

# Roots and Reformations

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‘Evangelical Churchmen’, wrote Balleine, in his *History of the Evangelical Party*, ‘trace their pedigree to the Puritans, the Reformers, and the Lollards, to all within the National Church who have learned to love simple worship and spiritual religion, but as a party their existence dates from the Great Revival of the eighteenth century,<sup>1</sup>. I am more concerned in this paper with pedigree than with party. I am concerned to isolate those distinctive features of evangelicalism which can be traced in men of that persuasion in every age of the church. A few years ago the question of evangelical identity exercised our minds. The problem has not now gone away because the phrase is not heard so often. Most of our difficulties arose from our failure to identify our roots clearly, and to own them when they were identified. I want therefore to consider our pedigree and for that we must go back to the Reformers. That is not to suggest that evangelical religion began with them, it did not. The Reformers were the first to claim that what they were teaching was no novelty of their age, but was itself the revival of primitive, apostolic Christianity. As D’Aubigné has put it:

The Word of the first century gave birth to the work of reformation in the sixteenth . . . The Reformation was not the substitution of the catholicism of the first ages for the popery of the middle ages: it was the revival of the preaching of St. Paul, and thus it was that hearing Latimer everyone exclaimed with rapture, ‘Of a Saul, God hath made him a very Paul’.<sup>2</sup>

Now the distinctive feature of that great revival and of New Testament Christianity itself was *personal faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord*. ‘What must I do to be saved?’ cried the Philippian jailer, and the cry echoes back and forth through the New Testament. ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved’ was the apostolic answer, and that too reverberates throughout its pages. What reason did John give for writing his Gospel? ‘. . . that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name’ (John 20:31). Why was all this necessary? Because ‘if *thou* shalt confess with *thy* mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in *thine* heart that God hath raised him from the dead, *thou* shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation’ (Rom. 10:9, 10). Nothing can be more distinctive of evangelical belief than that.

That was where it all began for Luther. His quest was for a gracious God; how could he be at peace with and reconciled to God? He found no peace through the mechanical views of grace and the sacraments that were preached in the church at that time. He found it when he came to trust in the promises of Scripture, to trust in Christ for salvation. He found it when the Gospel, through faith, became true *for him*, something personally and subjectively appropriated.

Luther spoke of the ‘openness of Scripture’, by which he meant that the historical facts of the Christian faith can be known by everyone who reads the Bible, but the saving knowledge of those facts, the efficacy of Christ’s death and the power of his resurrection, can only be experienced by those who *trust* in Christ. Cranmer makes the same distinction in his Homily *Of the True, Lively, and Christian Faith*:

As he that readeth Cesar's Commentaries, believing the same to be true, hath thereby a knowledge of Cesar's life and notable acts, because he believeth the history of Cesar, yet it is not properly said that he believeth in Cesar, of whom he looketh for no help nor benefit; even so he that believeth that all that is spoken of God in the Bible is true, and yet liveth so ungodly that he cannot look to enjoy the promises and benefits of God, although it may be said that such a man hath faith and belief in the words of God, yet it is not properly said that he believeth in God, or hath such faith and trust in God whereby he may surely look for grace, mercy and everlasting life at God's hand.<sup>3</sup>

And the same was true of all the Reformers. At the heart of their understanding was the necessity of personal faith in the sense of trust in Christ and a looking to him for salvation.

The discovery of the true nature of faith came to the Reformers with the force of a revelation. This was because the Church of Rome taught that faith was intellectual assent to the teaching of the church, to a certain body of truth. But when the Reformers turned to the Bible they found that that was not the case at all, that faith was in fact a leaning upon Christ, casting oneself wholly upon him as Saviour, looking to him for salvation and to no other person or thing.

When we come to the eighteenth century, we find the same thing affirmed by the leaders of the Evangelical Awakening, for that Awakening consisted of a rediscovery of this fundamental truth, which had been overlaid for a hundred years or more by Protestant scholasticism, which in some cases had degenerated into Deism and the religion of reason. It is important to remember that the Church of England, despite the fact that it had the doctrines of grace enshrined in its articles of Religion, had sunk back into a state of virtual ignorance of them. Men like Thomas Scott, the famous commentator, were before conversion, on their own confession Unitarians, and complete strangers to the doctrine of justification by faith. What was taught in the church, in the early eighteenth century, before the Evangelical Awakening, was not the warm, personal faith of the New Testament which the Reformers had preached, but a dry, cold legalism. Somehow, the whole system of the Gospel had become perverted. This is perhaps not surprising: the natural man is incapable of understanding the things of the Spirit of God, and is bound therefore in time to corrupt the truth and to put a false Gospel of works in its place. The doctrine that was popularly taught as Christianity at the time was that of justification by faith and works. A book that was widely read and had almost official standing, was *The Whole Duty of Man* which first appeared in 1657. It set out a doctrine of mitigated human obedience combined with the merit of Christ, in fact, just the kind of thing that A.R.C.I.C. II has been passing off as the doctrine of justification. The following passage gives us the flavour of the work:

The third thing, that Christ was to do for us, was to Enable us, or to give us Strength to do what God requires of us. This he doth, first by taking off from the hardness of the Law given to Adam, which was, never to commit the least sin, upon pain of damnation, and requiring of us only an honest and hearty endeavour to do what we are able, and where we fail accepting of Sincere Repentance.<sup>4</sup>

The effect of this teaching was to implant the idea that God accepts our repentance and labours as a substitute for complete fulfilment of his law, and the deficiency is made up by the death of Christ. People were told, 'Do your best and God will do the rest'. The whole concept of salvation was legalistic. No wonder John Wesley said, that before his conversion he had the spirit of a servant not a son. Before his conversion he thought he believed Paul's

teaching, that the Christian is saved by faith, but faith for Wesley was a very complicated and complex thing, a process mainly intellectual, involving ‘a firm assent to all the propositions contained in the Old and New Testaments’.<sup>5</sup> Peter Böhler, the Moravian Missionary, explained to him that faith was a simple reliance on the finished work of Christ. This drove Wesley to his Greek New Testament and he had to confess that the Bible was on Böhler’s side. It was the personal element that was absent from his faith, and which was pressed home to him with the searching question, ‘Do you believe that Christ is your Saviour?’. ‘I believe,’ said Wesley in answer, ‘that he is the Saviour of the world’. ‘But,’ Böhler persisted, ‘do you believe he is *your* Saviour?’.

The whole age was so sunk in rationalism and moralism, that a claim to personal experience of the grace of God, and the exercise of faith in its true sense of trust in Christ, was regarded as wild fanaticism and enthusiasm, ‘. . . the pretending to extraordinary gifts and revelations of the Holy Spirit’, as Bishop Butler put it in his rebuke to John Wesley. Yet the Evangelicals believed that they had Scripture and history on their side, they certainly had the New Testament to which to appeal and the formularies of the Church of England. In answer to the question: What is faith? Wesley had only to quote the *Book of Homilies* ‘A sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God, that, through the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God’. In preaching personal faith in Christ as being at the heart of Christianity, it was not the Evangelicals who were out of line, but the rest of the church which had forgotten what the Gospel really was.

This was the burden of the message of the Great Awakening. Listen to George Whitefield in the High Kirk Yard in Edinburgh, preaching to nominally Christian people,

Before we can ever have peace with God, we must be justified by faith through our Lord Jesus Christ, we must be enabled to apply Christ to our hearts, we must have Christ brought home to our souls so as his merits may be imputed to our souls, My dear friends, were you ever married to Jesus Christ? Did you ever close with Christ by lively faith, so as to hear him speaking peace to your souls?<sup>6</sup>

The appeal was for personal faith in Christ, but personal faith always allied to trust in his finished work of redemption, to an objective doctrine of justification. Without that, personal experience can degenerate into mere enthusiasm.

This inheritance of the Great Awakening was known amongst evangelicals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as ‘vital religion’. ‘The practitioners of vital religion’, says Ian Bradley, in his book *The Call to Seriousness*, were simply returning to the central teaching of the Reformation and reviving the traditions of seventeenth-century Puritanism in Britain<sup>7</sup>. This we have already seen to be the case with Wesley and Whitefield. The torch was to be carried over into another generation and another century by Wilberforce and Shaftesbury. Wilberforce’s book *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*, was intended, as the title indicates, to point up the difference between living, personal faith in Christ, which issued in changed lives dedicated to the service of God, and the nominal Christianity that prevailed generally in the church at the time.

It seems in our days to be the commonly received opinion, that provided a man admit in general terms the truth of Christianity, though he neither know nor consider much concerning the particulars of the system; and if he be not habitually guilty of any of the grosser vices against

his fellow-creatures; we have no great reason to be dissatisfied with him, or to question the validity of his claim to the name and privileges of a Christian.<sup>8</sup>

In place of this undemanding concept of Christianity the Evangelicals preached 'vital religion'. Central to that was the personal experience of conversion related to the atoning death of Christ. The plan of salvation was simple and could be remembered. G. E. Russell, a late Victorian journalist, remembered what he had been taught in his childhood. But head knowledge of the Plan was not enough, it must be experienced in the heart. Wilberforce, in a letter to his son Samuel on his ninth birthday wrote that he hoped soon 'to see the decisive marks of your having begun to undergo that great change'. Without personal, living faith in Christ mere head knowledge was unavailing.

And so this characteristic mark of evangelicalism can be traced right up to the present century. Even forty years ago Evangelicals had not lost this emphasis. In a report to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1950 entitled *The Fulness of Christ*, a number of leading evangelicals all avowed the centrality of this teaching. In speaking of the church they said:

The church is essentially a personal fellowship of men with God and with each other which is entered through personal faith in Christ. This personal faith comes, indeed, as men personally accept the gracious personal offer of God in the Word preached and the sacraments administered. But outward participation in the means of grace does not guarantee inward faith, and outward membership of the church does not guarantee participation in its inward life.<sup>9</sup>

All this is the direct inheritance of the Reformation and the Evangelical Awakening. They also say in underlining these points:

To be fully personal a relationship must, of course, be consciously realized. The Christian knows he is justified because of the objective act and promise of God. But the objective assurance is sealed by the inward witness of the Spirit . . . It is this which gives spontaneity and a certain élan to the Christian life. But it is not the ultimate ground of assurance. That rests on the objective atonement and the objective promise of God in the Gospel.<sup>10</sup>

Here we recognize the pedigree. Here is the acceptance and owning of our roots. Here is the direct and true evangelical succession in the Church of England. But where do we stand today? Evangelicals are in danger of losing this succession. First, through a failure to maintain the doctrine of justification by faith alone, A.R.C.I.C. II has revealed our weakness here and the degree to which many have drifted away from this teaching and no longer understand it. This point can be illustrated from the same document from which I have just quoted. This is how Evangelical bishops and leading theologians spoke in that report to the Archbishop of Canterbury about justification forty years ago:

We believe that the Reformation discovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone is a central and crucial part of the gospel. It is as fundamental to the doctrine of salvation as are the Nicene and Chalcedonian statements to the person of Christ. Failure to affirm it would be an acknowledgement that the church was uncertain or in error upon a crucial part of the gospel.<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to imagine such a firm, clear and unequivocal statement being made today, by an equivalent group. And the very situation against which those leaders warned forty years ago has come to pass. The A.R.C.I.C. II statement 'Salvation and the Church' has failed to affirm the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Secondly, through a growing sacramentalism in the church generally. Church Society has recently published a tract called

*Doctrinal Change in the Alternative Service Book*, which draws attention to the change that has been introduced through the Rite A service of Holy Communion. This service has moved in the direction of the 'real presence' and away from the importance of right reception by the individual believer. This, coupled with the almost casual attendance at communion services and the campaign to admit children to Holy Communion all indicate that the distinctive teaching of evangelicalism on personal faith and commitment is threatened. Thirdly, through preoccupation with the social gospel, so that the collective concept of the kingdom of God takes the place of individual conversion. People are included in the kingdom without repentance and faith, changing the structures is seen as the main task of the church rather than changing individuals. I shall be dealing more largely with this later.

Now this rediscovery at the Reformation of the nature of personal faith in Christ had enormous, indeed, revolutionary implications, for the church and society.

The first was this, *The establishment of the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith*. Because faith is personal trust in the Christ who is held forth to us in Scripture, the authority of the Bible became for the Reformers a *felt authority*. Before that, faith was regarded as an intellectual matter and the authority of the Bible was viewed in a detached and academic manner—the Bible was the Word of God because the Church said so. But now the Scriptures spoke directly to their hearts, God addressed them through its words, they found the Bible to be a living word spoken to them in the power of the Holy Ghost. The Bible and its authority were authenticated in their experience. It was this knowledge of the heart as well as the head that enabled Luther to stand at Worms against the pope and the emperor and the whole might of the mediaeval church and say those ever memorable words:

I am overcome by the Scriptures . . . and my conscience is taken captive by the words of God, and I neither can nor will retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience.<sup>12</sup>

He could not have uttered those words nor taken that stand, if the Bible were just a book whose authority he accepted at second hand, just because the church said he should. So the Bible became authoritative for the Reformers in a different way from the way in which it was regarded in the church of Rome, on the basis of personal faith and *felt* authority.

Scripture became the supreme and sufficient authority in all matters of faith. In view of the traditions which had grown up in the church, many of which were inimical to the faith taught in Scripture, the Reformers resolved to judge all traditions by the apostolic tradition alone, the Bible. Thus, Cranmer declares in his *Confutation of Unwritten Verities*:

Whatsoever. . . the church teacheth you out of the Canonical books of the bible, believe that; but if they teach you anything beside that (I mean, which is not agreeable with the same) believe neither that nor them . . . cleave ye fast to the sound and certain doctrine of God's infallible word, written in the canonical books of the new and old Testament.<sup>13</sup>

It is sometimes said that the Church of England does not take the position of Scripture *alone* as our authority in matters of faith. That is simply not the case. We have seen how Cranmer viewed the matter and he makes that clear in other places too. But, in addition, Archbishop Sandys declared:

It hath been the practice of all defenders of the truth since the beginnings to rely their faith only upon the Scripture and written Word.<sup>14</sup>

In more recent times Archbishop Tait stated:

There is no co-ordinate authority with Scripture . . . Scripture alone has ultimate authority.<sup>15</sup>

And Bishop Ryle wrote,

Holy Scripture [is] the only rule of faith and practice, the only test of truth, the only judge of controversy.<sup>16</sup>

So here we trace our roots and pedigree as evangelicals. Experience, personal faith relates reciprocally to Scripture. There were two great controlling principles of Reformation theology—the authority of Scripture and justification by faith. But they work together and reflect back upon each other. Scripture declares the truth, the way of salvation, and as that truth is received by faith so the authority of Scripture is authenticated in the experience of the individual. Justification by faith is therefore not just one doctrine amongst others, it is the key that unlocks the scriptures to us and admits us to their riches.

So where you have a decline in the understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith you have a corresponding decline in regard for the Bible and its authority. Truly, as Luther said, the doctrine of justification by faith is the article of a standing or a falling church. We have not far to seek for the failure in the church today to submit to the authority of Holy Scripture. Because of the absence of justification by faith as a powerful, living experience, the hermeneutical principle is missing which gives meaning and coherence to Scripture as a whole. Then other false and spurious principles come in to take its place. How fundamentally true were Tyndale's words when he wrote:

When by false interpretation of the law, Christ, which is the door, the way, and the ground, or foundation of all scripture, is lost, concerning the chiefest fruit of his passion, and no more seen in his own likeness; then is the scripture locked up, and henceforth there is extreme darkness and a maze, wherein if thou walk, thou wottest neither where thou art, nor canst find any way out. It is a confused chaos, and a mingling of all things together without order, everything contrary to another. It is a hedge or grove of briers, wherein if thou be caught, it is impossible to get out, but if thou loose thyself in one place, thou art tangled and caught in another for it.<sup>17</sup>

There can be no more vivid description of what happens when men lose the key of the 'pathway into Scripture', as Tyndale put it. They become hopelessly lost. Everything becomes confused and contradictory. Has not this a contemporary ring to it? When I read of the fruits of modern scholarship, as they are presented in the Doctrine Commission's Report, *Christian Believing*, (in the section 'The Christian and the Bible') I find these words of Tyndale's very relevant. In that Report it states that the Bible teaches a pluriformity in the faith; that the Bible is not a homogeneous whole, but a multitude of insights, and warring voices, some 'verging on the frenzied and obscene'; we must, it is claimed, in consequence give up the attempt to treat it as a doctrinal whole. Here we have the confession from our Doctrine Commissioners' own lips that they have lost their way; that they have lost the key of knowledge, 'they enter not in themselves and those that are entering in they hinder.'

But what about evangelicals in the Church of England today? Are they too in danger of losing their way? Well, there are warning signs that we would be unwise to ignore. The treatment of the interpretation of Scripture at the Anglican Evangelical Assembly in 1986 was very far from satisfactory. Too much stress was laid upon the diversity and complexity

of the content of scripture, and the variety of interpretations possible because of different cultural backgrounds. We were urged to widen our horizons and to be open to new truth, which it was said means learning from other interpretations: from liberation theology, from radicals, from the reformers and so on. All will help us to understand the diversity of Scripture better, it was argued, for Scripture speaks with more than one voice on many questions. This position was not seriously challenged. I believe the signs are there that evangelicals too are beginning to lose their way on this subject and that we need to recognize and own our roots before it is too late.

### **Understanding the Church**

The rediscovery of personal faith had implications too for *the understanding of the church*. The Archbishop of Canterbury at N.E.A.C.3 called upon evangelicals to examine this question of the nature of the church, which today is called ecclesiology. Strictly speaking ecclesiology means the science of the building and decoration of churches. But more recently it has become a jargon word for the doctrine of the church. The Archbishop was calling upon us to work out our evangelical understanding of the church. The call is to be welcomed, but it must not be taken to imply that evangelicals have not addressed themselves to this question before. I remember Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones calling upon evangelicals to do the very same thing more than twenty years ago, prior to the Keele congress. Wherever the ecumenical movement impinges upon Christians this becomes sooner or later the compelling question—what do we mean by the church? The doctrine of justification by faith is pivotal for our understanding of the nature of the church, just as it was for Scripture.

The impact of this teaching upon the Reformers' view of the church is seen immediately in Article 19 of the 39 Articles, *Of the Church*. It begins

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men . . .

That means the church is a gathering of believers, those who have experienced the grace of God and have put their trust in Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Seen in the light of the doctrine of justification by faith, the church must be thought of primarily in terms of that personal relationship with God. The church is the company of those who have through faith entered into that relationship. The Reformers therefore in the first instance defined the church in terms of grace and faith, not as Roman Catholicism has done in terms of structure and institutional continuity. Where the company of believers is, says Scripture and the Reformers, there is the church. Where the bishop is, says the Church of Rome, there is the Church. The Article goes on to say that it is the 'congregation of faithful men, *in the which the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly ministered . . .*'

That is indeed fundamental, for it is through the instrumentality of the Word that men and women are born again and brought through faith into a right relationship with God. In the deepest sense the church is the community of the elect who have been chosen and called out into the fellowship of the church by the Word. We have it set out for us in 1 Peter 1 and 2 'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God . . . As new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. To whom coming as unto a living stone . . . ye also as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house . . .' that is the church. This is the Biblical, Reformed evangelical understanding of the church.

Over against this understanding of the church we have that of the Church of Rome. In that system it is the relationship with the institutional church which is paramount, not this personal relationship of faith in Christ. It is by the church and through the church that people are saved, that is why the A.R.C.I.C. document, when it came to deal with justification, changed the terms of the discussion and chose the title, *Salvation and the Church*. It refused to consider justification apart from the church. By doing this it predetermined the outcome in Rome's favour. As the recent statement of the Vatican has put it 'The rôle of the church in salvation is not only to bear witness to it, but also above all, to be the effective instrument—notably by means of the seven sacraments, of justification and salvation'.<sup>18</sup> The significance of this is that the Gospel and the church coalesce and become indistinguishable. The church in fact becomes the Gospel. It is only through the church that the individual can be saved. That is why schism must be the ultimate sin in the eyes of the church of Rome, because in separating from the church you are separating from the Gospel. As Cardinal Clancy of the Sydney diocese of the Roman Catholic Church has recently put it in his call to lapsed Catholics, 'Christ established the church as our way of salvation. Any Catholic who rejects the church is virtually rejecting salvation. He added also a warning against false ecumenism, 'Only the Catholic church has all the qualities of the church founded by Christ'.<sup>19</sup>

I can see no way in which these two different understandings of the church can be reconciled: The one in which the church is defined in terms of believers: those to whom the Gospel has been brought home with power, who come to personal faith in Christ and are added to the fellowship of the church and the other, in which the church is defined in terms of a hierarchy of bishops and priests who act as the conduit and guarantee of grace to those who are in communion with it, who, if they keep the rules of the church and believe its teaching, will go to heaven. Personal faith in the sense of trust in Christ as Saviour does not really enter into it, and need form no part of that hope. I do not think there can ever be a synthesis or agreement between these two positions.

The danger in the ecumenical process is, that the one will be swallowed up in the other: that the evangelical, protestant understanding of the church will be eliminated in favour of the institutional, hierarchical understanding. There is in the ecumenical movement a built-in bias in favour of that because of its unbiblical insistence upon bishops as being essential to any reunion of the churches. Because this unscriptural view of episcopacy has tended to prevail, the relationship of Reformers and evangelicals with bishops has always been a rather uneasy one. 'There is nothing', said Tyndale, 'to be looked to from bishops . . . Christ was smitten on the cheek before the bishop, Paul was buffeted before the bishop . . . and a bishop has just turned me away'.<sup>20</sup> Balleine records that in the early nineteenth century the Bishop of London would not allow his carriage to be seen at the door of an evangelical vicarage. Is not Canon D. B. Knox right when he says in a recent article in *Churchman* that episcopacy is neither of the *esse* nor the *bene esse* of the church, but is a matter of indifference, for all things necessary for our spiritual well-being have been given us in Scripture.<sup>21</sup> The Reformed view of episcopacy is one that has rarely been heard, and that is, that it is a venerable and convenient form of government as long as it serves the Gospel, but when it is insisted upon as essential to the church and usurps the place of the Gospel, as we see it doing in the church of Rome and amongst some Anglicans, then it is highly inconvenient. More episcopacy is not the answer to the churches' divisions: it is one of the principal reasons for those divisions.

Evangelicals must therefore stand back and reappraise what is going on in the ecumenical movement: they must insist that the claims of the historic episcopate be examined critically, since it cannot be established from Scripture and its continuance must therefore be subject to

discussion and re-evaluation. They must commend the evangelical understanding of the church as the congregation of believing people in which the pure word of God is preached and to which the historical episcopate is not essential. In other words we must be fully aware of whence we have come if we are to be sure of whither we are going in this ecumenical age, and not simply drift back into an unreformed, unscriptural position.

### **The social implications of personal religion**

We must recognize the way in which the primacy of personal faith in Christ influenced the approach of evangelicals to social issues.

That evangelical religion has been the cause and the catalyst for great social change is undeniable. The Reformation itself brought in a new emphasis upon philanthropy. In the Middle Ages belief in the existence of purgatory determined the methods and object of charity. The primary need was located not amongst the poor of this world. However miserable their lot, it was infinitely preferable to the lot of the departed who languished in purgatorial fires. Mercy could best be served by the deliverance of the souls of the dead from that place of torment as quickly as possible. Thomas Aquinas wrote 'The least pain of purgatory surpasses the greatest pain of this life'. If that were the case, then no benefactor or donor could neglect concentrating his charity upon benefactions which would relieve either himself or his kin from the most pathetic destitution of all. The colours in which their sufferings were painted far exceeded even the sight today of famine-stricken people on television. We can only with difficulty imagine the orientation of life then, which focussed upon the sufferings of the life to come for all Christian people. The suffering of souls in such extremity became the first object of compassion.

The Reformation removed these apprehensions of torment. It taught that blessedness in the life to come did not depend upon the acquisition of merit, but upon the accomplished redemption of Christ, which ensured forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who trusted in him. This led to the construction of a new channel for human mercy and compassion to flow in. Men of goodwill began to devote their attention to temporal misery. Human suffering in this world began to come into focus as the mythical suffering of purgatory faded from view. Ecclesiastical charity declined and social charity grew proportionally in importance.

The Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century similarly resulted in a new impetus for social change and social work. There was first of all the influence upon morals or 'manners' as they were called in those days. It led to a profound change in the way people conducted themselves. Professor Harold Perkin states:

Between 1780 and 1850 the English ceased to be one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and bloodthirsty nations in the world and became one of the most inhibited, polite, orderly, tender-minded, prudish and hypocritical.<sup>22</sup>

The effects of the Evangelical Awakening on the reformation of character was to create in nineteenth-century Britain a bourgeois class and bourgeois values. It was inescapable: those who became decent, moral, thrifty and industrious, as a result of an evangelical conversion, also became prosperous and middle class. All this came about through a revolution in personal values, spiritual and moral, not through parliamentary legislation to make people better. With Wilberforce and Shaftesbury we see evangelicals in parliament influencing legislation in the abolition of slavery (1833), factory reform (1847), the abolition of the practice of transportation (1853), the ending of the scandal of 'climbing boys' (1834) and the

outlawing of employment of women and boys under ten years old in the coal mines (1842). It was a remarkable achievement. However, through-out it all, they never lost sight of the primacy of personal faith which was at the heart of evangelical religion. At this distance in time, and with the tendency to read history through the spectacles of present social priorities, there is the danger of some misunderstanding, and of thinking of such men as early Christian socialists. This they were certainly not. Evangelicals then did not see their efforts as bringing in the kingdom of God on earth through legislation. Their efforts were always subordinated to the main object of personal evangelism and were intended to advance ‘vital religion’ and the conversion of individuals. Wilberforce’s endeavours to free the slaves were pursued because it would promote their evangelization. As long as they were regarded as a sub-human species, how could men be persuaded that they had souls to be saved? Similarly, the poor had to be raised from the depths of misery and deprivation, and taught to read and write, if they were to heed the call to vital religion. Today, in some evangelical circles, social work is viewed quite differently, as an end in itself, and the means by which to bring in the kingdom of God.

Without this piece of the jig-saw—this recognition of the primacy of personal religion—other things that nineteenth-century evangelicals did will seem strangely perverse and irreconcilable with their supposed social concern. For example, Wilberforce introduced legislation that banned all trade union activity, and introduced other repressive measures in the interests of law and order. Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts* called for absolute submission to authority and resignation in the face of want and adversity quite as much as they sought moral and spirit-regeneration. Their response, it has been said, to poverty and suffering was emotional rather than ideological, and that would seem to be the case. They did not consider that the state was the best way of dealing with the problem of poverty. Evangelicals felt that political radicalism, just as much as immorality, was a vice on which they were called to wage full-scale war. ‘The enemies of our political constitution’, wrote Wilberforce in a letter to Lord Melton, ‘are also the enemies to our religion.’<sup>23</sup> The anchor which held them in all the political storms of the times was the conviction that it was the individual moral regeneration of its inhabitants that would save Britain, rather than any reform of its constitution, and Wilberforce probably summed it up in another letter when he wrote ‘. . . a good national education, by training up the people in the principles of true religion, would do more even towards our benefit than any other measure whatever.’<sup>24</sup>

Their words found an echo in the philosophy of Samuel Smiles who wrote:

It may be of comparatively little consequence how a man is governed from without, whilst everything depends upon how he governs himself from within. The greatest slave is not he who is ruled by a despot, great though that evil be, but he who is the thrall of his own moral ignorance, selfishness, and vice. Nations who are thus enslaved at heart cannot be freed by any mere changes of masters and institutions; and so long as the fatal delusion prevails, that liberty solely depends upon and consists in government so long will such changes, no matter at what cost they be effected, have as little practical and lasting result as the shifting of the figures on a phantasmagoria.<sup>25</sup>

In other words freedom is a moral and spiritual reality before it is a political reality. That was the order of priorities that evangelicals sought to maintain.

Today in the church the pendulum has swung all the other way—away from the moral and spiritual regeneration of the individual to collectivist solutions and political programmes. Rather as Marx said of Hegel, that he found him standing on his head and put him the right way up, that is, he kept the philosophical system but exchanged materialism for idealism, so

today there are those who claim to have put the message of the Bible on its feet by interpreting it in terms of political freedom and economic and social welfare. That, they say, is the real message of the Bible, which in the past has been ignored. And so agendas, including evangelical agendas, are full of political, cultural and social questions. The great question seems to be, How can we change society? How can we change social structures so as to improve people's opportunities to lead a full life? The primacy has passed from spiritual to temporal well-being.

Now I am not saying that everything held by evangelicals in the past must of necessity be held by evangelicals today. But I think we should be on our guard when we find the principles that they held so radically reversed and overturned. 'What . . . is paganism?', asked Gresham Machen, and gave the answer, 'Paganism is that view of life which finds the highest goal of human existence in the healthy and harmonious and joyous development of existing human faculties'.<sup>26</sup> There is something perilously close to paganism in the social gospel adopted by large sections of the church today. The Gospel has been politicized and the preaching of repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ pushed into the background. The Evangelicals, with their emphasis upon personal religion over all other concerns, in my view had it right, and we should seek to make that the principle that controls our thinking today, and the anchor that holds us in the present confused state of the church. The Revd C. H. Spurgeon has put this in his idiosyncratic style:

A new theory has lately been started, which sets forth as its ideal a certain imaginary kingdom of God, unspiritual, unscriptural and unreal. The old fashioned way of seeking the lost sheep, one by one, is too slow; it takes too much time, and thought and prayer, and it does not leave space enough for politics, gymnastics and sing-song.

We are urged to rake in the nation wholesale into this imaginary kingdom by sanitary regulations, social arrangements, scientific accommodations and legislative enactments . . . this is the last new fad. According to this fancy, our Lord's kingdom is, after all, to be of this world; and without conversion, or the new birth, the whole population is to melt into an earthly theocracy. Howbeit, it is not so.<sup>27</sup>

### **Seriousness**

Conversion and personal faith inevitably result in the change of individual conduct and lifestyle. That indeed was of the essence of 'vital religion', it led to a consciousness of responsibility to God. Wealth, property, natural gifts and abilities, and time itself were held in trust and an account of their use would one day have to be given to God himself. It is not at all surprising that evangelicals came to be marked out by a certain seriousness in their demeanour. With the heightened awareness that lively faith brings of the eternal world and spiritual realities it was to be expected that common pastimes and amusements would fade in their importance, if not become unworthy in themselves.

Yet it must not be thought that evangelicals were life-denying. They were not life-denying but world-denying. They had different values and a different outlook upon life from that of unregenerate society, and it was these that controlled their choices and actions.

This seriousness and sense of personal responsibility found expression in a number of different ways, for example, it led the Eclectics, when considering the question of the conversion of the heathen, to ask not, What the church was going to do about it, but, What are we going to do about<sup>28</sup>. Again, their first concern was not how they might fulfil themselves, but how they might serve God and do their duty to Him and their fellow men.

When Wilberforce was asked by one of his children why, in view of his love for the Lake District, he did not buy a house for the family there, he replied, 'I should enjoy it as much as anyone, my dear, but we must remember we are not sent into the world merely to admire prospects and enjoy scenery'.<sup>29</sup> The model of good behaviour put across in evangelical treatises in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a puritanical one. The stress in all of them was on self-denial and restraint rather than liberty and self-fulfilment.

We must ask ourselves today, whether the pendulum has swung too far the other way, and why. The emphasis nowadays seems to be upon self-fulfilment rather than duty and discipleship. I notice that when men write about their vocation to the ministry nowadays they stress that they 'enjoy preaching' or they 'enjoy' some other ministerial work. Surely, that is not the point, and its inappropriateness in that context is seen when we try to apply it to the apostle Paul, or somebody like Whitefield or Wesley, for instance. They would not have understood what was meant by that. Again, services so often seem to be geared to the enjoyment of people rather than the glory of God. The purpose seems to be to give people a warm glow and make them feel good. A letter a few months ago in the *Church Times*, obviously written with concern and without any desire to be outrageous, described a service in an evangelical church which was 'more akin to a club atmosphere. People sat informally around tables, and food and drink were served constantly. The introductions used liturgical game-show type responses amidst banter and laughter'.<sup>30</sup>

In his recent book *Laid-Back Christianity*, Jim Packer has a chapter on what he calls 'Hot Tub Religion'. The purpose of a hot tub it seems is to make you feel good all over.

Many today want Christianity to be like that, and labour to make it so. The ultimate step, of course, would be to clear church auditoriums of seats and install hot tubs in their place . . . Meantime, many churches . . . are already offering occasions which we are meant to feel are the next best thing to a hot tub—namely, happy gatherings free from care, real fun times for all . . .

<sup>31</sup>

I mention these things because they are warning signs that all is not right today with evangelicalism. We would be wise to ask now, what has gone wrong? It would be safer to sound the notes of seriousness, duty and responsibility, which have always been characteristic of previous generations of evangelicals, not perhaps exactly in the same way as they did, for times are different, but in such a way as to recognize and own our pedigree.

## **Conclusion**

I have tried to set out what I believe to be the nature and pedigree of evangelicalism. At its heart is simple, spiritual religion—a personal relationship with God through trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Saviour and Lord. That basic truth has profound implications for every other area of faith and life. It must control our thinking about the Bible, the church, society and our own individual lives. All these must be shot through with the supremely personal nature of grace and faith.

But if the centre does not hold, if we lose our grasp upon the doctrine of justification by faith, everything else begins to slip too. Without lively faith and the understanding that it brings, everything, including Scripture, becomes confused and incoherent. Our response to issues—to ecumenism, social questions, the nature of the church, the sacraments—becomes *ad hoc*, pragmatic, fragmentary, instead of firm, consistent and principled.

I believe that evangelicals today in the Church of England stand at a critical juncture in their history. We can see the warning signs that must not be ignored, which show that we are in danger not only of losing touch with our roots, but of breaking with certain basic principles that underlie evangelicalism. It is not yet too late to heed those warnings and to affirm once again our heritage to the benefit both of the cause and of the church to which we belong.

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- 4) *The Whole Duty of Man* (London 1698) Preface.
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