

‘Evangelicalism Divided.’ By Iain H. Murray – An extended review

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‘Faithful are the wounds of a friend’. For a work that is concerned with fellow Evangelicals, and is so frankly critical of named contemporaries, this is a graciously written volume. It takes in both the USA and Britain, and argues that a fundamentally similar process has been followed by Evangelicals over the last half century in both countries, with very serious results, which have divided the constituency. Francis Schaeffer and Oliver Barclay have previously written books taking much the same view, but this is the first time that both countries have been adequately covered together and the case has been so fully documented. When one sees the beginning of the story in relation to the end, it is difficult not to feel that the case is impressive and that it is time to consider our ways. If we learn nothing from this book, we will show ourselves very foolish.

The most influential American figure in the process, Murray considers, has been Billy Graham, and the most influential English figures have been John Stott and Jim Packer. Each of them has also had an international ministry, which has blended their influence and involved a good deal of personal cooperation. As Stott and Packer are Anglicans, Murray’s focus is particularly on the Church of England. The only other British figure to whom he gives comparable attention is Martyn Lloyd Jones, whose biographer he is, and who, like himself, was a Free Churchman who stood apart from the process he is recounting. He is very concerned to vindicate Lloyd-Jones from his normal reputation of being an advocate of separatism, not just an opponent of compromise, but whether he produces quite enough evidence to make out his case here, I am not sure. If Lloyd-Jones was so deeply misunderstood, one wonders why he did not do more in his lifetime to put the record straight.

The fact that the author is a Free Churchman does affect his perceptions somewhat. Positively, it allows him to look at the Church of England in a more objective way. Negatively, it means that his facts are not always entirely accurate, and that his judgments are sometimes affected by a degree of misunderstanding. Also, it means that he accepts without discussion Puritan views on disputed questions, and assumes that this is the true Evangelical position. For example, he holds that the Church of Rome is no church, whereas Hooker held that it was a corrupt and heretical church, but a church nonetheless. He also holds that the purity of the church involves demanding a ‘credible profession’ from all church members, whereas the Prayer Book is content to make a ‘charitable assumption’ that their profession is sincere. Queen Elizabeth would not countenance attempting to ‘make windows into men’s souls’. Both views and both policies have dangers, of course, but neither is self-evidently the Evangelical position.

One further qualification that needs making is that the author rather tends to see everything in black and white. Michael Ramsey is a Liberal with Roman Catholic sympathies and David Edwards is tantamount to an unbeliever. How could Evangelicals have truck with either of them (as Billy Graham and John Stott did)? This is a simplistic judgment. Archbishop Ramsey, despite his hostility to ‘fundamentalism’, wrote unusually orthodox books, and David Edwards is by no means the most extreme of Liberals, and often criticises those who

are. Anglo-Catholics are not all members of a Roman Catholic fifth column, and even Roman Catholics, since Vatican II, are a mixed bag. As to Liberals, it may be inconsistent for any of them to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, but some of them evidently do. It does not justify Liberalism, but it does matter.

After all allowances have been made, however, the book remains a powerful indictment. It compares in an interesting way the policy of Billy Graham (no theologian, as the author notes) of drawing in the support of all the local clergy and churches, including Liberals and Roman Catholics, to his crusades, with the policy of 'involvement without compromise' which, since Keele, has been followed by Evangelicals in the Church of England. The result of Billy Graham's policy is that people who have no sympathy with his message, and who simply want to use him to fill their churches, appear on the platform with him, and that enquirers who know no better are sent back to ministries which will give them no help. Only if everyone drawn into his circle were converted as a result would this policy be satisfactory, but sadly, of course, they are not.

The policy pioneered at Keele in 1967 of 'coming out of the ghetto' and entering into all the structures and activities of the Church of England in order to win them for Christ was really a noble ideal. Of course, it was not completely novel: there had always been a few faithful Evangelicals bearing their witness in Church Assembly, for example. But my recollection is that there was then a strong sense of priorities in the use of time, and that the work of the parish and overseas missions always came nearer the top of the list. Bible study and prayer also ranked very high, but the study of theology less so, and especially if it had to be pursued under Liberal teachers. The structures of the Church of England were on the whole a neglected field, where Anglo-Catholics and Liberals could have their own way.

The change pioneered at Keele led to very much altered priorities. There were afterwards many more lay Evangelicals in Church Assembly and its successor the General Synod, so much so that they could often block bad schemes even if they could not carry through good ones. Many more Evangelicals specialized in theology, and in time started getting into University faculties, not just theological college staffs, despite the prejudice against them which carried a strong temptation to compromise. Indeed, these changes in priorities had already begun before Keele, though Keele made them fashionable. Also, those who had no aptitudes in either of these two directions were now urged to play their parts in all the structures of the Church of England.

The high ideals of those Anglicans who encouraged these developments, notably Jim Packer and John Stott, were undermined by an unforeseen factor, namely, that the constituency at large were not sufficiently equipped to carry the responsibility involved. For the most part, they were not nearly well enough grounded in theology and history. Moreover, even if they had been, many of the issues they faced were new. It was an era of ecclesiastical reform and ecumenical discussion. And many of the younger enthusiasts readily identified change with progress, and were keen to alter things they hardly understood. By the time of Nottingham, ten years after Keele, as Murray points out, Jim Packer was already out of sympathy with what was happening. John Stott continued to give leadership as long as ambitious young men allowed him to, and cherished the hope that the Evangelical constituency would not fall apart in the tensions created by the more wayward spirits, but privately he was critical of much that was being said and done. And what was being said and done was to put all the stress on involvement and to forget the danger of compromise.

As an old friend of Jim Packer and John Stott (who hopes to remain their friend after this!) I have to confess that their leadership has not always impressed me. John Stott, it seems to me, has been too retiring, and Jim Packer has made errors of judgment. Of course, they had few precedents to guide them: it was in many ways a new situation. But, whatever criticism of their leadership one may think to be due, I know them to be genuinely orthodox and sincerely committed to the infallibility of Scripture-which Murray does not deny, though he hardly stresses it enough-and this marks them out from many who have followed in their wake. Murray naturally devotes a chapter to the biblical and theological study of Evangelicals, and calls it, not inappropriately, "‘Intellectual Respectability" and Scripture’. As he says, the story here goes back to the founding of the Tyndale Fellowship as long ago as 1944. Members of the Fellowship are committed to a basis of faith which includes the infallibility of Scripture, and in the early days a strictly conservative line was followed in all its publications. The traditional authorship of the biblical books was defended, pseudonymity denied, the narratives of the Bible treated as historical and its teaching harmonized. The Fellowship still has distinguished members who follow the same principles, but it is no longer an agreed approach. The fashionable theories of biblical criticism now find ready adherents among the members, speculative interpretation is given free rein, and infallibility is undermined, even if not openly denied. Stott and Packer, however, are among those who hold to the old paths and continue to treat Scripture as Jesus treated it. So we ought not to doubt that they can aid us still.

Murray has a chapter on ‘The Silent Participant’ (who is Satan, appropriately enough), and a final chapter in which he modestly makes suggestions for rebuilding all that has been destroyed. It would be foolish to think, especially after Murray’s book, that we could do this without Free Church help. Free Church Evangelicals have on the whole been much less affected by the Evangelical downgrade, and they are the old ecumenical partners of Evangelical Anglicans. It is also time, I would suggest, to look more positively at a body like the Church of England (Continuing), where the concerns that we need now to emphasise are already the major preoccupation. Separatism may indeed not be the answer: we have had so much experience now of involvement with compromise that we are perhaps at last ready to attempt involvement without it. But we do need help. And the natural place to look for help is to other Evangelicals.

One of the drawbacks of the policy of involvement in the denomination, and in its ecumenical links, is that it has left Anglican Evangelicals with much less time for their former links with Evangelical Free Churchmen. This is the more to be regretted, in that Evangelical Anglicans now needed more than ever before to explain themselves to their former friends. This book is an invitation to do so, which must on no account be refused. The book lays repeated stress on the fact that a true Christian is a regenerated and converted person. For years now, Anglican Evangelicals have been looking for converted persons in unexpected places, and forgetting the place where they can most readily be found. It is time for this forgetfulness to end.

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