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Evangelicalism: The Latest State of the Party

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I wrote ten years ago, in the first issue of *Anvil*, about the 'state of the party'. I make no bones about it being a kind of celebration of both evangelicalism on the one hand, and of *Anvil*, just being forged itself out of some great heat, on the other. I half-cherished at that point a hope of writing something larger about the development of evangelical Anglicanism in the twentieth century. So my seeing of recent history in terms of successive waves of types of evangelicals was part of that larger analysis in which I was registering to myself an interest.

The desire to write a bigger book has now left me. It may be that other literary objectives have replaced it. But it is also true that a great gap has been abundantly filled by other books, and to that extent the very task of reviewing the past of evangelicals has changed since 1984.¹

So where have we gone in the last ten years? Here is my report:

Firstly, in broad terms evangelicals have developed in and with charismatic developments generally, and their ordinands in particular have

1 The following publications of the last ten years should be noted:

Randle Manwaring, *From Controversy to Coexistence: Evangelicals in the Church of England 1914-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) is a 225-page hardback, of which 150 pages deal with the postwar movement. There were three reviews of this in *Anvil* Vol. 3 no. 3 — and my own was the most brutal, though Michael Saward ran me close. I called it 'a book of newspaper clippings, kept in an uncertain filing system, and larded over with personal memories (so I guess) and some random reading'. It is highly disordered and omissive...

Michael Saward, *The Anglican Church Today: Evangelicals on the Move* (Mowbrays, London, 1987) is a popular large-format paperback of under 100 pages (70 covering the post-war period). However, it is written with not only the journalistic pace to be expected, but also intimate inside knowledge of a large number of the issues he charts. Its optimism (even restrained triumphalism) contrasts wonderfully with the tone of its companion volumes in the series, *Catholics in Crisis* and *Rediscovering the Middle Way*.

Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1989) is a 400-page hardback, but only 65 pages cover the last half-century, and so its treatment is necessarily compressed, as, e.g. in the four-page chapter on 'The Charismatic Movement'. I am unsure how well the author has known the people of whom he writes — but it may be sheer gain that he has been an onlooker from a little distance.

[continued overleaf]

emerged not only from 'renewed' Anglican parishes but also at times from a House Church or similar background. The charismatic subculture (I use the term neutrally and in a value-free way) is everywhere to be found among evangelical Anglicans — whether in *Songs and Hymns of Fellowship* or in Spring Harvest, in praise marches or in guitars, in 'prayer counselling' or testimony-type cheap literature. In addition, tapes from Pawson, Prince and Roger Foster are to be found everywhere. A host of conferences, rallies, assemblies, and holidays (of which Spring Harvest is clearly chief) cuts right across denominations and frequently involves Anglican evangelicals. In the midst of all this, it is unclear how 'tongues', prophecy and healing are doing — though they are regularly described (as though in a kind of shorthand?) as 'the gifts', and, in my experience, charismatics regularly invite others to pray for the gift of tongues (which I unhelpfully believe to be contrary to the whole spirit of 1 Corinthians 12).² It is also unclear how 'the baptism in the Holy Spirit' is currently valued, or how it is deemed to be recognized. We also need to incorporate into our account the effect of ten years of visits by John Wimber and the 'Kansas City prophets'. The lasting deposit from these visits would seem to be 'the word of knowledge' — a single phrase in Scripture which, with apparent certainty about its meaning, has become in its own circles a leading feature of contemporary church life. Lest I tempt myself into further controversy, I refer readers to the Doctrine Commission's report (in which I had a hand), *We Believe in the Holy Spirit* (CHP, 1991). This report, arising directly from the 1981 report, *The Charismatic Movement in the Church of England*, treats the charismatic movement as the most prominent demonstration of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church of England's life in the 1980s, and then addresses it with corresponding seriousness and does some contemporary charting and questioning.

Secondly, I observe that new evangelical bishops keep emerging. In 1987-

D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Unwin Hyman, London 1989): this is a 365 page large-format paperback — but its period is vast and its purview covers all the denominations, and hardly more than a dozen pages touch on issues central to the three books mentioned above.

Reflecting on these books prompts me to issue a warning about any recent history — you have a choice as your historian between the possibly uncomprehending (though fair-minded) observer from the grandstand and the embattled player whose account of the game comes entirely from his own relationship to the ball. Hylson-Smith is slightly uncomprehending; Saward is undoubtedly jockeying for possession of the ball. Manwaring has some experience of play — but not, I judge, enough — and, having retired to the grandstand, has failed to focus his binoculars. My warning is this: I must compare myself to a man whose every instinct is to be an embattled player, and to give that sort of account, but who, both at half-time and during a period of injury, has got inveigled briefly into the press box to pretend I am simply an observer.

- 2 In case this is unduly cryptic, perhaps I could expand a little. In 1 Cor. 12 (where alone 'speaking in tongues' is classified as a 'charisma') each member of the body has his or her *different* function, and must rejoice in that very given *difference* of one from another. To urge, insist, or even pray, that each Christian in turn shall engage in exercising the *same* 'gift' as each other — viz., glossolalia — cannot therefore be suspended upon anything in that chapter. I write this without prejudice to the issue of wherein the 'gift of tongues' consists — I have a sneaking suspicion that the exegesis may yet prove it to be 'the ability to speak German or suchlike'. That would put a question against much current glossolalia....

88 they were diocesans (George Carey, Peter Dawes, Pat Harris, and Michael Turnbull), four successive appointments all made within twelve months of each other. There has been no crop like that since, though George Carey did become Archbishop of Canterbury, Roy Williamson Bishop of Southwark, Chris Mayfield Bishop of Manchester, and most latterly Michael Turnbull Bishop of Durham. But in 1991-93 it has suddenly been the era of new evangelical suffragans — Roger Sainsbury, Hugo de Waal, Graham Dow, Ian Cundy, Gavin Reid, John Finney, Michael Gear, Colin Bennetts and David Hallatt. It is doubtful whether these men are yet setting the pace or making the policy, but at the very least they strengthen the loyalty of evangelicals to the existent Church of England — it is a great dissuasive from a blanket attack on what the wicked bishops and devious leadership of the Church of England are getting up to, when one stops to recall that they are actually one's own friends, friends whose judgment, integrity and spiritual priorities one would have honoured without hesitation before they became bishops. One may still wonder how soon they will make a healthful impact upon the episcopal subculture.³

Thirdly, the agenda for the Church of England has actually been changed in the last ten years, and evangelicals have had a strong hand in that. This is simply a question of evangelism. Mission England in 1984 itself spread into all sorts of places, many of them far beyond evangelical parishes or structures. In the process it put down a solid marker about the priority of evangelism. This was put in a right social context by *Faith in the City*, the launching of the Church Urban Fund, and the appointment (initially Pat Dearnley) of the Archbishop's Officer for Urban Priority Areas. On its heels came the 1988 Lambeth Conference call for a 'Decade of Evangelism', and some proper consequent pressure upon the dioceses to get plans into place for the Decade. Central officers were appointed for the Church of England (soon to be matched by Archbishop Carey's personal initiative in *Springboard*, the venture which has taken on 'the two Michaels' (Marshall and Green) to stimulate and teach about evangelism up and down the country as a resource for the whole Church of England). None of these was a wholly or partisanly 'evangelical' thrust — but, as the Church of England swung (creakingly, of course) towards the objective of evangelism, evangelicals not only found the official agenda pushing them in the right direction (which was an odd experience in itself), but also found themselves up in the

3 This is an unshaken backbench conviction of mine which being made a bishop did not greatly affect. I do not object strongly to wearing a mitre, when an anglo-catholic incumbent particularly wants me to in the parish of which he is incumbent (though he will have to recognize I see no point in it!); but I am saddened when bishops lapse into taking it for granted that they will always wear a mitre unless they are especially asked not to. A mitre has in any case *no* liturgical role (see the symposium I edited, *The Bishop in Liturgy* (Alcuin/GROW Joint Liturgical Study no. 6, Grove Books, 1988). But the mitre is only a start — I would like to see bishops query rings, pectoral crosses tucked in breast-pockets, signatures with a + preceding them, the use of see names as surnames, the formal 'My Lord' (and 'by divine permission Lord Bishop of Ulchester'); and even purple shirts, which I still at intervals sport. After all, gaiters have perished within living memory — other elements of the sub-culture also would if people started to omit them. And that is all before we start upon the bishop in liturgy.

vanguard helping set the route and round up the followers. And an interesting evangelistic fashion arose — the church-planting industry. This has seized headlines where (as in four well-known cases) parishes have tried to plant congregations across their own borders without the consent of the parishes thus colonized. But beneath the banner headlines there are *hundreds* of documented cases of Anglican church-plants which have been uncontroversial in their origins, as they have functioned within the parent parish, or have taken over another parish by agreement. And the story of the church-plant movement is almost entirely a story of evangelicals. They hold the lion's portion of the movement's shares.⁴ Perhaps in 1993-94 we have been witnessing a further catching fashion for evangelistic evangelicals — the splendidly coded 'Willow Creek'. The code denotes a Chicago area church of that name — a church which has concluded that outsiders will come to church — and they do — if the Sunday event is made 'user-friendly' for them. This in turn has been encapsulated in the slogan 'A Church for the Unchurched'. Like 'church-planting', it has had its moments in England as flavour of the month.⁵

Fourthly, there has been a growing division within evangelicalism. In my article ten years ago I pointed out that growth in numbers opened up the likelihood of differences of opinion, and that a mature movement (or party!) would recognize that and find ways of handling it. Total cohesion and monolithic agreement come with the shoulder-to-shoulder experience of the last ditch; come out of the last ditch (going forwards) and people fan out, occupy different places at distances from each other — and start to sigh for the close comradeship of that last ditch. And it has to be confessed that the party spirit (in its partisan sense) is best fostered by a truly resilient and indestructible paranoia. Evangelicals with roots in the 1950s or before were well nourished on such paranoia, and have thus been equipped, if they were so tempted to carry forward the message of the last ditch into the 1980s and 1990s.

I suppose that ten years ago the seats of such evangelical reaction were to be found in the Church Society and, quite differently, at St Helen's, Bishopsgate. The Church Society exhibited its colours to its own constituency when in 1983 it sacked the then editorial board of *Churchman*, and inadvertently stimulated the forging of *Anvil* (a story worth recalling as the newcomer enters its second decade of non-paranoid evangelicalism). In one way or another Church Society apparently took steps in the 1985 and 1990

4 Perhaps I may be permitted also to tell a story about another development. In my Grove Books capacity I was approached by the Church Army in 1986 to see if we could run a joint CA/Grove series of Grove Booklets on Evangelism. The CA put up a £10,000 interest-free loan, the CA nominees joined with some enthusiasts to form the Evangelism Group, and the Series has produced four titles a year since 1988 almost all still in print, and quite a few of them (including one on church-planting) going to a second edition.

5 I am very ready to hear that this *works* in England, but I am not yet persuaded. I suspect (though I have not checked) that the sociology of religion in the Willow Creek region is different from what I encounter in the Medway area — in other words, a very high proportion of the householders in America were themselves in church and/or Sunday School a few years back, and recapturing them may be much easier than with our three-or-more-generations secularized population.

General Synod elections to get hard-line evangelicals elected to the House of Laity. It describes itself in the *Church of England Yearbook* as 'the senior evangelical society'. And it got itself headlines in 1993 when it sought a High Court order to prevent the ordination of women to the presbyterate being authorized by Measure, the contention being that this change was so fundamental that an Act of Parliament alone could legally achieve the result, as Measures were intended to provide legislation that accepted the unchanged doctrinal basis of the Church of England.⁶

The other locus of evangelical reaction was St Helen's, Bishopsgate, a flourishing centre for city-workers, indeed a place where hundreds have been converted and built up. There had been rumbles from Dick Lucas in the late seventies about the wishy-washy stance of evangelicals on General Synod; there has been constant sniping for twenty years against charismatics; and the place has given itself an image as separatist. The development of the last ten years has been the formal founding in 1986 of the 'Proclamation Trust', a society devoted to the traditional evangelical priority of 'preaching the word'. Whilst its aims have been stated positively — i.e. in proclamation terms — those who have been fostered and nurtured in its conferences and other groupings have been experienced in a very negative way by other Christians, including other evangelical Anglicans. At the Theological Colleges (notably Wycliffe and Cranmer Hall) they have often formed an *ecclesiola*; and if the story that they have at times declined to attend chapel services on the grounds that the daily offices did not include preaching is *not* true, well, at least the readiness of others to believe and re-tell the story indicates the negative image they have conveyed. I cannot tell whether they

6 The application was rejected only one day before the debate in the Commons on the Measure. It ranks as a most bizarre feature of Rip Van Winkle evangelicalism — and it came, it must be remembered, when not a few evangelicals (amongst whom I am one) were deploring the fact that the Commons had any role at all in the authorizing of the ordination of women. It felt as though the Church Society had learned nothing and forgotten nothing since the great victory of 1928, when the Commons proved to evangelicals that they had a better grasp of protestant truth than the Church Assembly had — thus entrenching in evangelical minds the vital importance of the establishment and the great need for the follies of the Church leaders to be corrected by the theological wisdom of Parliament. In this particular case, the Church Society drew upon its 1928 mindset in a mindblowing series of suppressed propositions:

- (i) the ordination of women is wrong;
- (ii) if Synod cannot see it, then Parliament is the place to decide;
- (iii) we must not simply picket MPs with our views, as that might still leave the legislation at risk of being passed;
- (iv) we must be ready therefore to tangle the Parliamentary scene in such a way as to make it an ordinary Bill, seeking Parliamentary time from the government for its introduction, and then having three readings in each House.
- (v) we have good hopes therefore that in such a case the procedure would prove so difficult as to delay the issue indefinitely;
- (vi) we are so sure we are acting righteously and on behalf of the evangelicals in particular that we should be ready to risk — and lose — a six-figure sum in pursuit of this changed procedure;
- (vii) this kind of end justifies these kinds of means....

Whether Church Society has exhausted its funds I do not know; but its credibility must certainly be into overdraft.

have recreated a *theology* of monologue preaching at a time when others have been almost desperately looking for other means of communication, but again the impression is of taking themselves very seriously as the last upholders of true evangelicalism when everyone else has gone soft-edged or soft-bellied. I would add that 'taking themselves very seriously' should be questioned at the level of principle, a principle of Christian lifestyle.

What do I mean by this 'level of principle'? Why, I submit that no-one can live at peace in a comprehensive church and both propagate his or her own theological priorities, and live in the interim with other people's, unless that person has a richly developed sense of humour. In particular a Christian sense of humour will enable the possessor:

- (a) to laugh at himself or herself — and even his or her religious self (this is difficult to do if you consider you must project the seriousness of your own beliefs, but the two are not wholly incompatible);
- (b) to show the other person that he or she is still willing to *learn* (a rare virtue in disputants);
- (c) to grease the works in all other forms of communication.

The sense of humour is really tested by the last-ditch. All of us turn ugly, shrill, or unsmiling when we deem ourselves under oppression. And so those who most naturally gravitate to the last-ditch — and dig one anew if none exists or no cause for one exists — tend most easily to come across as humourless. The 'chip on the shoulder' syndrome arises in those who believe that they are being persecuted without cause, and who can laugh at neither themselves nor their supposed oppressors when under that persecution. And the moment a chip on the shoulder is observed, communication starts to decline.

Well, that is an excursus. If the background of evangelical reaction lies somewhere in or near the Proclamation Trust (which is not specifically Anglican), then the foreground undoubtedly belongs to Reform. Reform was brought to birth after the General Synod approved the ordination of women as presbyters in November 1992, and, although its initial statements did not make it clear that the movement stood against such ordinations as its prime task, yet its being occasioned by that decision was symptomatic of its stance. The Synod decision may have been more of a last straw than a sole test of apostasizing, but the relationship of the decision and the formation of Reform looks fairly close.

It is perhaps appropriate to ask what cumulative irritants apart from women presbyters could have led to this. I set out some impressions I have gleaned of issues and provocations which have been contributing to it:

- 1 All truly liberal effusions in the Church of England irritate. It is not only that the Bishop of Durham has loomed over the scene unrebuked by authority all the last years — it is also that the 'Sea of Faith' and kindred aberrations have arisen at intervals to swell our indiscipline.
- 2 There has been considerable agitation in the ranks in relation to the women presbyters issue about the apparent care being taken of dissident anglo-catholics and the apparent indifference towards evangelicals. (To my knowledge, there have been determined presentations in the House

of Bishops on behalf of the position of evangelicals opposed to the Measure — but these opponents have lacked the reassurance of having actual allies in the House, for all the evangelical bishops have been visible supporters of women's ordination.)

- 3 They have concluded that the general run of evangelical Anglicans are intellectually and morally flabby. They do not see those who involve themselves in Commissions and Committees, those made Archdeacon or Bishop, as standing firm for unchanging truth any longer. Thus the sheer numerical growth of evangelicalism is to them a gaudy deceit; in truth there has been a receding from objective standards of the gospel, and few of granite-like integrity remain. (This of course makes it very hard for them to respect the bishops known as evangelical, and very hard for them to believe that such bishops genuinely represent a gospel interest in the House of Bishops or in their own dioceses.)
- 4 They observe the Church of England becoming ever more diocesanized, and in protest insist all the more loudly that the local congregation is the local church, that it should have much greater control over its own finances and policy, and that, if necessary, some of the diocesan 'requests' for money would have to be resisted. This resistance would do three things at once; it would save giving financial underwriting to unworthy objects; it would enable more money to be given from the parish to well vetted and worthy objects; and it would establish the point that the parish has a viable and well-financed life of its own, and is not the diocese's poodle — or milch-cow. (The point has of course been reinforced by the prospective financial blizzards which we are told will blow upon the dioceses as the Commissioners reduce grants for stipends by some £12 million in 1995 and £16 million in 1996 — the equivalent of present stipends for 2,000 clergy!) It is, of course, relatively well-off parishes which make the running in this kind of policy, but it is an objective fact that evangelicals have taught and practised sacrificial giving as part of discipleship with more effect than most others, and they are therefore often in the position of both being asked to contribute more heavily than their neighbours, and also of having little confidence in what will then happen to the cash.
- 5 They are marked by high certainty about their cause. Again, this is not unusual in last-ditch situations, where the very context makes it hard to say 'Could I possibly be mistaken?' But it begs the question as to whether evangelical Anglicans should actually be looking for last ditches.

It must be remembered that, as far as I can see, the Reform stance is not shared, not only by evangelical bishops, but also by the evangelical theological staffs and the general run of evangelical Anglicans round the country. The very indifference of the rest of us to the dangers they see so plainly is part of the reason for their endemic pessimism about the Church of England as an institution. On the other hand, pessimism itself and a persecution complex, whilst they help cement people into warlike postures, might need to be challenged by the gospel itself.

What is certain is that all have got to keep in full (and 'not taking myself

too seriously') contact with each other. And somehow the talk has got to penetrate beyond 'how can we live together in peace, and even be mutually supportive?' to 'what are the gospel and biblical principles which determine our ecclesiology, and thus direct our practice? Can we possibly find common godly springs of action which will make our being together not artificially adopted in an outward way, but truly come from the heart?'

Beyond that sort of issue — and it does seem to me to be pressing — there is a major job of national and worldwide evangelism waiting to be done. That very prospect should discipline our internal tensions and disputes. Evangelicals know *where*, in the economy of God, their energies should be spent.

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