

## The Changing Face of Evangelicalism

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Every once in a while, a Christian must take stock. He or she will ask such questions as these: Has my love for the Lord grown during the past twenty years? Do I pray more, and more biblically, than I did ten years ago? Have I multiplied my understanding of God's mind as revealed in Scripture, so that I am more consistent in my love for fellow believers than a few years ago? Has the powerful operation of the Spirit within me deepened my grasp of Christ's love for me? The answers to such questions should drive us to our knees--either in gratitude to God for the signs of his gracious perseverance with us, or in repentance where we must confess with shame that our progress has been slight, or even non-existent.

Local churches must ask similar questions, but the answers are invariably more complex. When answers concern large aggregates of people, there is an inevitable degree of generalization. In other words, the answer may be utterly false with respect to specific individuals, but as a comment on the general trend it may be largely accurate.

In what follows I propose to draw attention to the changing face of evangelicalism. Admittedly this is a rather personal perspective. I am comparing evangelicalism as it is found today, primarily in the United Kingdom (but I shall make some asides on evangelicalism in America), with evangelicalism as it was known a mere generation ago. By "generation" I refer to a rather flexible period, from twenty to fifty years. I shall try to be as even-handed as possible: Christian evaluation should never succumb to mere nostalgia, an antiquated sighing for the "good old days" that were

often nothing of the kind. But neither should we elevate superficial gains and mere modernity to a high rank in the moral and spiritual scheme of things. If readers sometimes feel that the contrasts I draw are out of step with their memories of specific times and places, I nevertheless hope they will recognize that the generalizations I sketch in are largely accurate descriptions of the evolving status of evangelicalism in much of the English-speaking western world.

1. A generation ago many Christians were still largely concerned with "separation." By this they meant that their lives should trace out patterns of style and conduct quite different from those of the world. Many Christians felt themselves to be an embattled minority in fairly stern opposition to the world. This sometimes generated a certain kind of legalism. I remember being advised, with only a certain degree of facetiousness, "Never drink, smoke, swear or chew, and never go out with girls that do." This was not the sum of all godliness, but it was thought to be a useful code of acceptable behavior. At its best, however, concern for separation ensured a certain commitment to individual holiness that generated personal discipline.

By contrast, contemporary Christians have become sensitive to the perceived legalism of the past generation, and have reacted by trying to "infiltrate" the world for Christ. At one level this is a good thing: Christian participation in law, politics, science, industry, commerce, education and other fields is surely part of our mandate to serve as the salt of the earth. On the other hand, this has sometimes been accompanied by the salt losing its saltiness. As separation has declined, so has distinctive Christian witness. We have gained, and we have lost.

2. Along the same lines, Christians a generation ago attached quite a

bit of importance to personal piety, and tended to view an individualistic and personal application of Scripture to be the primary end of all right-minded Bible study. This had many salutary results: it focused on individual sins and the need for growth and perseverance in spiritual discipline. On the other hand, it sometimes overlooked biblical emphases on corporate responsibility, on the church as a family and a body, on the importance of structural justice in a radically evil world. By contrast, a growing part of intellectual leadership amongst contemporary Christians focuses on the latter concerns, but says precious little about the former. We have gained, and we have lost.

3. To put the matter in a slightly different way, a former generation of evangelicals could summarize the faith in a number of agreed basics, such as the unqualified truthfulness of Scripture, the sufficiency of the cross-work of Christ as the only ground for human salvation, the need for rebirth if one is to enter the kingdom of God, the primacy of justification in any biblically-faithful description of salvation, the work of the Spirit in bringing unregenerate men and women to faith and in sanctifying them thereafter. All of these perspectives focused on the salvation of the individual. The goals were holiness and heaven. By contrast, although these concerns are by no means lost to view, many evangelicals are now investing large quantities of energy in addressing complex questions: What is the Christian's response to the claimed morality of a nuclear deterrent? How should Christians view in vitro fertilization? How should Christians attempt to influence the situation in South Africa? How should Christians engage various levels of government so as to provoke solutions to inner city attentions? The list seems endless.

I have already said that it would be quite wrong to idealize the last

generation and condemn the present one. After all, the last generation was itself in pilgrimage. To some extent it was called forth in reaction to the incredibly oppressive forces of the naive liberalism that dominated Europe and the western world from the end of the Victorian period until the Great Depression and the Second World War. As for the contemporary concern to change society and work through the implications of our faith in social, political and scientific arenas, one does not have to read much before discovering there have been other times in the history of evangelicalism when Christians used the powers of the media and the government to right social evils and to reform a decaying society. In the wake of the Evangelical Awakening, Christians took a lead in prison reform, the abolition of slavery, the introduction of trade unions, the preparation of codes that limited the abuse of children in mines and factories, and much more. Of course, that movement was divided: in this country, "free church" Christians tended to support the reforms, and Christians within the established church tended to oppose them: life is never very simple. But such reforms as were encouraged were often spearheaded by believers.

Perhaps it is a false impression, but it seems to me that many of those believers engaged in such transforming work out of the overflow of their personal godliness and commitment to prayer and evangelism. Doubtless some leaders engage the contemporary ethical questions out of the same Christian maturity, but I do not think it too harsh to suggest that there is a noticeable tendency amongst many contemporary leaders on these matters to focus all attention on the public and ethical issues at the expense of an equal or even greater focus on the need for personal regeneration, a firm grasp of elementary evangelical truth, a simple zeal in evangelism and the like. We are no longer in the defensive posture of the '40's and '50's:

we have matured, we have gained. But we seem to have lost something.

Perhaps it is our first love.

4. In the last generation, theological truth mattered. It mattered to evangelicals who were attempting to regain the territory they had lost; it mattered to those of other theological persuasions who were convinced that evangelicalism was narrow-minded and frequently ignorant. To some extent it still mattered, at least to a degree, to the press. But this has changed substantially. Of course there is still bitter theological opposition between evangelicals and those who dismiss evangelicalism; but by and large the sharpness of the dispute has dissipated. Sometimes this has been an advantage. A generation has risen up at universities and colleges that know so little of the gospel they are sometimes more open to it than an earlier generation that had received just enough to be inoculated against it. On the other hand, the sharpness of the issues are not so clear for many evangelicals anymore.

In the Church of England, one only has to read the papers of the Keele and Nottingham conferences to notice a drift from the stance that says evangelicalism is the gospel to the stance that will confess only that evangelicalism is one form of the gospel. The great god Pluralism stalks through the land, and takes captives in his train. It has become polite to hold to almost any position, so long as one does not suggest that any other position is wrong. This profound cultural commitment to pluralism is accompanied by secularization. Secularization does not diminish the numerical strength of biblical Christianity, nor does it necessarily diminish the fervour with which it is held. The process of secularization simply squeezes religious commitment to the periphery of life. The things that excite, challenge, and set the agenda for contemporary society are not

religious truth claims (evangelical or otherwise), but making money, sports, leisure time, job security, politics, various kinds of reform, the influence of the media. For many modern evangelicals, the truth of the gospel does not truly stand at the heart of their existence.

In America, a recent book by James Davison Hunter, Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation, has tried to plot some of these changes by detailed surveys of students in various post-secondary evangelical institutions. In my view, some of the questions put to these students were deeply flawed. Nevertheless, some of the questions were extremely astute, carefully chosen, and somewhat unnerving. The results are even more unnerving. Hunter concludes (page 213):

In closing, the story of conservative Protestantism in America is in some ways the story of the pilgrim in John Bunyan's epic allegory. In his journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, Bunyan's pilgrim stumbles into innumerable difficulties and temptations--from the Slough of Despond to Doubting Castle; from the Town of Vanity to the Valley of Humiliation; from Hill Difficulty to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. This is not to mention his encounters with such unsavory figures as Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Mistrust, Timorous, Pliable, and the like. Yet what our pilgrim (Evangelicalism) endures and Bunyan's does not is a long and sustained season in the Labyrinths of Modernity. Not only does he emerge a little dizzy and confused, but out of the experience our traveler is transformed. The pilgrim becomes a tourist. Though still headed toward the Celestial Country, he is now traveling with less conviction, less confidence about his path, and is perhaps more vulnerable to the worldly distractions encountered by Bunyan's pilgrim.

Have we gained, or have we lost?

5. The previous generation was frequently characterized by a profound suspicion of intellectual endeavour. This stance owed not a little to the profound conflicts between orthodoxy and "modernism" in the generation before that. The most farsighted of Christian leaders saw the need to regain the lost ground. Meanwhile there was on the whole a profound recognition that genuine spiritual advance was fueled by fervent prayer, continual self-examination and careful repentance, the transforming work of

the Spirit without whose energy no useful work could be done. The present generation is formally committed to the same beliefs, but the edge has been somewhat dulled. We have far more intellectual leaders; it is not obvious that we have more fervency in prayer and more self-conscious dependence upon the Spirit. We have gained, and we have lost.

6. A generation ago, many young clergy and others, both within and without the established church, were coming to terms with Reformed theology and buying up the works of Puritan writers who had been abandoned for a hundred years. This movement was aggressive, articulate, largely united, and on the cutting edge of evangelical life (at least in Great Britain). If they were sometimes lacking in tact, at least they were not lacking in zeal. Meanwhile there was no such thing as the charismatic movement: the appropriate label was 'Pentecostalism', and it was restricted to small denominations on the periphery of religious life in the nation.

Today this has changed dramatically. It is the charismatic movement that is aggressive, zealous, and growing. Many people who have more recently adopted Reformed theology have bought into the entire structure without the struggles and growth that the past generation experienced. The Reformed movement has split into several factions. There are different understandings of the relationship between the law of Moses and the new covenant, differing perspectives on the charismatic movement, continuing division on the sacraments/ordinances and on church government. Sometimes Reformed theology, in one or more of its contemporary branches, seems much more embattled and defensive, and much less catholic, than did the brand of Reformed theology advanced by the leaders of the last generation. I realize I shall get into difficulty for this judgment, not least because there are many variations within the movement. Some of the godliest and most

spiritually-minded leaders I know continue as paradigms of Christian maturity and godliness within the Reformed tradition, a tradition with which I would want to be identified. Nevertheless, the need to make simplifying generalizations will force many of us to acknowledge the justice of the charge.

Nor am I suggesting that the charismatic movement has been an unmitigated blessing. The abuses of Scripture, the painful divisiveness, the love of sensationalism, the corruptions of personal power have been obvious to many of us. But so also have we witnessed the mobilization of the laity, zeal for evangelism, concern for spiritual reality in individual lives, growth in holiness and praise, amongst many of our charismatic brothers in Christ. Whatever we make of these two movements, we are living in very different days from those of a mere generation ago. I find it very difficult to assess how much we have gained, and how much we have lost.

7. Our fathers tended to live in the light of the Lord's return. In many circles they fought over the details of eschatology, especially in North America and in Brethren and other circles in this country. The contemporary mood has eliminated most of the infighting; it has also eliminated most of the eagerness to see Jesus return. Doubtless we should be grateful that fewer people are willing to fight over whether or not you are a pre-tribulationsist; it is hard to find any cause for gratitude in the disturbing fact that many evangelicals cannot cry with the earliest Christians, 'Even so come, Lord Jesus.' We have gained little, and we have lost much.

8. In evangelical circles both within and without the established church, worship services a generation ago tended to be predictable in their form and structure. Today there is much more variation--more choruses, more



diversity, more participation, more of the unexpected. At its worst, the previous generation fell into formalism, dullness, mere ritual; at its best, the security of wise forms, often repeated, released Christians to engage in thoughtful praise and adoration, rather than disturbing them and distracting their attention with every new gimmick that came along. The diversity of the present environment, at its best, can provide a flexible framework for thoughtful leaders to encourage Christians to think through their faith in the context of corporate meetings for worship and instruction; at its worst, it panders to mere novelty, distracts the saints from profound reflection on God and his character and work, and introduces the entertainment factor as the primary device for holding people's attention. We have gained, and we have lost.

How shall we assess the cumulative changes that have transformed the face of evangelicalism in the course of one generation? We live and serve in an environment that is more secular, multi-cultural, multi-racial, and cynical than that of our fathers. Substantial gains reflect the goodness of God in maturing a movement and providing some growth where the beginnings were so small. But it is not clear that evangelicalism's agenda is now being constrained by the Word of God and prayer. As evangelicalism has grown, so has it dissipated an increasing proportion of its energies and become so diversified that many forms of the movement would not be recognized as evangelicalism by our fathers. The very diversity of the movement makes it all the more difficult to make a proper assessment. The polarizations amongst us as, important as they may be in the curbing of opposite extremes, have contributed little to doctrinal and spiritual maturity.

One thing, at least, should be clear to all thoughtful believers: we

are a long, long way from heaven-sent revival. Like Isaiah in his day, we need to understand our times and confess our own participation in the sins of the age, crying out to God that he would clean us and touch our lips with a live coal from the altar. May it please God to raise up men and women, whether many or few, who, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, will stand in the gap before God that he may not destroy us, and who will so lay hold of him by faith that they stand with Jacob crying, 'We will not let you go until you bless us.'