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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Beyond Belief

What makes an Evangelical an Evangelical? Or better, what can someone who claims to be an Evangelical deny or refuse to believe and still be recognised as belonging to this family of Christians? These questions surface from time to time, usually when some prominent individual or organisation changes its stance on an issue and, by so doing, calls its doctrinal soundness into question. Over the years there have been a great many people who, for one reason or another, have abandoned the Evangelical constituency for what they see as greener, or at least freer, pastures and awareness of this has made those who have remained faithful to their heritage wary of new disputes.

To some extent, of course, Evangelical unease in this area is a result of our peculiar heritage. Modern Evangelicalism developed in the eighteenth century revivals and was, in part, a reaction to the ‘dead orthodoxy’ which reigned at that time in so much of the Protestant world. In those days there were men who believed every jot and tittle of their respective creeds and confessions, but who lacked the one thing needful—a living relationship with Christ. Some of them, unfortunately, were more prepared to find fault with others not quite of their persuasion than to bring the Gospel to a dying world, an inversion of priorities which left a bad taste in the mouth of the early revivalists. Then too, the leaders of the Evangelical revival were not united in their beliefs. Though most of them were clergymen in the Church of England, at a time when that meant subscription *ex animo* to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, there were still great differences between people like John Wesley, who thought that predestination was a terrible doctrine and a serious bar to preaching the gospel, and George Whitefield, who insisted that it was the very basis for evangelism. To some extent, a common experience of personal salvation papered over these cracks, but the underlying problems remained and it was not really possible for these two men (or for their respective followers) to work together for long.

By the nineteenth century things had settled down somewhat, and there were

men of definite Evangelical persuasion in all the major denominations, including the newly-formed Methodists. There were also perceived dangers from without—the growth of unbelief, the resurgence of Roman and of Anglo-Catholicism, and the rise of a liberal form of Christianity which often seemed little different from unitarianism.

At the opposite end of the spectrum there was a kind of sectarianism which took the Reformation cry of *sola Scriptura* to a new extreme, and claimed to dispense with any form of creed or confession altogether. The Plymouth Brethren, the Disciples of Christ and various other, smaller ‘restorationist’ groups appealed only to a few, but they were often highly educated people who exercised a much greater influence than their numbers alone would have warranted. Most of these would later be induced to co-operate with other Evangelicals, though their resistance to systematic theology has sometimes had a negative effect on the parachurch organisations to which they have belonged and contributed, making it difficult for those bodies to adopt or enforce a clear and specific doctrinal standard.

In the 1920s there was a great falling-out among those calling themselves ‘Evangelical’, with the more liberal element merging into the mainstream Protestant denominational ambiance and only a conservative ‘rump’ left to carry the traditional banner of revival. In those years there were two doctrines above all which distinguished the conservatives from the rest—the full, verbal inspiration of Holy Scripture and the penal substitutionary atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. Failure to accept these meant exclusion from the Evangelical world, small and beleaguered as it then was. For many years hardly anyone outside the fold noticed, but the Evangelicals’ dedication to the truth as they saw it and to evangelism in key sectors of society, changed the picture after 1945. In a single generation, the despised conservative Evangelicals had again become the largest and most active wing of the church, and the temptation to split presented itself once more.

At first, there were only the usual departures from the ranks, as career-minded theologians and would-be bishops found it advisable to cut their ties to such an embarrassing subsection of the Christian world. But in the last few years, that tendency seems to have given way to something else. Nowadays, it seems that people who a generation ago would simply have left the Evangelical world

behind, are claiming the right to stay in the fellowship, even though their beliefs are a far cry from what Evangelicals have traditionally regarded as acceptable. This tendency appeared first of all in the field of biblical studies, where the Tyndale Fellowship has had enormous difficulty in trying to hold the line against liberalism within its ranks. At one point, it even began to insist that members renew their commitment to its (fairly minimal) doctrinal basis every year, in the hope that such a move would make them more conscious of the fact that the Tyndale Fellowship was a theologically committed body, and not merely a society of biblical scholars, but this move has had only limited success. Virtually all of them, it seems, have managed to reconcile their consciences to a doctrinal basis which they did not in fact fully believe, and they have remained within the organisation. As a result, the Tyndale Fellowship now includes members who deny, not only the plenary verbal inspiration of the biblical text, but a host of other things as well, and there is nothing that anyone can do about it.

Going soft on Scripture is an old problem, but at least there have been prominent voices which have spoken up in defence of the Bible, and (more important) there have been preachers and teachers who have exemplified how a faithful ministry is both possible and fruitful within the parameters of traditional Evangelical orthodoxy. Penal substitutionary atonement, on the other hand, has fared less well.

When John Stott wrote his book *The Cross of Christ* in 1986, he remarked in the preface that, in the previous fifty years, there had been only two books written on the subject by Evangelicals. Nobody was denying it, to be sure, but that may have been mainly because relatively few had ever heard of it. Penal substitution had disappeared by default and been replaced by a plea to accept Jesus as one's personal Saviour and enjoy the experience of peace with Christ- soon to be supplemented by a heady dose of the 'Holy Spirit'. As a result, in today's Evangelical world, doctrine is out and loud music is in; Evangelicals are now most likely to be people who do silly things in public and attribute them to the inspiration of the Spirit, whom they seem to carry around like a spiritual iPod.

In this atmosphere, penal substitution hardly stands a chance. For a start, you have to think about what it means, and that excludes at least half the current

‘Evangelical’ constituency before we begin. Penal substitution is all about sin, punishment, repentance and blood—a far cry from the hugging and swaying to the rhythm induced by the switched-on worship leader before, during and after the service. It is not nice, not user-friendly, not cool—and so it is quietly left to fade away as the older generation slowly makes its way to the local garden of remembrance. Only if this stately progress into oblivion is disturbed does anyone pause to notice what is going on, and for this we must all be grateful to Steve Chalke for his recent broadsides against one of the supposed pillars of our faith. Had he not drawn it to our attention, penal substitution might have slipped away altogether. Thanks to him, however, we have been made aware that there are yet 7000 in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal, and who are prepared to stand up and contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.

Does that faith include belief in a penal substitutionary atonement? Steve Chalke evidently thinks that it does not, and there are many in high places who would readily agree with him about this. It is quite true that the phrase ‘penal substitution’ is of fairly recent origin, and the finer points of the doctrine did not really fall into place until the time of Martin Luther (though with startling effect, as Luther’s career reminds us). It is also true that there have been other ways of expressing the mystery of Christ’s death, which are perfectly valid in their own contexts. A famous example of this is the phrase of Gregory of Nazianzus: ‘What has not been assumed has not been healed.’ Gregory was defending the full humanity of Christ by saying that if the Son of God had not become a true man, he could not have died for us on the cross. He did not use the word ‘substitution’, which was not part of his theological vocabulary, but what else could he have meant? Jesus had to be fully human in order to take our place (i.e., substitute for us), and Gregory certainly had no illusions about crucifixion, which was the most horrible punishment known to the ancient Romans. He may not have developed all the finer points of the modern doctrine, but would he have denied it if it had been presented to him? Surely not!

More significantly still, the doctrine of penal substitution is expressed quite clearly in the New Testament. The apostle Paul himself states it very clearly when he writes: ‘He (God the Father) made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2 Corinthians 5:21).’ Once again, the words ‘penal substitution’ are not used,

but what else can this passage possibly mean? Jesus became sin on our behalf, and we do not have to go very far in the Bible to discover what God does with sin—he punishes it! Those who deny penal substitution do so for a number of reasons, which invariably sound plausible to them—and to many others who are looking for reasons not to believe it.

Today the most commonly heard objection to it is that the doctrine is cruel and unjust—how can a loving Father punish his Son, when his Son has done nothing wrong? How can we believe in such a bloodthirsty tyrant as our ‘heavenly Father’? Perhaps it takes a fuzzy mental climate like our own to make accusations of this kind seem credible, but no Christian has ever claimed that God is cruel and bloodthirsty, let alone that he is unjust. The punishment which the Father metes out to the Son is most certainly ‘undeserved’—that is the whole point of it! If the Father had punished those who deserve it (you and me) we would have been annihilated long ago—in Noah’s flood, for example. The punishment of the Son is the Father’s supreme act of love, because a substitute who *can* take the punishment has done so on our behalf. Furthermore, the Son did not go to his death involuntarily—‘not my will, but Thy will be done’ was his prayer the night before he was crucified. The Son of God volunteered for the task of atonement, again because of his great love—not so much for us as for the Father. His love for us is limited and secondary to his being, because we are only finite creatures. But his love for the Father knows no bounds, and therefore his mercy shown to us is without limit. Why would anyone reject such a blessing as this?

The answer, sad to say, is that most people have never understood the gravity of their own situation before God. The average person does not appreciate that he is a sinner destined to eternal damnation, nor is the average modern preacher likely to tell him this, because such a negative approach might put him off joining the church! But whether we like it or not, that is the sober truth, and penal substitution comes into focus most clearly when we realise just how desperate we are without it. That in turn is a work of the Holy Spirit—not just any work, but his great work, which (sadly) hardly gets a mention in those temples dedicated to his worship. Long ago there was an Archbishop of Canterbury, the famous Anselm (1093–1109), who told his pupil Boso that the reason the latter did not understand the meaning of Christ’s death was that he had not yet considered how great the weight of sin is. This is still the root of

the problem today. Those who reject penal substitutionary atonement are not really concerned with divine fairness and justice, even if they couch their objections in those terms. What they are really rejecting is their own total depravity. They simply do not believe that they can possibly be as bad as they really are. Like the patient who refuses to accept his doctor's warnings because he does not feel any pain or see anything immediately wrong, these people carry on as if there is nothing desperately wrong with them. No doubt they will accept that they are not perfect, and that they are (in some sense at least) sinners, but they cannot come to terms with that radical alienation from God which our sinfulness entails. They do not really understand or accept that they deserve the very worst punishment that God can devise, because in their hearts they have rejected their Creator and Lord and preferred the idols of this present age. To believe in the necessity of a penal substitutionary atonement means not to believe in oneself—it means to accept that, as the Prayer Book puts it, 'there is no health in us'. That is still the hardest confession for any of us to make. Yet until we do, we shall get nowhere with Jesus and his death, far from being the remedy for sin that we so desperately need, will come to us as condemnation for our pride and our unbelief. Those who think that they can abandon this teaching and yet still hold onto Christ are deluding themselves, and it is the responsibility of our leaders to ensure that, if they persist in doing that, they should not be given an Evangelical platform from which they can delude others as well. May God grant us all the clarity of mind and of purpose to see this great truth, and may he plant in us anew the deep spiritual conviction that only by his penal substitution of himself for us has Jesus Christ become our Saviour, our Lord and our God.

GERALD BRAY