
The Lost Vision

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A review article on RESTORING THE VISION, a collection of essays in which evangelicals speak out, edited by Melvin Tinker, Monarch, 1990, 286 pp, #8.99

We must not idolise the Puritans - they had their weaknesses - and yet with the ejection of those never-to-be-forgotten men went a vision of a spiritually revived and reformed Church of England. Since those far-off days that vision has never been restored. There have been good and faithful men, many of them, but there has never been a corporate vision amongst them of a reformed church with a biblical gospel, church order agreeable to Scripture and spiritual church discipline. The restoration of that vision would mean an end to episcopacy, establishment, pluralism (more than one gospel) and liberalism. If present-day Anglican evangelicals do get in the driving seat - and with George Carey's appointment to Canterbury many would say that is now a fact - they do not seem even to want to go in that direction. Which leaves many evangelicals in our free church constituency perplexed and saddened. We do not enjoy our differences with brethren in the Anglican church, nor do we think ourselves without faults, but we cannot for the life of us see how a serious commitment to Scripture and to the honour of Christ as Head of the Church can go along with a desire to maintain the Church of England in *its present form*. It seems extraordinary to us that this 'half-way house' of the Elizabethan settlement, with all its political expediency, spiritual compromise and incomplete reformation, should have become such a permanent institution, beloved by liberals, high-churchmen and evangelicals alike.

The general comments are sadly confirmed by David Holloway in his essay **What is an Anglican Evangelical?**. He dismisses the suggestion that Anglican evangelicals are suffering from an 'identity crisis' ('What is Evangelical?') believing that all is 'reasonably well' and that 'basic evangelical doctrine - the heart of evangelical identity - is not under threat at the grass roots.' The key to progress, for Holloway, lies in having an evangelical Archbishop and a sympathetic bench of bishops. 'Without such leadership Anglican Evangelicalism will probably (and sadly) become less Anglican and more partisanly evangelical. But with such leadership Anglicanism will become more evangelical ... and more Catholic and less alienating to the Catholic constituency.' What kind of vision is this?

Gerald Bray's contribution on **What is the Church? An Ecclesiology for Today** is stimulating, brave and worthwhile. He affirms the final authority of Scripture, engages in a good deal of basic biblical thinking about the church and is strongly critical of much within Anglicanism. However, Dr Bray doubts whether the Scriptures contain any clear guidance concerning church order and so is willing to live with the 'non-biblical' (his phrase) Anglican order. 'Unlike

the Puritans of the 17th century, evangelicals do not believe that it is necessary to recreate a 'Scriptural church' by reading order out of the pages of the NT. To do this is unhistoric and leads to controversies ...' We found this a depressing note and wondered if it does not undermine the 'sufficiency' of Scripture. Whatever the failures of the past surely we ought to believe that Scripture does give us sufficient guidance to establish a church order that is worthy of the name 'biblical' in which the Headship of Christ comes to proper expression. So far as evangelical unity is concerned Dr Bray settles for spiritual unity between all evangelicals across denominational barriers. This is in line with his stress on the invisible church, the bonds of unity of which are spiritual and not organisational. Thus Dr Bray bypasses the vital question (as it seems to us) of how we justify being in visible unity with those who deny the gospel and visibly divided from those who affirm it. To quote his words, 'Thus it is perfectly logical for an evangelical to recognise the presence of the Church wherever the gospel is preached and people are being converted, to question or deny its presence when these phenomena are not apparent.' This is our position exactly - with this addition, that we ought therefore to unite visibly with gospel churches and separate from those which are not true churches at all. Here the issue is not church order first and foremost, but the gospel.

Dr Packer's essay on **Evangelical Hermeneutics** is first-class and deserves to be read by all who are concerned to see God's Word preached faithfully. The same can be said for Melvin Tinker's piece on **Content, Contest or Culture** - his warning against pluralism and relativism is timely. Perhaps I enjoyed most Alec Motyer on **The Meaning of Ministry**. His profound grasp of Scripture makes the essay particularly rich in insights. The Priesthood and the Lord's Supper are handled very helpfully; the recovery of Eldership and the ministry of women less so. We have sympathy with his conclusion that 'The supreme need of the Church of England at the present day is to stop dying and start living, to stop declining and start growing. The key to that is the local, not the central, and the deciding factor between life and death is the recovery of the priorities of apostolic ministry: devotion to prayer and the ministry of the Word.' Yet the wider issue remains of the discipline of heretics and the repudiation of heresy; if this cannot be done, as all the signs would indicate, then local churches with apostolic priorities must take apostolic steps to withdraw from false teachers.

Chris Wright's essay on **Inter-faith dialogue and the uniqueness of Christ** seeks to meet the new challenge of a multi-faith society. He identifies 3 approaches: Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism, and recognises that evangelicals have traditionally adopted the exclusivist position, ie 'that if Jesus Christ is uniquely the truth, and the only way of salvation for mankind, then that excludes the possibility of other faiths being true in the same way, or being ways of salvation.' However, this view seems too rigid for Wright and he seeks to open it a little by suggesting at least the possibility that devout adherents to other faiths may have a true experience of God - though if they do, then such grace finds its source in Christ. The arguments here are extremely tenuous - in fact, little more than wishful thinking.

One more contribution calls for comment, and that is by Roger Beckwith on **Ecumenism; the Way Forward?**. I found this the least acceptable and, in places, quite provoking. To trace the modern ecumenical movement back to the labours of Calvin and Cranmer for unity amongst the Reformed churches and then to charge the 17th century Non-conformists with the sin of schism because they broke communion with the Church of England is rather a lot to swallow in one essay. I have two questions I should like to ask Dr Beckwith: first, if, as he says, the NT teaches 'division is necessary to rid the church of unrepented sin and serious doctrinal error', where does that leave evangelicals in the Church of England today? The second is this - what Scriptural grounds are there for demanding our interest and involvement in any form of Christian unity not based on the gospel?

There is great need of a restored vision today - not only amongst Anglican evangelicals but all who love the historic Christian faith. We are sadly fragmented and our testimony to the world is weakened by our disunity. **But it is not enough to affirm the final authority of Scripture if by our attitude to church issues we undermine its sufficiency.** The saying 'Stick with nurse for fear of finding something worse!' must be replaced with 'Step out in faith, with the hope of finding something better.' Surely the NT holds out something better than Anglicanism - a brighter and clearer vision of a church body established on the gospel, and in which the gospel is believed and proclaimed. Not simply a good place to preach the gospel, but a fellowship of saints going out into the world with the gospel.

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Today evangelicals need to learn to travel light, to abandon the cares of this world as much as possible, and to seek to follow Christ as the New Testament reveals him to us. We need to recover both the vision and the reality of a church which is the source of life, the mother of the faithful, there to nourish and support us as we seek to witness for our Lord in the world. If we can achieve this, then there is every reason to suppose that we shall see the fruits of our faithfulness in the increase of the church. But if we stick to cultivating our own patch and let religious frivolity take the place of serious witness, then we should see the source of our life dry up before us, and the church as we know it will wither away and be destroyed by Jesus in the way he destroyed the dead fig tree in the Gospels.

G Bray, RESTORING THE VISION, p 210
