Battle for the Mind

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Introduction

Anglican evangelicals have been far more influenced by non-Christian ideas than is realized, often in a subtle fashion. They have perhaps unconsciously adopted certain ways of thinking, values and attitudes which originate not so much from the Word of God but from the World which stands in opposition to God, although such ideas may be given a Christian guise.

Of course this is not anything new; in varying degrees it has always been so amongst God's people. Given this fact it is somewhat anomalous, therefore, that evangelicals should fail to be alert in order to detect and counter trends which are at variance with Scripture. The Apostle Paul's parting words to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:28 should be sufficient to cause us to take this responsibility more seriously than we do:

> Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. *Even from your own number* men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

We must allow the full implications of this passage to come home to us with some force. From *within* these congregations, one's nurtured and taught by the apostle Paul himself, what we may, at the risk of being anachronistic, call 'evangelical' congregations, there will come men who will distort the truth. The question of sincerity or motivation is not an issue, it is the fact that such a thing can occur that is Paul's concern. How justified that concern was is born out by what we read in 1 and 2 Timothy, that within a generation this prophecy was sadly fulfilled.

In his first letter, the Apostle John pinpoints what the root of the problem is within his context—2:18:

> Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us. For if they belonged to us, they would have remained with us.

Then in 4:1ff.

> Dear friends do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they come from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world . . . They are from the world and therefore speak the viewpoint of the world and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

Here are teachers claiming new insights from God which are experientially based. The way John counters this is not by appealing to some other experience, one more authentic, but by appealing to the truth—the apostolic testimony which forms John's opening words in chapter 1 'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.' (v. 3). What is more, one cannot help but notice how strong and intemperate John's language is in referring to such persons and their teaching as 'anti-Christ'. Why does John use this sort of terminology? The prefix 'anti' could mean that what is taught takes the place of Christ or stands in opposition to Christ, which amounts to much the same thing, and so constitutes an accurate *description* of what is occurring. But it is also an indication of the *seriousness* with which John views such developments which he claims are in line with the 'world's view'. After all, nothing less than the integrity of the Gospel is at stake and the eternal well-being of men and women which depends upon that Gospel. The issue remains the same today—the health of the Gospel and the health of the church. Evangelicals are not in the business of preserving a 'tradition' called evangelicalism; the real burden of concern is with that which evangelicalism claims to embody, *viz.*, the integrity of the Gospel understood in its richest and broadest sense; what Paul calls the 'whole counsel of God'. It is this which is in danger of being compromised and distorted in various ways from within evangelicalism itself, a situation which needs to be faced with humility and courage.

The *locus* of the *battle*

We are engaged in a spiritual battle which centres on the mind— a battle for presuppositions, beliefs and values which in turn determine our behaviour. The passage which focuses this truth for us most clearly is Romans 12:2

> Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Cranfield draws out the implications of these verses in these terms:

> In the situation in which he is placed by the gospel, the Christian may and must, and—by the enabling of the Holy Spirit—can, resist the pressures to conformity with this age. And this command is something which he needs to hear again and again. It must ever be a great part of the content of Christian exhortation, so long as the church is 'militant here on earth'. For the pressures to conformity are always present, and always strong and

> insidious-so that the Christian often yields quite unconsciously. . . . However he is to allow himself to be transformed continually, remoulded and remade . . . and it is by the renewing of your mind that this transformation is effected.[1]

The overall context of Romans makes it plain that such a renewal occurs by attending the Word of God applied by the Spirit of God in the church of God which issues in sacrificial service.

In his perceptive book *The Gravedigger File*, Os Guinness comments:

> Christians are always more culturally short-sighted than they realize. They are often unable to tell, for instance, where their Christian principles leave off and their cultural perspectives begin. What many of them fail to ask is 'Where are we coming from and what is our own context?'[2]

That is the question this paper seeks to consider. As Anglican evangelicals, where are we coming from? What are some of the major trends in thinking in our society which are manifesting themselves within Anglican evangelicalism? It is self-evident that there is no simple cause- and- effect relationship here. The claim is not being made that patterns of thinking and certain beliefs are being adopted consciously, as if a deliberate decision is being made to put the Bible to one side or subsume the teaching of the Bible to current, popular thought. The process is often more subtle and gradual than that. The more modest suggestion proposed is that the prevailing intellectual climate—what is called 'modernity'— is more conducive to certain ways of thinking and behaving than others of a particular type.

Discerning the trends

What follows is a sketch of the prevailing currents of thought which are present in our society and which appear to find expression within Anglican evangelicalism.

First of all there is **secularism** or 'trad. is bad and the latest is the greatest'. This is characterized by a debunking of history and of what is not *immediate*. It is the *process* of secularization which gives rise to the predominating secular *mentality*. The process is the gradual freeing of sectors of society and culture from the decisive influence of religious ideas and institutions. The secular mentality on the other hand, is well described by Harvey Cox, *viz.*, that 'Man turns his attention away from worlds beyond to this world and this time.'[3] In other words, this world—the world of sight, sound, taste and touch— is all that there is; or in a diluted form it is the most important aspect of reality. The net effect is that religious ideas and language become less meaningful and the church is marginalized, while concerns relating to 'this world' predominate and set the agenda for people's thinking and action.

There are two negative responses to secularism. First, there is the intended secularization of the Gospel, which, while retaining traditional

theological language, provides new content and emphases, usually of a political nature. The various liberation theologies of Guttierez and Cone are obvious examples of this. In a concern to make Christianity 'relevant' and 'meaningful' the net effect is to transmute it into something else.

But what of evangelicals? Are there signs of a drifting in this general direction? For an evangelical, one would perhaps expect the Gospel to the defined in terms of Christ, the atonement, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and reconciliation with God. But according to one Anglican evangelical writer:

> The good news we love is defined in the Scripture as good news to the (physically and socially) poor; and that means that what the good news means to poor Christians (in scripture and today) should set the criteria for focussing what the good news means to others.[4]

The fact that it would be impossible to find such a definition or focussing of the gospel in such terms in either Acts or the epistles seems to have escaped the writer's notice. How can one explain such a development in thought which is linked to an inadequate view of the kingdom of God which, for this author is an 'old rule affirmed', *viz.*, 'God rules'?[5] A clue as to what the answer might be is given in a statement made by the same writer in a subsequent article:

> There are two sources of theology. One is the Bible and the Christian tradition that has developed from it. The second is Christian experience.[6]

While one may go so far as to agree that 'Christian experience' in its widest sense may form the context in which theology is done and to some extent determine its shape and application, surely there is only one *source* which provides the material for theology and that is Scripture. Even the tradition built upon it is itself the product of the theological enterprise the fount of which is the Bible and it needs to be tested by the Bible.

The danger is to adopt what Francis Schaeffer in his book *The Great Evangelical Disaster* calls the 'blue-jeans mentality'. In expressing concern about the accommodation in which evangelicals are engaging, he likens it to some of the young people who used to come to L'Abri wearing 'blue jeans' as an expression of their rebellion but which in fact was a mark of their accommodation because *everyone* was wearing blue jeans! Therefore he writes:

> What they [accommodating evangelicals] are saying is this: 'We are the "new evangelicals", the "open evangelicals"; we have thrown off our cultural isolation and anti-intellectualism of the old fundamentalists.' But what they have not noticed is that they have nothing to say which stands in clear confrontation and antithesis to the surrounding culture. It is so easy to be a radical in the wearing of blue jeans when it fits in with the general climate of wearing blue jeans.

However, if the first response to secularism is to accommodate the Scriptures to the prevailing trends of the day, the second is to withdraw, which leads to the next heading —**privatization** or 'You in your small corner'. Here questions of belief and behaviour are withdrawn from the public sphere into the domain of 'private life'. Religion, therefore, is something 'very personal', which in practice means that it is not open to discussion and scrutiny. This is the end route of the worst excesses of pietism which is still a great temptation for evangelicals. What is more, because belief is largely seen in our English culture as being restricted to the private world, Christianity is then viewed as being little more than an optional hobby with no universal truth claim.

The pressure is certainly on to quarantine religious belief and morality to the world of the individual and the world of 'values' in contrast to the world of 'facts'. This pressure is given added potency when linked to **pluralism** or 'Variety is the spice of life'. By pluralism one does not simply mean the sociological fact that we live in a society made up of a plurality of cultures and beliefs, but rather to the *ideology* of pluralism that such a variety of beliefs is good, reflecting a certain understanding of truth and reality. We now find ourselves in a situation in this country in which there is no one substantially shared world view, instead there is a whole host of what Peter Berger calls 'plausibility structures' —beliefs and practices which enable people to try and make sense of life. When one contemplates the tremendous variety of religions and philosophies now on offer today, many in popular form, the result can be quite bewildering producing what can be called the 'fairground effect'; just as the old fairgrounds had a number of stalls each with a man clamouring for people's attention, so today there are promoters of different beliefs calling out from every quarter. Therefore the question arises: which do you choose? Which in turn begs the prior question: how do you choose? Some, of course, would ask whether such questions have any place. John Hick for example would have us see religions as being different but complementary, all forming part of the universe of faiths.

However, pluralism along the lines just described has its advocates within evangelicalism. Not in terms of Christianity and other religions, but in terms of evangelicalism and other traditions within the Church of England, what is sometimes referred to as 'internal ecumenism'.

In an article which appeared in *The Church of England Newspaper* a couple of years ago one Anglican evangelical urges a more positive approach by evangelicals to those of other traditions and writes:

> As evangelicals it is important for us to ask where we draw the line. At what point are we to see ourselves out of communion with those whom we disagree? When Paul and Peter disagreed fundamentally over the issue of circumcision, the latter had a defective understanding of the Gospel of salvation. What bound them together was not the fact that they agreed with each other. They clearly didn't. Presumably they were bound together because, as Paul urged the factious and disagreeable Corinthians, they were

> 'the body of Christ'. It was their common allegiance to Jesus as Lord that held them together. Instead of writing Peter off and refusing to have anything to do with him, Paul urgently engages in debate about salvation. St. Luke tells us that those who were insisting on circumcision were nevertheless 'believers' (Acts 15:1 and 5). Their understanding of the doctrine of salvation was wrong. Yet they were still 'believers' —in our terms, Christians. Paul was able to persuade the errant Peter about the truth of the Gospel as a fellow believer . . . We should argue the truth of the Gospel with a commitment to the unity of all believers in Jesus even when we question their understanding of something as fundamental as the nature of salvation. As an evangelical I am continually disappointed by the questioning of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There are good reasons for believing the biblical account . . . But when I meet Christians who question the Biblical account I engage them in debate not as enemies but as believers in Jesus, who like Peter, have failed to grasp sufficiently the doctrine of salvation.[8]

However one may sympathize with the intentions of the writer one cannot be but concerned by both the confused thinking and careless exegesis exhibited as well as the logical consequences of what is proposed.

In the first place, a number of categories of people are grouped together without making much needed qualifying distinctions. The common factor linking them all is what can be called 'problems of belief', but the groupings must be teased out and distinguished to avoid theological confusion.

First, there are those who are true believers but who may be suffering a spiritual lapse or failure of nerve. Peter at Antioch falls into this category. In Galatians 2, the issue is not that Peter and Paul were disagreeing over the question of circumcision but over table fellowship with Gentiles (Gal. 2:12). It is clear from Acts 11 that by that time some agreement had been reached that Gentiles belonged to the church, therefore what Paul is charging Peter with is inconsistency and not unbelief (Gal. 2:14). Peter, being true to character, seems to have weakened at this point and had given way to what Paul calls '*false* brothers'. Paul saw the serious consequences that this sort of behaviour would eventually have and was forced to have a public showdown over the issue. Therefore it was not that Peter and Paul were at odds about the nature of salvation, as suggested in the above article, but that Peter was failing to marry belief to behaviour.

Secondly, there are those who are spiritually immature, like the Corinthian Christians. Paul seeks to correct this and we too must help those struggling in this way.

But there is a third category which the writer seems to ignore, *viz.*, those who out of conviction hold to non-apostolic beliefs and teach them. Acts 15 is mentioned in the article, but there is an error of fact, for v. 1 does *not* say that the folk who went to Antioch were 'believers'. Luke uses the term *'tines'* [some] as if to deliberately create a distance between those men and the church. Certainly in v. 5 we have former Pharisees who are called believers insisting on circumcision, but that is quite understandable: after

all, former ingrained beliefs cannot be shaken off overnight. But once the decision is made that circumcision is not necessary for Gentiles, although for the sake of brotherly love certain concessions are made, where would such men have stood had they *continued* to insist on circumcision? Would they not have come under the *anathema* of Galatians 1:8? Paul's argument suggests that the answer would be in the affirmative.

The writer appears to be saying that it is possible to have a valid Christian unity *apart* from the Gospel, especially when he writes that we 'should argue the truth of the Gospel with a commitment to unity of all believers in Jesus even when they question something as fundamental as salvation.' But surely the New Testament's requirement for being a believer, and therefore of being united in Christ, is an embracing of Christ by faith? Otherwise one is forced into the unbiblical position of believing that one can be a Christian without accepting Christ or in some cases even repudiating the biblical view of acceptance with God.

It is quite irresponsible, both with regard to the truth of God and the eternal well-being of people, simply to assume that because, say, a fellow minister 'believes in Jesus' (although not necessarily as the Redeeming Son of God) he is a Christian. In the context of the liberal-evangelical debate it is not a question of there being an entity called 'the Gospel' with two different ways of viewing it. Rather there are different and rival concepts of what the Gospel is—in Paul's language it is 'another Gospel'. Greshem Machen's argument in his *Christianity and Liberalism*[9] has yet to be refuted. Full-blooded liberalism is not a version of Christianity: it is a different religion.

This pluralistic mindset is, one would suspect, the dominant one in Anglican evangelicalism today and will eventually be its undoing.

It is now only a short step from pluralism to **relativism** or 'That's just your way of looking at it'. The issue of relativism is philosophically quite subtle and one would refer to Jeffrey Stout's helpful handling of this in his *Ethics After Babel*[10]. However, at the popular level it is characterized by the notion that objective truth is out. Nothing, especially in the areas of belief and morality, can be claimed with certainty and as being universally binding. What is true for one person is not necessarily true for someone else. Alan Garfinkel's response to the relativist is telling when he says: 'I know where you are coming from but, you know, Relativism isn't true-for-me.' What is 'true', therefore, is relative to one's culture, upbringing, gender and even churchmanship. How many an argument has thought to have been settled by the retort: 'Well, you *would* say that, because you are an evangelical'? C.S. Lewis referred to this as 'Bulverism' and effectively made short work of it.

Are evangelicals in danger of opening the door to a relativism of this kind? In a recent paper entitled 'How can the Bible be Authoritative?'[11] one Anglican evangelical scholar certainly appears to be prising that door open. There are many things one could say about this paper, not least about the acerbic tone in which reference is made to 'evangelicals', presumably mainline evangelicals. However, it is the main proposal and

its consequences which are our concern. It is argued that the primary category for our understanding of the Bible is 'story' or 'narrative' which has an authority of its own. To help us grasp how this idea may be worked out in the life of the church the following model is proposed:

> Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to be prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it is felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive experienced actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and *who would then be told to work out the fifth act for themselves.*'[12].

This model is then applied to the Bible with Creation being Act 1, the Fall Act 2, Israel Act 3, Jesus Act 4, and the New Testament as the first scene in the fifth act. *But*, and this is the critical point, *we are still living in the fifth act and the church is called to 'offer something between an improvisation and actual performance of the final act'*, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of course. How, then, is the Gospel to be communicated? Certainly not in terms of 'timeless truths', which the writer says is precisely what we should not translate the Bible into, but in terms of a 'story' which people are to be caught up in so that we 'make our unique, unscripted and yet obedient improvisation'.[13]

Apart from this thesis marking the end of the belief in the finality and sufficiency of Scripture as traditionally understood, there are no adequate checks that what someone would consider to be 'improvising' the Christian faith is in fact the Christian faith. There are two routes which this suggestion opens up. One is the route of Newman and some form of Catholicism. The other is relativism, so that David Jenkins can improvise in one way and John Stott in another and both could claim that what they are doing is broadly in line with God's story the Bible. If it is objected that the way of checking whether such improvisation by the likes of Jenkins or Wiles is authentically Christian is by referring back to Scripture, so that while they claim Jesus is not God incarnate we may say Scripture indicates that he is; they can reply on the basis of this writer's own argument, that the Bible is not that kind of book, it is not a theological compendium, but a story which is incomplete with one's beliefs fitting into it in a way that is no worse or better than anyone else's.

Pluralism flows into relativism and relativism easily spawns **subjectivism**: 'I rule, O.K.'. Here one wonders whether recent interests by evangelicals in certain aspects of 'Catholic spirituality', and particularly mysticism, is an indication of this. The use of Scripture to encourage 'visualization' is a disturbing trend which calls for a critical response.

We are acutely aware that our society is saturated with **hedonism** or as

David Cook likes to put it 'Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we diet'. The love of pleasure, good feelings—those are the things that are sought and offered. But we need to ask to what extent is the church pandering to this? Not only in its evangelism 'Are you unhappy? —come to Jesus', but in its worship, has hedonism taken hold? One thinks of one evangelical church which alternates its mid-week meeting between prayer and bible study and a praise and prayer. The former attracts twenty people, the latter sixty. What values and outlook does this reflect? The Puritan notion of Christians having their 'losses and crosses' is quite alien to many today.

Finally, there is **materialism** or 'It's as real as I feel'. This can be understood in two ways. The first is philosophically, that only what is open to the senses and empirical investigation is 'real'—seeing is believing. The other is a more general intuition that significance and security are to be found in possessions—possessing a good home or healthy body. John Wimber in *Power Evangelism*[14] challenges Western Christians for adopting a post-modern world view and so being sceptical of the miraculous. But this argument can be turned around, for it could be asked whether a dominant concern for healing, health and material well-being as well as the need to demonstrate the Gospel's power in miraculous signs and wonders (seeing is believing), are themselves reflecting a western materialistic mindset rather than a biblical one. Even a cursory consideration of the place of signs and wonders in Jesus' ministry as presented in both Mark and John's Gospels would suggest that it is.

Such moulding forces are not only operative within *Anglican* evangelicalism of course. In a paper entitled 'Mission in the Face of Modernity'[15], Os Guinness contrasts Lausannes I and II:

> Under the influence of the 'terrible trio' (advertising, television and pop-culture), modernization has caused profound changes in public discourse: above all a shift from word to image, action to spectacle, exposition to entertainment, truth to feeling, conviction to sentiment and authoritative utterance to discussion and sharing. Most of these wider cultural shifts have been well exemplified here [Lausanne II] and the general diminishing of any sense of 'Thus saith the Lord' has been marked.

If we are still left in any doubt about the moulding effect of such forces upon Anglican evangelicalism such doubt may be dispelled by a consideration of this short extract describing a special service held in one large 'evangelical' church in the north of England:

> The Nine O'Clock service has taken a conscious step of distancing itself from a narrow view of things charismatic, drawing its identity holistically rather than being identified with any one tradition. It identifies itself with the orthodox and catholic traditions. Moreover it has opened itself to the challenge of rational engagement with the world, and discourse with the liberal tradition. It is exposing its practices and theology to the rigours of critical scholarship. It has a catholic-orientated sacramental theology and has majored on the use of the symbolic in worship, yet it contains some of

> the most modern expressions of worship in the world. It has sought to establish a radical community life, and to align itself with the poor.'[16]

Here all the different streams seem to flow into one pool.

The way ahead

How can such ideas gain credence? Part of the answer is that there is some measure of truth in all of them. There is a legitimate pluralism among evangelicals; we acknowledge a measure of relativism in our approach to Scripture and its application—the question of feet washing for instance; even hedonism perversely reflects the notion that God has created material things for us to enjoy (1 Tim. 4:4). Where things go wrong and error evolves is when ideas which have a legitimacy in a certain context begin to occupy an improper place in our thinking, becoming exaggerated and disproportionate to the detriment of fundamental Christian truths. One definition of a weed is a troublesome plant which is a problem by virtue of its growing in an unwanted place and crowding out other more wholesome plants. That is a fair picture of what seems to be happening in the church today.

What should our response be? At least the following three things: own up, speak out and stand together.

We need to own up that things are not as they should be. We have to face, however painful it may be, that some have veered off course and that perhaps the alleged strength of evangelicalism in the Church of England is rather deceptive, being more apparent than real.

Secondly, we need to speak out. Not simply by reacting to events but by creating opportunities to state positively and unashamedly where we stand and refuse to be manoeuvred into positions which compromise our evangelical beliefs. However, when we do speak we need to do so in love and out of concern for the glory of God and the well-being of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thirdly, mainline evangelicals need to stand together. Can we not think of ways whereby we can go beyond talking and complaining and move on to doing things to encourage and support one another? Is it time for 'new wineskins' for such evangelicals?

The days ahead are critical, may God give us the grace and wisdom to proceed cautiously but boldly.

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NOTES

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11 N.T. Wright, 'How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?' *Vox Evangelica* XXI, 1991.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 18 (italics mine).
13 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
14 J. Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, Chapter 5.
15 Os Guinness, 'Mission in the Face of Modernity' in *The Gospel in the Modern World*, Edd. Eden and Wells, Inter-Varsity Press, 1991.
16 Robert Warren and Chris Brain, 'Crisis Time for Revival' *Anglicans For Renewal*, Vol. 44, 1991.