
Book Reviews

The Post-Evangelical

Dave Tomlinson

Triangle, 1995, 151 pp., £5.99 paperback

Some books are so shocking that they are dismissed out of hand. One suspects that this particular volume may already be in peril of suffering that fate in at least some evangelical circles. The shock value is not hard to find. The title itself is enough to set alarm bells ringing in most conservative groupings and the first few pages only serve to make them ring more loudly. But it is not just the content of the book which shocks, it is the fact that the author was himself an evangelical at an earlier stage, but now deems himself to have moved beyond that phase.

His book is intended to provide some serious reflection on his own personal pilgrimage and, insofar as it represents the experience of others, to demonstrate what appears to be yet another crisis for the evangelical movement.

Tomlinson's style is attractive and readable. As might be expected from one who identifies himself with those on the frontiers of contemporary culture in our media-oriented world, he communicates well.

Biographical sketch

In a very helpful and non-ostentatious way Dave Tomlinson provides his readers with an autobiographical sketch (pp. 11-13). His evangelical pedigree is beyond dispute. Born and raised in the Brethren movement, he professed faith as a teenager and before long came under the influence of the emerging Charismatic movement. He was attracted to this particular expression of the Christian faith, but soon

found that it was not welcomed in the circles to which he belonged. This led to his departure from Brethrenism and the start of a long association with what came to be known as "the New Churches". He was involved for over twenty years in these circles, playing a significant role in leadership and also being involved in church-planting.

He points to the late 1980s as a time when he and his wife felt they needed a fresh focus in their lives and, without intending it, "became caught up with those who were either on the edges of evangelical and charismatic churches or who had fallen off the edges altogether" (p. 12). Many of these "ex-churchgoers" he met at the Greenbelt arts festival and he reckons their numbers to be in the tens of thousands.

His involvement with these people led eventually to his starting a "church" which meets on a Tuesday night in a pub in Clapham with the somewhat memorable name of "Holy Joe's". Not surprisingly, the format of a typical "service" in Holy Joe's is as unusual as its name.

Central concerns: the author's

The purpose of the book is threefold: to provide some kind of justification for the type of person who might be found in this group in Clapham, to offer some kind of pastoral support to them and to air some of the difficulties which have been catalysts in the departure of these people from their evangelical roots.

The opening chapter is entitled, *A Symbol of Hope*. In it we are introduced not only to the terminology of the world of post-evangelicals but also to the framework of their thinking. The author demonstrates the close link between this group as a religious phenomenon and the

broader cultural and intellectual phenomenon of post-modernism in the secular sphere. The affinity between post-evangelicals and the New Age movement is noted, particularly with reference to the fact that both groups are virtually impossible to define neatly.

After providing a sweeping, but fascinating survey of recent evangelical history in the second chapter – where he highlights the success of popular evangelicalism with the title *We've Never Had it so Good* – he goes on in the next chapter to give a more down-beat analysis. He argues there that much, if not all traditional evangelical religion is hopelessly out of touch with the contemporary world in which it is placed.

The book goes on to describe those who have outgrown the confines of that kind of faith and who are desperately looking for some kind of spiritual alternative, but are having trouble finding any. Various anecdotes of real people in very real situations are given by way of illustration – one ending up in a liberal Anglo-Catholic church, another abandoning Church altogether. Tomlinson then analyses the experience of such people and the experience of those who they left behind using the model of Scott Peck's four stages of spiritual growth in his book, *To a Different Drum* (pp. 47-51).

In chapter five, the author moves into "pre-emptive strike" mode. He anticipates obvious objections, especially from conservative evangelicals and attempts to answer them in advance. This move is in many ways counter-productive, because he ends up caricaturing the opposing arguments. His reinterpretation of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector into the more contemporary genre of "the Spring Harvest Speaker and the Liberal Bishop" (pp. 61-62) is interesting – not least because he has the

Liberal Bishop going home justified and not the evangelical. (His argument being that, "everyone who thinks he has arrived at his destination has actually hardly begun, and he who continues searching is closer to his destination than he realises" (p. 62)).

The really interesting bit comes in chapters 6 through 8. There he outlines the essence of his hermeneutical approach. He describes how the latter part of the twentieth century has developed a new approach to the way we interpret what we see and hear. Translating that into the realm of how we interpret the Bible, he contrasts what he calls the evangelical "flat-pack" approach with the more versatile, post-evangelical approach, which he compares with working with a Meccano set, an approach with almost limitless permutations of understanding (p. 82). In the chapter entitled, *The Truth, the Whole Truth and Something Quite Like the Truth* he deals with epistemology and how that affects our view of Scripture. Then he goes on to develop this more fully in *Is the Bible the Word of God?* Here he rubbishes the doctrine of inerrancy, commends Karl Barth's doctrine of the Word of God and argues that we need to move beyond it in the light of contemporary scholarship and theories of knowledge.

In the last two chapters we are given a post-evangelical vision for the future of the Church in the world. A future in which the Church is not aloof from culture, but thoroughly integrated in a positive way and thus equipped to survive into the next millennium.

Main concerns: the reviewer's

For some, the mere summary of the contents of the book will be enough to say that it warrants no further consideration. But I suspect there is a growing number within the evangelical community who will actually find the issues Tomlinson is raising

most interesting. Therefore we would do well to offer some kind of critique. There are at least **six key areas** in which serious concerns need to be expressed. They hang together in logical sequence.

His methodology is self-determining. He adopts a kind of mix-and-match approach where he draws a little bit from contemporary psychology, something else from current theory of knowledge and a little bit more from the Bible. The point is not that he is drawing from a range of sources – we can all do that with profit – but rather that he has no clearly defined and sustained starting point. Despite his claim not to be “a woolly liberal” he adopts precisely the same approach as the classic liberals when he says, “we need to approach it [the Bible] with all the critical skills available, while also bringing to it qualities of faith and imagination through which we can expect to find God revealing himself” (p. 122). He makes the Word the servant of his faith and not vice versa.

He exaggerates the place of culture. From the very outset he is preoccupied with culture in its various dimensions. Where he seems to be coming from is a reaction against that kind of evangelical sub-culture which characterises many churches and groupings, but is not a fair representation of the historic Faith. The effect is to give culture a controlling influence over how we understand and apply the message of the Bible. If the term did not have pejorative overtones, Dave Tomlinson might actually feel quite at home with the expression “cultural relativism” for that is what he effectively propounds.

He redefines the nature of truth. He talks about a paradigm shift in epistemology, arguing for an understanding of truth “as something more provisional and symbolic and therefore less able to be put into hard and fast statements” (p. 87). In so doing he is inevitably saying

something about God and Christ himself who declared himself to be truth itself and truth which cannot change. Is he also “provisional and symbolic”?

He ends up with a Bible that is shaped by humanity and not a humanity shaped by the Bible. Without for a moment dismissing the importance of the humanness of Scripture, to say “imagination is the essential thing in hearing God’s Word...” (p. 118) gives a controlling influence to contemporary human thought which makes an authentic understanding of God’s message virtually impossible.

He regards the doctrine of inerrancy as “a load of tosh” (p. 106) and those who believe in such a concept as naïve. He sees it as a hangover from the nineteenth century fundamentalist - liberal controversies and as being a non-issue in our contemporary world. It is tempting to say he is the one who is naïve, but he is not, for he is fully aware of what he is saying and what its implications are.

He dismisses the notion that we need to have certainty in life. For him, true maturity is to be able to live happily with not being sure of anything because he believes that true certainty is unattainable. Exhaustive certainty is certainly beyond our reach, but authentic certainty is not. The central thrust of God’s message – that which makes it Good News – is that there is a certainty which can be ours in the face of a changing world and ultimately in the face of death itself. Remove that from what God is saying and the Bible becomes esoteric nonsense.

Do we take him seriously?

It is hard not to read this book without feeling agitated – from whatever perspective we might be coming. Some may well give vent to their agitation by consigning the book to the waste-paper bin,

or the equivalent section of their library. The only thing about that is that it does not make the issues go away. The fact that the editors of *Evangel* magazine saw fit to include an article by Dave Tomlinson in their Hermeneutics issue (13.3 Autumn 1995) shows that they were prepared to take him seriously and if they, then others also. It would be unfair to dismiss him.

It is the issue of hermeneutics more than any other which makes this book worthy of our attention. The kind of hermeneutical principles which Tomlinson advocates are not academic rarities, but are rather fast becoming the academic norm and this not merely in the kind of liberal institutions where one might expect to find them, but in evangelical ones as well. What is striking is the way Tomlinson provides us with a living example of where such principles of interpretation can potentially lead. However valid some, if not many of these tools of interpretation may be, one is left asking what controls they are subject to. Here is proof that it is possible to reinterpret the message of the Bible at every level from the cross at one end of the spectrum to sexual orientation at the other, rejecting practically every tenet of the faith commonly respected in successive generations, and still lay claim to being faithful to God!

It is not hard to see how the step from evangelical to post-evangelical is so easily followed by Christian to post-Christian and for that reason, if for no other, all who still cherish the faith of the Bible need to be aware of Dave Tomlinson's views because they are shared by a growing number. Our pastoral concern for those who are "on the edge or over it" must be equal to his, but not manifest itself in confirming such people in their doubt, but rather strengthening them in the faith.

The issue is but another strand of the question, "Where is evangelicalism

going?" Sadly, it is going in all kinds of directions of which this is but one – or is it the many? If there is not some kind of recovery of belief it will be unrecognisable before we know it.

Mark G Johnston

Together We Stand

Clive Calver & Rob Warner

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 178 pp, £8.99, paperback

A "seething pot" is how Jim Packer sees current evangelicalism in his *Foreword* to this celebration volume for the 150th anniversary of the Evangelical Alliance. From the safety of his transatlantic ivory tower he commends the authors of this book in their attempts to monitor and direct evangelicalism in the UK. Not all readers will agree that these undoubtedly influential men are yet in a position to "direct" the whole national scene but we can at least review here their paperback attempt to "monitor" it. It is a warts-and-all snap-shot of how things really are. Packer, for example, contrasts the predictable cold routines of his own youth with the "wonderful...new vitality" he sees today as, "The tidiness of sedate death is giving way to the untidiness of immature life".

Individual chapters are not, unfortunately, credited to one of the two stated authors, Clive Calver or Rob Warner, although those who know both men will have little difficulty with most personal references. For the general reader, however, the use of the first person sometimes leaves the readers wondering about the author's identity. It is ironic then that the earlier chapters address the fact that "Evangelical Christians have largely been

passing through a twentieth-century identity crisis". They offer the broad definition that, "An evangelical is a person who has committed his, or her, life to Jesus Christ, seeking to live under his Lordship and authority, believing and accepting the Bible for what it says" (p. 14). When they trace the biblical and historical roots of our rich heritage they do, however, descend into caricature, as when *organisational* unity is contrasted unfavourably with *relational* unity (p. 13) or when *Fundamentalists* are contrasted with *Evangelicals* (p. 20).

Overall, the book depicts much that is good about evangelicalism. Few of us would quarrel with the spiritual dimension shown by the priority that, "The true nature of our unity lies in that single word 'love'" (p. 31). Scripture is quoted freely and objective truth is seen to be foundational. Clive Calver has done a great deal of good in strengthening evangelical backbones against the pluralism crippling many wobbly churches today. Some of us outside the EA do not see how he could sit so comfortably alongside George Carey at *Spring Harvest* but we certainly applaud him in his public debates with Islamic scholars and the secular media. Chapter 4, *All One in Christ*, contains a spirited stand "in defence of the truth" over against the modern mood of easy-going toleration. He properly disowns the downward path to inter-faith syncretism by quoting John Stott with approval, "tolerance can degenerate into an unprincipled confusion of truth with error and goodness with evil" (p. 56).

This does not imply, of course, that Christians should not exercise legal tolerance towards those of other faiths. What it calls for is, "the obligation to present the truth of the Christian faith. Indifference is not an option to which we are entitled" (p. 56). Evangelism and world mission are shown to lie, in fact at the

deepest roots of our unity, "We are committed to the truth of the gospel and the principle that freedom of religion should include the right to propagate it" (p. 58). Excessive individualism is demonstrated to be unbiblical and a whole chapter is given to better ways of handling disagreements on lesser matters among those agreed about essentials (ch. 9). This contemporary hot-potato is further illustrated by an Appendix re-publishing the *Practical Resolutions of 1846* about how the founders of the EA covenanted to treat each other, beginning in paragraph 1, "We encourage one another in making public comment to place the most charitable construction on the statements made by fellow Christians..." Regrettably, it is not only those within the EA membership who need this reminder.

The short but clear section on *Hermeneutics* (pp 69-71), while seeing this as a potentially divisive subject, does not accept uncritically the subjective excesses of recent work in this field. "If modern evangelical scholarship produces techniques that require years of academic learning to master, we may repeat the error of the medieval church and take the Bible away from the people, with the implication that the untutored are not in a position to comprehend God's Word" (p. 70).

Because it is such a faithful representation of current gospel church life, perhaps we should not be surprised at the theological fuzziness which runs through this book. An important central chapter is called *Fracture Points* and it lists no less than 13 "reefs on which evangelical unity...has been regularly prone to shipwreck" (p. 60). There is no doubt about the reality of these hazards but their doctrinal distinctiveness is not well defined here. No genuine Calvinist will recognise him or herself in this inept analysis in which "human free will" is confused with

“human responsibility” (pp. 61-62). No evangelical committed to cessationism will agree that their respected and historic view should be summarily dismissed because the authors believe it “has lost credibility” (p. 67). Nor should the emotive debate on women’s ministries be credibly discussed without any reference to the crucial concept of *headship* (pp. 78-81).

In attempting to classify the diverse streams of evangelical Christianity in chapter 8, the authors are all at sea (pp. 128-9). Surely it is time for Clive Calver to pension off his simplistic division into “twelve tribes”. Such a model is inadequate to define the realities of the UK church scene today and is least appropriate where clarity is most needed, that is, outside the EA itself. At least Derek Tidball’s *Rubik’s Cube* model recognises more than one dimension to their differences (*Who are the Evangelicals?* 1994, p. 20), while some have found even that to be inadequate (*For such a time as this*, 1996, p. 275). The “tribes” classification fails to do justice to the reality that there is more than one watershed on which churches separate. Some divergence is geographical, some theological, some denominational and some merely pragmatic. Where does Calver locate the many UK churches holding Reformed views of salvation, independent policies in church government but which readily co-operate on a gospel basis? Evangelical churches are not mailing items, readily pigeon-holed by adding a postcode. We deserve better from a book which claims so much.

It is in its treatment of *ecumenism* that this tract on unity is most disappointing. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ 1966 call is misrepresented as being for “a single united evangelical church” (p. 127), which is simply untrue. To suggest that his “fiery rhetoric” was “impassioned eloquence...in the heat of the moment” (p. 65) also gives

the reader a false impression. His theologically reasoned address publicly presented the position he had privately set before the Commission which reported to the National Assembly of Evangelicals. The Doctor’s call was rejected not because of his passionate manner but because John Stott and others disagreed with the content of what he had said. Sadly, this book does nothing to dispel the myth that Dr Lloyd-Jones and those who supported him in 1966 were the destroyers of evangelical unity.

Perhaps the present reviewer may be permitted to insert here a previously unreported experience which sheds some light on those significant events. The organisers of the Assembly had helpfully provided time on the morning following the Doctor’s address for the discussion of motions from the floor. The late Kenneth Paterson, then an FIEC pastor in Tooting, shared my own concern that the opportunity to consider the practical implications of the call should not be missed. We consulted by telephone and, before the day’s business began, submitted to the chairman a motion, properly worded and duly seconded, proposing a discussion of the substantive issue from the night before. A wide range of evangelicals were present and there was a real buzz of anticipation. Then, to our huge disappointment, the chairman opened the first session by explaining that the organising committee had already met and decided that no such motions would be accepted. A formal resolution approving the (uncontroversial) *Report of the Commission on Church Unity* was approved without discussion. The truth is that responsibility for closing down any real consideration of secession in order to attain genuine evangelical church unity does not belong to John Stott alone. It lies with the 1966 officers of the Evangelical Alliance who changed the advertised

programme and denied the Assembly, set up for that very purpose, any opportunity for practical consideration of the issues the Doctor had raised.

The fascinating crystal-ball chapter 10, *The Futures of Evangelicalism*, picks up the obvious danger of what is perceived as growing influence of evangelicals within denominations leading to their being re-assimilated into the mainstream. "Will senior evangelicals become increasingly distanced from one another as their energies are poured into their denominational duties?" (p. 152). Looking ahead they also question the optimism of those who think they can reform their denominations from within. They perceptively comment on the powerful cultural bias in favour of the *status quo*, "The reluctance of Christians to cause more disarray or disruption than is absolutely necessary means that some who entered the denominational structures as reformers have later confessed to losing their way, not knowing how to move forward an institution so capable of ensuring its self-perpetuation" (p. 153). Further fragmentation is seen to be another danger, especially when sustained growth is accompanied by complacency about self-destructive tendencies. In addressing the recent corrosion in biblical convictions, they warn that what is now trendily called the "post-evangelical" is nothing more than "mild-mannered and moderate liberalism". Regrettably, however, they fail to grasp the nettle stinging so many today by answering their own key question, "when does an evangelical cease to be an evangelical?" (p. 154).

There is a widespread perception that the EA is dominated by charismatics. It is salutary, then, that the first "threat to evangelical unity" listed among the *Fracture Points* is "Charismatic renewal" (p. 66). This is a useful corrective to those

who persist in seeing it as God's way of uniting his people in these Last Days. It is, however, when some hazy figures emerge from the prophetic mists that the authors' personal perspectives are betrayed. Their preview of future prospects for *Realignment and Renewal* make interesting reading. Rob Warner's optimism about the Baptist denomination conveniently overlooks what he has previously said about the difficulties of reform from within (perhaps he only meant the Anglicans there!) but he forecasts that a re-aligned, non-liturgical, believer-baptising coalition would be predominantly charismatic. Furthermore, he extrapolates present trends to suggest that, "by the end of the century no less than one half of all evangelicals will identify themselves as charismatics" (p. 158).

The main body of the book closes with a reminder that, "The greatest prospect is the one most beyond our control. While we can pray for revival, it cannot be manufactured." (p. 160). Perhaps it is just here that one of the greatest tensions of today's evangelicalism emerges. The writer of the closing chapter rightly reminds his readers that revival is invariably preceded by a sense of need and that where there is complacency, no revival will come. The overall impression of the book, however, is that evangelicals, as depicted in its pages, are on the march. The EA 150th Anniversary Celebrations are an understandable opportunity for the leadership to congratulate their members and to encourage the troops. The size and worship culture of these events, however, tend to feed the triumphalism which is among the greatest dangers facing evangelicals today. Warner includes himself among those who "believe revival to be a real prospect for the western world in this generation". Is there not an equally real danger that we might be urged to seek

revival for the vindication it would bring to our gospel principles or for the moral impact it would make on our society? How hard it is for us, in our technologically sophisticated and pragmatically managed churches, to set our sights on the most supreme goal of all. Our priority must be to seek God himself as we cry out for him to revive his church, "that your people may rejoice in you" (Psalm 85:6)

In that prayer all evangelicals, whether in the EA or not, should be able to say, *Together We Stand*.

Alan Gibson

Evangelical Faith and Public Zeal

Evangelicals and Society in Britain 1780-1980

Edited by John Wolffe

SPCK, 1995, 221 pp., £10.99, paperback

The publisher's blurb explains that this volume of nine papers "reassesses the great tradition of evangelical, social and political action over two hundred years". Except for Clive Calver, Director General of the Evangelical Alliance, who has contributed an "Afterword", the writers are all teachers of history at the tertiary level. The book arose out of a symposium sponsored by the Evangelical Alliance in 1992. Of the authors, the editor explains that "their own attitudes to evangelicalism might be characterized as a mixture of the sympathetically critical and the critically sympathetic" (pp. 2,3). They have aimed "to cross the boundary between past and present" and that between "history and theology" (p. 3). They have also worked with a definition of evangelicalism enunciated by David Bebbington in his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (1989).

This word "is used to denote those movements in the Protestant churches that derived their original inspiration from the upsurge of revivalistic movements that broke out across the north Atlantic world in the 1730s" (p. 4). This reviewer believes that such a definition imposes unhelpful historical and geographical limitations on the term evangelical. Such a definition must appeal to those who argue that evangelicalism is a late arrival on the Protestant and Reformed scene.

The writers have argued convincingly that evangelicals have always had a concern for the earthly and material needs of their fellows. Against that it has to be admitted that, "recent images of evangelicalism have tended to see it as an escapist religious movement offering a sense of eternal security but little constructive engagement with contemporary society" (p. 1). The book ranges from the work of such men as Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Chalmers to more recent organisations such as CARE and Tear Fund. The move from the dynamic individual leadership to committee action is of interest. It is also salutary to contrast what could be achieved in the aftermath of revival with what has been done in the late twentieth century when, in David Bebbington's words, evangelicals were limited by "their sheer weakness. They were dimly aware that their collective influence over the tone of British life had been slowly declining since the middle years of the previous century" (p. 183).

Ian Randall has written on the social gospel. For those who consider that this was a liberal phenomenon he has some surprises. He introduces a number of figures with varying degrees of commitment to evangelicalism, but he focuses on the work of FB Meyer in Leicester and London. He describes what

he calls Meyer's "massive socio-political involvement". He points out interestingly that in the 1920s, Meyer's "socio-political activities declined and his energies were directed towards the premillennial Advent Testimony and Preparation Movement which he began in 1917" (p. 170).

A very useful chapter is that by David Bebbington, *Decline and Resurgence of Evangelical Social Concern 1918-1980*. He links Keswick theology and premillennialism with a weakening of evangelical social concern. He proceeds to consider factors which helped to restore a concern. These include JI Packer's "vigorous onslaught" against Keswick teaching in 1955 and the recovery of Reformed theology associated with Packer and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He considers that an even more important factor was the charismatic movement where positive attitudes to social concern contrasted sharply with those found in the older Pentecostalism. He also sees as significant a softening of evangelical attitudes towards the ecumenical movement.

This reviewer found *Gender Attitudes and the Contribution of Women to Evangelism and Ministry in the Nineteenth Century* to be the least satisfactory paper. It begins by acknowledging "specific biblical passages, in particular teachings found in Paul's epistles, which appeared to forbid the public ministry of women" (p. 98). After showing ways in which women did begin to exercise public ministry in Britain and on the mission field, the last paragraph tells us that "women had been seen to be effective preachers and evangelists, not only among other women, but also in mixed gatherings". This pragmatism leads on to the conclusion, "they could not now be stopped for reasons of propriety or prejudice, they were still willing to serve in the background, but where they felt that active leadership was appropriate, they were ready to demand and take up appropriate positions. We all

today – both men and women – are their debtors" (p. 113).

This is a significant book which opens a mine of important detail and as such it is to be welcomed. It is also a book with a message and it is at this point that one has reservations. It is good to know of a continuing and perhaps growing evangelical concern for the needs of society. Recent evangelical efforts to challenge the ills of society have been numerous, but those detailed on pages 190, 191 have not been very successful. Popular media figures continue to advocate permissiveness and seemingly have plenty of followers. Sunday observance is further undermined. Abortion continues unchecked and the homosexual lobby grows even more aggressive. All this contrast sharply with what was achieved in the early nineteenth century. To make these observations is not to say that there should have been no resistance to the rising tide of wickedness. It is however somewhat disturbing that as the book comes to a conclusion social concerns seem to fill the horizon. This is the more significant when we remember that the writers have worked with a definition of evangelicalism that was inspired by the eighteenth century revivals. By the time the reader comes to the end of the book the possibility and significance of revival seems to have completely disappeared. We are told that, "evangelicals in the closing years of the twentieth century possess a firm desire to recover the identity and emphasis of their predecessors" (p. 209). There is no evidence that this desire includes a burden for revival. God alone can give revival, but it would be sad if a very commendable compassion for the needy eclipses our prayerful concern for the vast numbers who face a lost eternity. The middle way between an unhealthy pietism and a social gospel needs to be probed more deeply.

Robert W Oliver
