of Wesley and Whitefield in the previous century. There has been far more scrutiny of the evangelicals of the eighteenth century than of their nineteenth-century successors, chiefly because origins always seem more fascinating than developments. But evangelicalism was of far greater importance in the nineteenth century, for it had ceased to be a small-scale affair marginal to society's main interests and, at least by mid-century, had become culturally dominant. It was the gospel that made Victorian England 'religious'.<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth century was not conspicuously religious at its beginning; in the second half of the century, by contrast, respectability necessarily entailed churchgoing.<sup>3</sup> The gospel had effected the change. The *place* under examination is the British Isles. Many of the features of British evangelical religion were reproduced in the United States and the rest of the English-speaking world, for the same literature was read at home and abroad. But since most (though by no means all) the trends in evangelicalism originated in the British Isles, that is the part of the world most rewarding to study. The gospel in nineteenth-century Britain is well worth close attention.

There were innumerable variations among evangelicals, but at the same time they held certain characteristics in common. The four most important qualities that they shared and retained throughout the century can readily be listed. First, they were conversionist. They believed that people needed to have their lives changed by receiving the gospel. Secondly, they were activist. They insisted that true Christians must put effort into spreading the gospel. Thirdly, they were biblicist. They regarded the Bible as the sole source of the gospel. And fourth, they were crucicentric. They saw the doctrine of the cross as the focus of the gospel. These characteristics can usefully be examined in turn.

The call to conversion was the content of the gospel. Preachers urged their hearers to turn away from their sins in repentance and to turn to

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Christ in faith. G. W. McCree, a London Baptist minister of midcentury, was typical in holding (according to his son) 'that conversion was far above, and of greater importance than, any denominational differences of whatever kind'.<sup>4</sup> Parents looked anxiously for signs of conversion in their growing children. The evangelical mother of W. E. Gladstone, the future prime minister, wrote in a letter when he was about ten years old that she believed her son

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<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to London Bible College for inviting me to deliver this address as the Laing Lecture for 1982. I am also glad to acknowledge the kindness of the principal and staff of Union Theological College, Belfast, for one of whose Trustees' Lectures in 1980 much of the material was assembled.

<sup>2</sup> O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 1 (London 1970<sup>2</sup>) 1.

<sup>3</sup> A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (London 1976).

<sup>4</sup> G. W. McCree, *George Wilson McCree* (London 1893) 20.

was 'truly converted to God'.<sup>5</sup> Conversion was most common among teenagers, but the average age at conversion seems to have fallen during the century. In its first half a higher proportion of conversions took place in adulthood. Later on, as churches recruited more from Sunday schools, conversion tended to occur at an earlier age. The mean age at conversion among future Methodist ministers in the period 1781-1840 was 16.9 years; the mean age in the period 1841-1900 was 15.8 years.<sup>6</sup> The conviction that conversion was the gateway to vital Christianity nevertheless remained firm throughout the century.

The insistence of evangelicals on conversion raised three perplexing issues. First, could conversion sometimes be gradual rather than sudden? Anglican evangelicals, commonly more educated, sober and respectable than their brethren in other denominations, never had qualms about accepting the validity of gradual conversions. Likewise William Jay of Bath, an Independent minister with a fashionable congregation, could not date his own.<sup>7</sup> Methodists, on the other hand, usually expected a sudden conversion, but some of them came to share Jay's view that it could take the form of a process so that no particular occasion could be recalled. This was a cause of controversy in 1844 at Sheffield, where a Wesleyan superintendent had taught that 'the work of the Holy Spirit is often gradual and gentle'. His attitude was rejected by James Caughey, a vigorous American revivalist, who asserted on a visit that 'the work of conversion is so momentous, that no man can pass through it, and not know it'. Any true convert was expected by Caughey to be able to name the time and place of the great change.<sup>8</sup> Caughey's understanding of conversion as conscious crisis prevailed in Methodism until the end of the century, to be reflected in the novels of Arnold Bennett. Among the Independents, however, there was an undoubted shift towards the standard Anglican position. Alexander Raleigh, one of their most distinguished preachers between the 1840s and the 1870s, made a conscious change of heart central in his earlier sermons, but later accepted that conversion could be gradual and unconscious.<sup>9</sup> There can be no doubt that in the evangelical world as a whole, gradualism gained ground as the century progressed.

The second issue was over the means of conversion. The orthodox view was that true conversion was the work of the Holy Spirit. Higher Calvinists of the eighteenth century had argued that no human means could aid the Spirit, who would work in his own time. Those who were

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swept into the stream of the Evangelical Revival believed that challenges to trust Christ were legitimate human means for bringing about conversions, but that the Spirit was still responsible. In the nineteenth century, however, some of the more enthusiastic evangelicals, eager to maximise conversions, began to teach that the crucial factor was a person's will to be saved. The right methods, such as meetings designed for anxious inquirers, could encourage the desire to believe. In *Lectures on Revivals* (1836) Charles Finney, the leading American exponent of this line of thinking, presented revivalism as a science, a powerful technique for ensuring mass conversions. His was an immensely popular work, selling 80,000 copies of a single edition by 1850 and making an impact in Britain, not least because it was carefully

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<sup>5</sup> G. W. E. Russell, *Mr Gladstone's Religious Development* (London 1899) 7.

<sup>6</sup> C. D. Field, 'Methodism in Metropolitan London, 1850-1920: a social and sociological study' (Oxford D. Phil. thesis 1975) 232.

<sup>7</sup> George Redford and J. A. James (eds.) *The Autobiography of William Jay* (London 1855<sup>2</sup>) 22.

<sup>8</sup> R. Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism* (Westport Connecticut 1978) 125.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Raleigh (ed.) *Alexander Raleigh* (Edinburgh 1881) 15.

adapted for the British market by removing, for example, strictures on drinking tea.<sup>10</sup> Finney came close to denying the need for the intervention of the Spirit. Some did draw that inference. J. H. Hinton, later a leading Baptist minister and a founder of the Evangelical Alliance, wrote in 1830 that 'a sinner has power to repent without the Spirit'. He subsequently declared that he had been misunderstood, explaining that he did believe that the Spirit acts in conversion overall.<sup>11</sup> But others did not retract. Nine students at Glasgow Congregational Theological Academy were expelled in 1844 for 'self-conversionism'.<sup>12</sup> They went on to form part of a new Scottish denomination, the Evangelical Union, whose basis was a commitment to revivalism. Eagerness for converts had the effect of changing the theology of a section of evangelicalism. A person, some concluded, may exercise his will in order to be converted.

The third issue, the most celebrated and the most protracted, revolved round the relation of conversion to baptism. This was the substance of what probably qualifies as the chief theological controversy of the early and mid-nineteenth century. The problem was one of reconciling the conviction of evangelicals that conversion was the time when a person was born again with two statements in the Anglican formularies. According to the Prayer Book order for baptism, an infant is declared regenerate following the ceremony; and according to the catechism, baptism is the time of our new birth. Evangelicals who were also Anglicans had a tangled knot to untie. Furthermore, Anglicans of other schools were able to claim that evangelicals were disloyal to the formularies of their church. The best known incident, remembered as the occasion of Manning's secession to Rome, was the Gorham case of 1847-51. The Bishop of Exeter, a punctilious high churchman, suspended Gorham, an evangelical clergyman in Devon, for not accepting the Prayer Book teaching that baptism is the time when a person becomes a Christian. On appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, Gorham's right to reject this doctrine of baptismal regeneration and remain a clergyman of the Church of England was upheld.<sup>13</sup> But this incident was only the tip of an iceberg. Controversy had begun as early as 1812, when Richard

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Mant, a traditional high churchman, criticised evangelicals for rejecting Prayer Book teaching over baptismal regeneration. Evangelicals made a variety of replies. The order for infant baptism, some held, expressed a charitable hope over the future regeneration of the child;<sup>14</sup> or, according to others, the service was designed for believers who would pray with confidence for the salvation of the child.<sup>15</sup> Others again felt that they had to embrace a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, going on to redefine regeneration to mean not 'becoming a Christian' but something less decisive. This was the course taken, for instance, by J. B. Sumner, later Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>16</sup> It is a shaky answer, a sign that evangelicals found this apparent discrepancy between their doctrine and their liturgy embarrassing.

It is not surprising that the issue was raised repeatedly during the rest of the century. In Scotland, for example, a leading Episcopalian and later Primus, James Walker, insisted in 1825 that baptismal regeneration was the teaching of his church.<sup>17</sup> His arguments were met by

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<sup>10</sup> Carwardine, *op. cit.* xiv.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* 63.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* 99.

<sup>13</sup> Chadwick, *Victorian Church*, 250-62.

<sup>14</sup> G. Bugg, *Spiritual Regeneration not necessarily connected with Baptism* (Kettering 1816).

<sup>15</sup> [Catherine Marsh], *The Life of the Rev. William Marsh*, D. D. (London 1867) 131.

<sup>16</sup> J. B. Sumner, *Apostolical Preaching considered, in an Examination of St Paul's Epistles* (London 1815) 137n.

<sup>17</sup> J. Walker, *The Gospel Commission* (Edinburgh 1826).

a number of evangelical clergy, and a pamphlet war ensued. In England, C. H. Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, censured evangelical Anglican clergy in a sermon of 1864 for failing to repudiate the principle of baptismal regeneration found in the Prayer Book. A storm of indignation burst about him, and again the anomaly was brought to the public eye.<sup>18</sup> In Ireland, evangelicals in the disestablished Church of Ireland pressed during the 1870s for the revision of the liturgy of their church so that their consciences might be relieved. They eventually secured the incorporation of a paragraph explaining away the offending phrase in the baptismal service.<sup>19</sup> The problem was perennial because the idea that infants are regenerate through baptism did appear in the Book of Common Prayer, while evangelicals believed that only through conversion did a person become a Christian. The recurring tension over this subject is a sign of the centrality of conversion in the gospel preached in the nineteenth century.

The second characteristic of evangelicals was their activism. It flowed from the first: since conversion was so important, they put immense effort into seeking conversions. Hence they were forever active in preaching, visiting, distributing tracts, holding prayer meetings and organising Sunday schools. Thomas Chalmers, subsequently the leader of the evangelicals who in 1843 seceded from the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church, well illustrates the point. In his early ministry he was not an evangelical, knowing nothing of vital Christianity. After the satisfactory discharge of his parish duties, Chalmers commented at the time, 'a minister may enjoy five days in the week of uninterrupted leisure for pursuing, in his case, some favourite studies.'<sup>20</sup> After his conversion to evangelical religion, by contrast, Chalmers was reputed to have visited 11,000 homes in his Glasgow parish during one year.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, A. R. C. Dallas, as evangelical curate of Burford for only one

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year, 1826-27, introduced a system of district visiting by lay people, a Sunday school, a soup kitchen and a savings bank, reorganised the alms houses and workhouses and fought a campaign against sabbath desecration.<sup>22</sup> The stir caused in a rather sleepy township by an evangelical clergyman who took his duties seriously is well reflected in George Eliot's story 'Janet's Repentance' in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Mr Tryan, the new curate, flutters the doves by delivering a series of Sunday evening gospel lectures.<sup>23</sup> Heavy demands were made on ministers. A working week of between 90 and 100 hours was expected of men in the Wesleyan ministry.<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that there was among the Primitive Methodists a 'Worn-out Ministers' Fund'. Evangelicals were always to be up and doing. Among such men, whether ministers or laymen, the highest praise was to be called 'useful'.

The flurry of activity surrounding evangelicals could mean that other matters were neglected. In particular, learning could be regarded as a dispensable luxury. Anglican evangelicals were regularly taunted with producing meagre fruits of scholarship. The criticism was not entirely justified, for writers like William Goode and Nathaniel Dimock were men of considerable theological stature, yet there was enough truth in it for the charge to stick. The explanation, as

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<sup>18</sup> W. Y. Fullerton, *C. H. Spurgeon* (London 1920) 305ff.

<sup>19</sup> D. H. Akenson, *The Church of Ireland: ecclesiastical reform and revolution, 1800-1885* (New Haven 1971) 302-308.

<sup>20</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688-1843* (Edinburgh 1973) 155.

<sup>21</sup> I. H. Murray, 'Thomas Chalmers and the Revival of the Church', *The Banner of Truth* 198 (Mar. 1980) 16.

<sup>22</sup> Diana McClatchey, *Oxfordshire Clergy, 1777-1869* (Oxford 1960) 92.

<sup>23</sup> George Eliot, 'Janet's Repentance', *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Stereotyped edn. Edinburgh n.d.) 183-88.

<sup>24</sup> Field, *Methodism in Central London*, 46.

was pointed out at the time, is that evangelicals believed it their duty to throw themselves into parish work.<sup>25</sup> Similarly at the beginning of the century Independent ministers were trained not in theology or Greek, but simply in preaching. It would have been 'highly improper', a contemporary argued, 'to spend, in literary acquisitions, the time and talents which were so imperiously demanded in the harvest field'.<sup>26</sup> Study, even of theology, seemed superfluous. Because it was not self-evidently valuable, any training at all for ministers sometimes had to be justified. This was particularly true among Baptists. The promoters of a Baptist college in 1823 felt it necessary to point to apostolic example. Paul, the great preacher, 'had previously enjoyed the advantages of a learned education'.<sup>27</sup> Increasingly as the century wore on, learning was more widely seen as a valuable handmaid for the preacher. Yet still among the young men whose zeal drove them out to far-flung mission fields in the wake of the Cambridge Seven at the end of the century, it was doing things that counted. Earnest activity remained a keynote for those involved in the spread of the gospel.

Thirdly, evangelicals were biblicist. Much attention was paid to the Bible because all spiritual truth was to be discovered in its pages. Any theology must be firmly based on the Bible. There was a revealing incident in the House of Commons in 1850. Discussing the curriculum of the universities, a Unitarian M.P. contended that modern discoveries in theology should be taught. 'Discoveries in theology!', exploded Sir Robert Inglis, an evangelical high churchman. 'The subject is too serious to notice further than this—that all the truths of religion are to be found in the blessed Bible; and all "discoveries" which do not derive from that

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book their origin and foundation, their justification and explanation, are worth neither teaching nor hearing'.<sup>28</sup> Christian knowledge is essentially static, Inglis held, because given in revelation. Such an attitude, widespread among evangelicals, could seem closed-minded. But biblicism did not necessarily imply hostility to fresh light thrown on the Bible. Evangelicals were enthusiastic followers of archaeological discoveries in the Middle East that helped to bring alive the biblical narratives. Nor did biblicism necessarily entail an unintelligent literalism. When Charles Simeon, the great leader of Cambridge evangelicalism, was asked at a conversation party whether, in loyalty to the letter to the Hebrews, one must believe that a rock really followed Israel through the wilderness, he replied, 'Oh yes, of course, with a hop, skip and a jump!'.<sup>29</sup> Respect for the Bible led evangelicals into far-fetched views much less frequently than is often alleged.

In preaching, furthermore, they did not habitually indulge in a wooden exposition of obscurities. They were highly selective in the choice of texts. Thomas Wilson urged candidates for the Independent ministry early in the century to concentrate on the three Rs: ruin, redemption and regeneration.<sup>30</sup> For the end of the century, when the age of the survey was just dawning, we have a detailed breakdown of texts taken by preachers in a variety of evangelical pulpits on a Sunday in March 1896. The survey came about because, intriguingly, the journal *Tit-Bits*, on receiving a complaint from a reader about the length of sermons,

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<sup>25</sup> e.g. Canon Miller at Islington Clerical Conference 1877 *The Record* (19 Jan. 1877).

<sup>26</sup> *The Evangelical Magazine* (1803) 203, quoted by G. F. Nuttall, *The Significance of Trevecca College, 1768-91* (London 1969) 7.

<sup>27</sup> W. Medley, *Rawdon Baptist College* (London 1904) 14.

<sup>28</sup> Hansard, vol. 110, 713 (23 Ap. 1850).

<sup>29</sup> H. E. Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (London 1977) 161.

<sup>30</sup> J. Wilson, *A Memoir of the Life and Character of Thomas Wilson, Esq., Treasurer of Highbury College* (London 1846) 199.

launched a competition to find the longest—it was, in fact, a sermon preached at a Primitive Methodist chapel lasting 1 hour 18 minutes.<sup>31</sup> *The British Weekly*, an interdenominational paper, decided it would repeat the survey but also investigate texts. Three-quarters were drawn from the New Testament. John's gospel was the most popular source, followed closely by the first letter of John and then by the other three gospels. In the Old Testament, most texts came from Psalms, Genesis and Isaiah. No sermons were preached on Philemon, 2 or 3 John, Lamentations, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk or Zephaniah. The single verse that inspired most sermons was Galatians 2:20 about being crucified with Christ.<sup>32</sup> A survey today would probably elicit similar results. Certainly there was no deliberate obscurantism evident here.

To set great store by the Bible was to raise the question of its origin and status. Evangelicals always held that the Bible was inspired, but their understanding of inspiration changed over time. The general view was not as firm at the beginning of the century as might be expected. Henry Martyn, the evangelical hero who after a distinguished Cambridge career travelled as a missionary to the east, was at one point in 1812 closely questioned by a Persian official. Believing in the verbal inspiration of the Koran, the Persian asked Martyn whether he considered the New Testament the word spoken by God. 'The sense from God', Martyn replied,

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'but the expression from the different writers of it.'<sup>33</sup> Henry Martyn, that is to say, did not believe in verbal inspiration. Nor was he exceptional. At a meeting in 1800 of the London Eclectic Society, consisting of evangelical leaders chiefly Anglican, a variety of views on inspiration was propounded. Richard Cecil, for instance, declared it dangerous to believe all scripture equally inspired.<sup>34</sup> Similarly Josiah Conder, a militantly orthodox Congregationalist, held in the 1830s that there were different degrees of inspiration, and even that Esther, Chronicles and the Song of Solomon were probably uninspired.<sup>35</sup>

Such views, however, began to be challenged by a much more robust attitude. It began with Robert Haldane, a leading Scottish evangelical, who in 1816 was dismayed to find that in Calvin's Geneva there was taught a misty romantic notion to the effect that scripture was inspired in the same sense that poetry was inspired. In reaction, Haldane insisted that every word of scripture originally came direct from God. The verbal inspiration of the Bible marked it off decisively from all other literature. Consequently Haldane led an assault on the British and Foreign Bible Society's policy of circulating Bibles containing the apocrypha for use on the continent. This was to mingle wheat and tares. Haldane's views, propagated by friends of his like Dr Carson of Tubbermore in Ulster and Dr Gausson of Switzerland, steadily made ground.<sup>36</sup> Although it never enjoyed a monopoly among evangelicals, Haldane's position became the norm. J. C. Ryle, later Bishop of Liverpool, could write in 1873, 'I feel no hesitation in avowing that I believe in the plenary inspiration of every word of the original

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<sup>31</sup> *The British Weekly*. (5 Mar. 1896) 325.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* (26 Mar. 1896) 379.

<sup>33</sup> J. Sargent, *Memoir of the Rev. Henry Martyn, B.D.* (London 1825<sup>8</sup>) 426.

<sup>34</sup> J. H. Pratt, *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders: notes of the discussions of The Eclectic Society, London, during the years 1798-1814* ([1856] (Edinburgh 1978) 152ff.

<sup>35</sup> E. R. Conder, *Josiah Conder* (London 1857) 289ff.

<sup>36</sup> A. Haldane, *The Lives of Robert Haldane of Airthrey, and of his Brother, James Alexander Haldane* (Edinburgh 1855) 481-526.

text of Holy Scripture.<sup>37</sup> It is often supposed that a strong view of scripture was eroded in the nineteenth century by the higher criticism. This is not so. Only very late in the century did the higher criticism begin to have any impact on popular views on the subject.<sup>38</sup> The chief nineteenth-century trend was towards a stronger doctrine of inspiration.

The fourth leading characteristic of evangelicals was crucicentrism. Evangelicals differed from others, Henry Venn, later secretary of the Church Missionary Society, explained in 1834, not in their overall statement of doctrine, but in the relative importance they assigned to various points of doctrine.<sup>39</sup> Their chief emphasis was on the cross. A university sermon of 1811 designed by Simeon as a statement of faith was called 'Christ Crucified, or Evangelical Religion Described'. Likewise probably the greatest sermon by Robert Hall, Simeon's great Baptist contemporary at Cambridge, was a defence of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.<sup>40</sup> The subject of Hall's sermon is the key to the centrality of the cross in evangelical thought. The preaching of Christ as the substitute for sinners was the message that proved most effective in bringing hearers to salvation. The cross was therefore the great doctrinal preoccupation of evangelicals in every denomination. By the 1870s there was some anxiety that substitution was less prominent than it had been earlier

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in the century, but a book by R. W. Dale, the leading English Congregationalist, did a great deal to entrench this aspect of the work of Christ in the minds of a new generation.<sup>41</sup> Right up to the end of the century and beyond, evangelicals put the cross at the centre of their theological perspective. Anglo-Catholics, by the 1890s, were beginning to differ: in 1891 Charles Gore, later a bishop of high standing, argued for the incarnation as the heart of Christian theology in a persuasive series of Bampton lectures. But evangelicals were not to be diverted. The Methodist authorities warned their people not to relax their hold on the centrality of the cross, even for the sake of dwelling on the incarnation.<sup>42</sup> The cross of Christ, they knew, was the power of God to salvation.

Again this evangelical characteristic gave rise to debate. For whom had Christ died? For the elect only, as Calvinist believers in particular redemption affirmed? Or for all, as Arminian advocates of general redemption insisted? The evangelical ranks had been riven in the eighteenth century by controversy between Methodists, who were Arminian, and most others, who were Calvinist. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, this debate was dying down. Apart from the Methodists, most evangelicals were content with an intermediate position which they usually styled 'moderate Calvinism'. The Eclectic Society discussions reflect this position. Members argued that Arminians were right to stress human responsibility to repent and Calvinists right to stress the need for divine grace.<sup>43</sup> 'I frankly confess', wrote William Wilberforce, 'that I myself am no Calvinist, though I am not either an anti-

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<sup>37</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on St John* (London 1873) preface vii, quoted by M. L. Loane, *John Charles Ryle, 1816-1900* (London 1953) 56.

<sup>38</sup> W. B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (London 1954).

<sup>39</sup> Henry Venn (ed.) *The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn, M.A.* (London 1835) viif.

<sup>40</sup> O. Gregory (ed.) *The Works of Robert Hall, A.M.*, 5 (London 1839) 73-103.

<sup>41</sup> R. W. Dale, *The Atonement* (London 1875).

<sup>42</sup> 'Annual Address to the Methodist Societies', *Minutes of Several Conversations... of the People called Methodists* (London 1892) 374f.

<sup>43</sup> Pratt, *Thought of Evangelical Leaders* 165ff., 505ff.

Calvinist.<sup>44</sup> Even the evangelical champion of orthodoxy among Irish Presbyterians, Henry Cooke, was not prepared to endorse Calvinism as a total system. There were 'things in the Westminster Confession of Faith', he told the Irish General Assembly in 1826, 'to which neither he nor any other member of the house could subscribe'.<sup>45</sup> Another orthodox stalwart, Spurgeon, is sometimes thought to have been defending Calvinism in the Down-Grade Controversy that racked the Baptist denomination in the late 1880s. It is true that he was a Calvinist and believed Calvinism was a force helping to hold men to vital principles. But in the year when the controversy broke out, 1887, he had a Methodist, Mark Guy Pearse, occupy his pulpit more than once; and he explicitly declared that he was criticising those who denied fundamental truths like the atoning sacrifice, not Arminians.<sup>46</sup> During the nineteenth century, it is clear that the debate over the scope of the atonement was moribund among evangelicals. It was dismissed as mysterious, impractical, a subject ill suited to bringing about conversions. Hence denominations that had been divided on this very issue were reunited before the century was over. In England, the gap between General and Particular Baptists that went back to the early seventeenth century steadily narrowed during the nineteenth, and in 1891 they formally fused. In Scotland, the Congregational Union, professedly Calvinist, and the

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Evangelical Union, revivalist and Arminian, came together in 1897. What evangelicals agreed on seemed of infinitely greater importance than their disagreements, and their supreme ground of agreement was the cruciality of the cross.

The nineteenth century, as much as the eighteenth, shaped evangelicalism for the twentieth. If today we wish to stand in the evangelical tradition, we need, like nineteenth-century evangelicals, to be conversionist, activist, biblicist and crucicentric. There is room for discussion of how these principles are to be understood in the late twentieth century, but we can ill afford to drop any of these four points. The reason is that they are hallmarks of the gospel. The gospel itself is at risk if any of these four principles is surrendered. It is probably true to say that all who call themselves evangelicals today look for conversions, expect to be active and see the Bible as their guide. But the centrality of the cross, over the last decade or so, may have been allowed to recede. The resurrection (rightly) receives much attention, but sometimes it is allowed to eclipse the atonement. We forget at our peril the gospel paradox that we have life through Christ's death. The cross of Jesus Christ alone has the moral power to redeem. If we wish to learn from the nineteenth century, probably the greatest lesson is that evangelical religion was defined in terms of the cross. The centrality of Christ crucified is the legacy of the nineteenth century to the twentieth, and to the twenty-first.

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<sup>44</sup> William Wilberforce to Robert Southey, 5 Dec. [?], 2519/63, National Library of Scotland, quoted by P. F. Dixon, 'The Politics of Emancipation: the movement for the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, 1807-33' (Oxford D. Phil. thesis 1971) 86.

<sup>45</sup> J. M. Barkley, 'The Arian Schism in Ireland, 1830', *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest* (Studies in Church History 9) ed. Derek Baker (Cambridge 1972) 333.

<sup>46</sup> *The Sword and The Trowel* (Ap. 1887) 195; (Nov. 1887) 598.