
The Importance of Not Being Nice

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A desire to get away from a negative, confrontational image has sometimes led evangelicals to be comprehensive where they should be exclusive; irenic where they ought to be polemic; and diplomatic where they ought to be bold and unyielding. That is the main thesis of this article. It is not always a virtue to be nice. There are times when for the sake of the gospel and for the cause of truth Christians must be narrow and exclusive; fierce in their resistance to error and altogether 'earnest contenders for the faith once delivered to the saints'.

All this was highlighted in a book published last year entitled 'ESSENTIALS — A LIBERAL-EVANGELICAL DIALOGUE', by David Edwards and John Stott. David Edwards, Provost of Southwark and a liberal, presents an appreciation and a critique of the published works of John Stott, Rector Emeritus of All Souls, Langham Place and an evangelical, who then responds more briefly. The subjects dealt with include the Authority of Scripture; the Atonement; the Miracles and Resurrection of Christ; Christian Morality and Eschatology. The book has been widely reviewed in the evangelical press and all are agreed that Stott's response is just what we have come to expect from him — strong in its commitment to Scripture, crystal clear in its perception and warmly evangelical in its spirit. There are disappointments, the most serious of which is his strongly argued case for the annihilation of the wicked and his agnosticism over the plight of those who have never heard the gospel. There are times when he concedes too much to science — for example over the creation of man, and too much to cultural considerations — for example, in the case of women taking a teaching and leadership role in the church. However, in spite of these reservations I go along with the reviewer who wrote, 'On the whole John Stott's contribution is a masterly restatement of many gospel essentials.'¹

How serious are the differences between evangelicalism and liberalism?²

David Edwards, himself a moderate liberal, has this to say:

'Yes, a great sacrifice will be required, for the ideas which I shall criticise are very dear to many conservatives. I shall be asking whether the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are infallible or inerrant; whether Christ died in order to propitiate the wrath of God by enduring as a substitute for us the punishment we deserved; whether in order to believe in God as a Christian it is necessary to believe in all the miracles reported in the Bible; whether the Bible authoritatively offers us detailed teaching about our behaviour or about the future; and whether it is necessary to respond to the Christian gospel before death in order to be saved by God. That is asking a lot!' (p31).

It certainly is. At the heart of liberalism lies the refusal to submit to the authority of Scripture. Stott quotes Luther's words to Erasmus, 'The difference between you

and me, Erasmus, is that you sit above Scripture and judge it, while I sit under Scripture and let it judge me.' Every issue that Edwards takes up confirms this. The evangelical view of the Cross as Sacrifice, Substitution and Propitiation is rejected as being unbiblical and uncommunicable to modern man; and it is this second consideration that is most weighty in Edwards' mind. The final authority is *our* sense of the meaningfulness or otherwise of any particular teaching — whether it agrees with our sense of justice or has any meaningful place in our experience. The miracles of Jesus are dealt with in the same way. They are rejected because they are unacceptable to the modern mind. For the same reason Edwards regards the Virgin Birth as 'probably fictional'. Even in the case of the bodily Resurrection of Christ which Edwards accepts (with 'much puzzlement and doubt'), the reason for acceptance is not the authority and trustworthiness of the Scripture record, but his own judgement of that event. Moreover he does not regard belief in the empty tomb as an essential part of the Christian faith — all that is essential is to believe that Christ lives on in the hearts of believers. When we come to issues of Christian morality we find Edwards passing moral judgement on the judicial acts of God, ie in the Flood and in the slaughter of the Canaanites. Our Lord's teaching is not accepted as permanent moral legislation. 'Jesus was not a legislator but a poet' who 'taught by vision and not by law'. Moreover His teaching reflected the prevailing culture of the society in which He lived. All this enables Edwards to give to our Lord's moral teaching as much, or as little, authority as he chooses to give it.

There is nothing new here. It is the old spirit of liberalism against which Gresham Machen wrote over 60 years ago.³ Edwards simply reminds us how far apart liberalism and Christianity are. They are profoundly and radically different. Their location of authority is different. Their gospel is different. All this appears clearly enough in this book. The question is, **how are we to respond to liberalism?** It is interesting to compare Stott's response with that of Machen — they are very different. Machen saw liberalism as 'the chief modern rival of Christianity ... An examination of the teachings of liberalism in comparison with those of Christianity will show that at every point the two movements are in direct opposition.'⁴ He wrote his book with the aim of showing his readers what is at stake in this controversy. 'If Christianity, in its historic acceptance, is really to be abandoned, it is at least advisable that men should know what they are giving up and what they are putting in its place.'⁵ The book is a first-class defence of historic Christianity. Machen saw no place for liberalism in the Church of Jesus Christ. The two could not live together; there was a mutual antagonism. Stott's approach is essentially different. To him liberalism is a form of Christianity, albeit a defective form. So whilst Stott is prepared to defend the evangelical faith — and I do not question his sincerity and zeal for a moment — he is willing for evangelicalism and liberalism to co-exist, and even to treat such a staunch proponent of liberalism as David Edwards with evident love and fraternal regard. Bear in mind that Edwards is not a novice who has temporarily been blown off course. He is a false teacher who is seeking to draw others from the true gospel. We must, of course, love our enemies, even those who are the enemies of the Cross, but there is a difference between the way we show our love to our enemies and the way we show our love to our brothers

in Christ. Fraternal regard and warmth are not for those who proclaim another gospel.

There is another factor which heightens the seriousness of these issues, and that is that **the fruit of liberalism can now be clearly seen**. This teaching has been at work in the church for a hundred years or more. C H Spurgeon faced it in the 'Downgrade Controversy'. As long ago as 1887 he wrote,

'The house is being robbed, its very walls are being digged down, but the good people who are in bed are too fond of the warmth, and too much afraid of getting broken heads, to go downstairs and meet the burglars ... Inspiration and speculation cannot long abide in peace. Compromise there can be none. We cannot hold the inspiration of the Word, and yet reject it; we cannot believe in the atonement and deny it; we cannot hold the doctrine of the fall and yet talk of the evolution of spiritual life from human nature; we cannot recognise the punishment of the impenitent and yet indulge the 'larger hope'. One way or the other we must go. Decision is the virtue of the hour.'

The years have passed and the church has reaped the fruit of liberalism; the long steep decline in church attendance; the widespread ignorance of the true gospel; the unbelief and apostacy of many of the church leaders; the deep moral and spiritual confusion in the church; the loss of authority; and the withdrawal of the Spirit's power. We cannot say, as men did in the 19th century, 'We can take in these new enlightened views of Scripture and yet hold on to the old evangelical faith and life.' We know that is not true.

What guidance does the Scripture itself give us regarding our attitude to liberalism? It certainly is a matter with which Scripture deals at length. Most of the Epistles were written, at least in part, to combat various forms of false teaching which troubled the young churches. The test to be applied to all teaching was apostolicity. The Apostles' ministry was a continuation and a completion of the ministry of Christ. They taught with His authority. They had no hesitation in requiring the churches to obey their teaching, and viewed any departure from the truth as something very serious and with grave consequences.

They proclaimed only one gospel. The New Testament does not countenance for a single moment the idea of a plurality of gospels, each one as valid as the other (Gal 1:6-9). The gospel in the New Testament is a recognisable defined entity which can be stated plainly in propositions of truth. Paul calls it 'a pattern of sound words' (2 Tim 1:13); the idea is of a standard of truth. In the following verse he refers to the gospel as 'the good deposit' which has been entrusted to us. The gospel is a priceless treasure which God has deposited with His church and which we are to 'guard' tenaciously against all thieves and robbers. Again, Jude exhorts his readers to 'contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints' (Jude v 3). Liberalism is an assault on the gospel. Where liberalism has triumphed the gospel has perished. It has been replaced by another gospel which is really no gospel at all. They are as mutually exclusive as light and darkness.

The Apostolic approach to error was complex because it took account of different degrees of error and the different circumstances of those who fell into error. A comprehensive paper was given at the 1985 BEC Study Conference by the Rev R

J Sheehan.⁷ He set out several categories of error and the different ways in which the Apostles dealt with them. For example, there are the sincerely ignorant who simply need to be more fully taught in God's truth. Or again, there are Christians who have been deceived and led astray by false teachers. The Galatian letter deals with this situation. The question is, where does David Edwards fit in to the Apostolic response to error? Clearly he does not belong to the sincerely ignorant or even to those who have been deceived by false teachers. The relevant N T passages are therefore those that deal with false teachers such as the Judaisers. Paul and Barnabas were confronted by these men at Antioch (Acts 15), and came into 'sharp dispute and debate with them'. But it did not end there. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the Apostles and elders, who entirely supported the stand they made. A letter was then sent to the church at Antioch conveying their conclusion and making it clear that these Judaisers were without Apostolic authority. The whole issue was handled with the utmost seriousness and clarity. The sad fact is that the Judaisers refused to submit themselves to the Apostolic doctrine and continued to trouble the church with their heresies. Therefore the Epistles contain a number of directions to the churches as to how to respond to false teachers. The churches were urged to be watchful and to be on their guard. (Rom 16:17; Phil 3:2; 2 John 7:8)

Those who are elders and who teach the church must, whilst avoiding futile arguments, set the truth before those who oppose them in the hope that God may grant them repentance and deliver them from the snare of the devil. Elders must not be quarrelsome but forbearing and gentle in their dealings with those who fall into error (2 Tim 2:23-26). However, it is noticeable that other passages are more severe. In the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2 and 3) the Lord commends Ephesus because it would not tolerate false teaching. The language of Galatians is most severe: 'If anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned' (Gal 1:9). And in Romans Paul urges the church to 'watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.' (Rom 16:17) In the same way, writing to Titus, Paul instructs him to warn those who are divisive, once and then twice, and then have nothing more to do with them. (Titus 3:10,11)

All this leaves us in no doubt that **the N T expects the leaders of the churches and the members to take a very clear stand against false teaching.** And when due allowance has been made for the different degrees of error and the varying circumstances, liberalism represents a well-established, highly dangerous and destructive attack on the Apostolic gospel; and those who are its established teachers are not to be tolerated in the church. It must be remembered that David Edwards is not simply a private member of the church but a teacher and a leader. It is John Stott's acceptance of him as such that is so disturbing. The question is not whether David Edwards is a Christian, but whether he has any right to be a minister in the Christian church or any claim to that respect and fraternal regard that is due to a gospel minister. When the members of our churches see that these men are accepted in a general atmosphere of friendship and fellowship they must conclude that the differences between liberalism and evangelicalism cannot be too

great. The failure to take error seriously is one of the saddest features of the present time. How different it all is from the attitude we find in John when he wrote, 'If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.' (2 John vv 10,11). Or in Paul in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders when he warned them that after his departure 'grievous wolves' would enter in among them 'not sparing the flock' (Acts 20:28).

Finally, **all this has a bearing on the present church situation** and in particular on John Stott's own ecclesiastical position. Until the 1960's evangelical Anglicans were uncomfortable with their position in the Church of England. They recognised that their true unity and fraternity lay with other evangelicals within and without Anglicanism. But in the 1960's a change took place; that sense of unease was replaced by a sense of belonging and involvement.⁸ One of the leading figures in those days was John Stott. It is interesting to notice in 'ESSENTIALS' that John Stott's definition of 'fundamentalism', from which he seeks to disassociate himself, includes this point, 'a separatist ecclesiology, together with a blanket repudiation of the Ecumenical Movement and the World Council of Churches'. Is that inconsistent with historic evangelicalism? Surely not. What is inconsistent is Stott's inclusivism.

There is much about 'ESSENTIALS' that causes us to fear, and I believe these are apostolic fears.

'But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.' (2 Cor 11:3,4)

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References

1. Review by Rev R Burrows in CHURCHMAN, vol 102, no 3
2. Burrows, op cit does draw attention to this. 'Liberalism is seen as being destructive to the Gospel. But the book's courteous and gentlemanly tone hides the enormity of the issue.'
3. CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM, 1923
4. J Gresham Machen in a biographical Memoir NED B STONEHOUSE, p 342
5. CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERALISM
6. THE FORGOTTEN SPURGEON, Iain Murray, p 143
7. See a review of this Conference in FOUNDATIONS Issue 15
8. This change was emphasised in the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967. See the official Statement, entitled KEELE '67.