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THE CHANGING FAITH OF EVANGELICALISM

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Church Association Tract 420 was developed from an address given by The Rev Norman Baptie to the CA Autumn Conference in 1913. Inevitably it represents the understanding of one man about 'evangelical churchmanship', but it gives an interesting vantage point from which to assess our own understanding and our evangelical credentials. Baptie identifies six characteristics of the Evangelical Churchman.

1. Spirituality of life.

In his list of evangelical distinctives Alister McGrath includes 'life changing experience'. There are historical differences between a Reformed and Arminian understanding which both historically fall under the evangelical umbrella but, both practically and theologically there can be no doubt that this is a defining feature of evangelicalism.

The accusation can be made against much evangelical practice that we are good on justification but not sanctification: that we focus strongly on conversion but not on the spiritual life. It is important to realise that it is the spiritual life that Baptie is describing. Faith is the underlying attribute and clearly that faith must begin at some point, but he is concerned more with how that faith is 'acted upon'. He identifies three ways - separation from sin, separation to God and service for God.

Though the evidence may be anecdotal I believe that we as evangelicals are negligent, when compared to many of our forebears, in speaking of sin, of separating ourselves from worldliness and in living distinctively Christian lives. Historically evangelicals have been marked, and often reviled for the distinctiveness of their lifestyles.

Notice also that Baptie repeatedly uses the word 'personal'. Evangelicals have always been very clear that we cannot rely on the merits or good works of others, nor can we simply hide in the crowd.

2. The General Historicity of the Bible.

In citing this point Baptie is clearly responding to the issue of Old Testament accuracy and insists that contrary to the weight of scholarship in that day evangelicals were defined by accepting the general historicity of the Bible. That is to say they were convinced 'that its contents are matters of fact.' It is a useful exercise once in a while to read some of the works of the biblical sceptics of the 19th Century in particular to see how what they asserted as absolute fact is now just laughable. For example it was once held with great certainty that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because writing had not been

invented at that time. Subsequent archaeological discoveries have made it abundantly plain that this was nonsense.

For our purpose here it is more important to recognise how the ground has shifted. In many modern definitions of evangelicalism the focus is on the authority of the bible in what it says about faith and spiritual truths rather than its accuracy of fact. Oddly the term used by some to describe this is 'infallibility'. In one definition of 'Open Evangelical' it states that they accept the authority of scripture but are 'not prepared to wear the inerrantist label'. That is they do not accept its historicity, nor are they convinced that its contents are matters of fact.

Augustine once remarked that the admission of falsehood in Scripture makes its authority 'wholly uncertain and wavering'. To assert that there are parts of scripture that are reliable or parts that are not, or even to say that some of it is culturally dependent, is to set up ourselves, or some body, as the arbiter and judge. The result of this, whether we like it not, is that scripture is secondary to either the authority of reason or the Church.

3. Simplicity of worship.

I cannot think of any modern definition of evangelicalism that includes this point. I do, however, know some non-evangelicals who would see one of the chief characteristics of evangelicalism today as banality of worship.

Historically it is undeniable that simplicity of worship has been a feature of evangelical worship. The reformers saw it as their task to take away the centuries of grime that had accumulated in Christian worship in order to reveal the simple beauty of what lay beneath. Their focus was not on outward ceremonial but on the delight to God when worship comes from a penitent, grateful and believing heart. In the last century and a half the Church of England as a whole has been deeply influenced by the Oxford movement and many once simple churches have been cluttered up with frills and ornaments which are irrelevant and often detrimental to true Christian worship. Sadly, amongst evangelicals our worship too has become more and more complex, elaborate and unbiblical.

4. Expository preaching

Today evangelicals have much to be thankful for through the work of the Proclamation Trust. Expository preaching is top of the agenda for many evangelicals and it has had an impact in a much broader field. However, when Baptie speaks of the need to move away from 'church entertainment' to 'Bible schools' we have to admit that not many churches are marked by being devoted to teaching.

5. Work on spiritual lines.

The dichotomy between evangelism and social action is sad and has done much damage to the evangelical cause. Our evangelical forebears often lead the way in caring for the needy and in social change. Sadly some of the clearly evangelical organizations they founded are now entirely secular. However, today, within the context of the welfare state, Christians are well represented in such professions as teaching and medicine.

Baptie's three heads for spiritual work are derived from the Acts of the Apostles where we see a Church that was passionate in both evangelism and teaching, where believers met together for prayer, encouragement and to break bread and where there was work being done to care for the needy. Baptie contrasts this with the churches of his day that he accuses of being concerned with entertainment and secularising their activities in order to attract outsiders. Are our church programmes today any better?

6. Individuality.

If there is anything likely to make the blood boil amongst many 'evangelicals' it is Baptie's final point. In recent decades the stated and public policy of evangelicals has been to integrate into the mainstream rather than to insist on our distinctives. It is undoubtedly true that this has produced some good. Sadly, along the way many who have embarked on this course of action have lost their distinctives. Now virtually all that remains for some is that they know that they owe a debt to their evangelical upbringing.

Our forebears were passionate on this point. They established theological colleges that would be based on evangelical distinctives, they secured evangelical patronage in order to keep continuity of evangelical ministry, and they set up organizations for mutual support. They did not do these things because they saw evangelicalism as one expression of Christian faith amongst many, nor because they believed that wider church would benefit from our particular input. Rather they believed they were right, that evangelicalism is authentic biblical Christianity.