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Michael A. Testa

Newman and the Evangelicals

Dr Testa is a Roman Catholic scholar working at Maryville University, Saint Louis who has written widely on John Henry Newman. His present essay takes up a little-explored area that will be of special interest to Protestant readers.

Immediately following an experience at age fourteen, John Henry Newman describes his experience of a conversion at age fifteen in the autumn of 1816. He wrote: 'I fell under the influence of a definite Creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which through God's mercy, have never been effaced or obscured' (Apo., 4).¹ He goes on to speak of Rev. Walter Mayers of Pembroke College, who through conversations, sermons, and most especially books, all reflecting the teachings of Calvin, awakened the beginnings of a living faith for the young Newman. One book which he recalls was a work of William Romaine (1714-1795). However, he does not remember the title nor the content except for the doctrine of final perseverance, a teaching which holds that God would never permit his chosen to fall away from him. In accord with that doctrine Newman says he experienced the fact of his election into eternal glory with as much certainty as the fact of his hands and feet. This sentiment lasted until age twenty-one when it gradually faded away. Newman then makes a statement that is important in understanding his later thought and development:

I believe that it had some influence on my opinions, . . . in confirming me in my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of two and two only absolute and luminously self evident beings myself and my Creator. (Apo., 4)

This vignette in the life of the young Newman offers real insights into the early formation of this nineteenth-century giant. The influence of Calvinistic Evangelicalism figured heavily into his

¹ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), 4. (Hereafter Apo. in text).

formative years. Nonetheless, Newman professed to have abandoned the last remnants of Calvinistic doctrines under the influence of Edward Hawkins.

Despite Newman's claim of abandoning Evangelical teachings, it is clear they strongly shaped his life and future work either as a source of insight or a point of controversy. I also think this influence can be readily seen in the preaching of Newman. In this article I will investigate the Evangelical influence upon John Henry Newman. It will examine the Evangelicals' influence on Newman, his preaching and work in opposition and rejection of such influence, and the probability that such sway remained present in Newman's thought.

Evangelical Influences

Newman's formation came under the Calvinistic side of Evangelicalism as opposed to the branch of Wesley and Methodism. The first name that is mentioned in the *Apologia* is William Romaine who for some time was the 'sole representative of Anglican Evangelicalism in London, and only as a lecturer.'² He is described as the strongest man connected with the movement.³ Yngve Brioloth suggests that Romaine's 'Life, Walk and Triumph of Faith' was the pamphlet Newman possibly read which influenced his conversion.⁴ Romaine represents the opposite extreme to Wesley, though this theological opposition did not lead to severing of personal relationships.

Another Evangelical whom Newman claims he almost owes his soul to is Thomas Scott (1747-1821). He crossed paths with John Newton (1725-1807) for whom Scott had little initial admiration. The account of how Scott moved from one position to another until he came to fully embrace the Evangelical faith, is told in his widely circulated autobiography *The Force of Truth* which Newman undoubtedly possessed.⁵ Newman also admired the fact that Scott was resolute in his opposition to Antinomianism. Newman states that he was a true Englishman: 'I deeply felt his influence; and for years I used almost as proverbs what I considered to be the scope and issue of his doctrine, "Holiness

² E.J. Poole-Connor, *Evangelicalism in England* (London: Truslove and Brag, 1951), 183.

³ Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England: 1734-1984* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 26.

⁴ Yngve Brioloth, *The Anglican Revival* (London: Longmans, Green, 1925), 32.

⁵ G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party* (New York: Longmans Green, 1908), 113-115.

rather than peace," and "growth the only evidence of life" (Apo., 5).

Newman claims to have hung on the lips of Daniel Wilson who served as vicar of St. John's Bedford Row where he founded the London Clerical Education Society. He brought about a number of Evangelical innovations. When he later became the Bishop of Calcutta in 1832 he left a parish known for its strength and efficiency.⁶ Jones of Naylord (1726–1800) mentioned along with Scott, is described as one of the few eighteenth century bridges between old and new Anglicanism. He is credited with putting together Scriptural proofs of the Evangelical doctrine before he was sixteen.⁷

The last two names Newman mentions during his period of conversion are Thomas Newton and Joseph Milner. It was Newton, the Bishop of Bristol, who through his *Dissertations on the Prophecies* convinced Newman that the Pope was the Antichrist predicted by Daniel, St. Paul, and St. John. Joseph Milner (1744–1797) was the great Headmaster of Hull Grammar School and afternoon lecturer who in 1770 adopted Evangelical views after reading Hooke's sermon on justification. His friends immediately dropped him, yet whenever he entered the pulpit the church was filled to capacity. Care of souls became the common topic of conversation, however his fame chiefly rests on his *History of the Church of Christ* (1794–1801), one of the greatest books that the movement ever produced. Instead of devoting so much space to schisms and heresies, he sought to write a history of the good which Christianity had created. One of its other significant features was that it turned the attention of English readers to the almost forgotten writings of the Early Fathers, a practice which Newman was to employ strongly.

Rejection of the Evangelical Movement

As mentioned, under the influence of Edward Hawkins, Newman was to abandon his Evangelical faith for more intellectual pursuits. In his essay, 'On Preaching the Gospel' Newman writes his strongest criticism against the Evangelicals:

This is what comes of fighting God's battles in our own way, of extending truths beyond their measure, of anxiety often a teaching more compact, clear, and spiritual, than the Creed of the Apostles.

⁶ Balleine, *History of the Evangelical Party*, 196.

⁷ Brillioth, *Anglican Revival*, 32.

... Let us be sure things are going wrong with us when we see doctrines more clearly, and carry them out more boldly, than they are taught us in revelation. (Jfc., 340–341)⁸

Newman states that this lecture is a practical application of the principles and conclusions of the previous lectures, in regard to the 'mode of preaching and professing the Gospel popular thirty or forty years since called "evangelical"' (Jfc., xiv).

The tone of this work is clear. It was written in 1838 well after Newman has rejected the Evangelical movement yet there are many passages prior to this one which are indicative of his severing of ties with this party. In 1825 Newman delivers his sermon 'Inward Witness to the Truth of the Gospel.' Here he is still concerned with how one acquires religious knowledge.⁹ At this point he has rejected the possibility of sudden 'conversion' and holds that it is through our actions that we come to religious awareness. He writes:

When I see a person hasty and violent, harsh and high-minded, careless of what others feel, and disdainful of what they think;— when I see such a one proceeding to inquire into religious subjects, I am sure beforehand he cannot go right. (PS, viii, 113–114)¹⁰

On the other hand he encourages his hearers 'do but attempt what you know to be God's will, and you will most assuredly be led into all truth' (PS viii, 120). For Newman it is by upright living not an instant conversion that we come to know the truth of the Gospel. By following the commands of Scripture we learn that these precepts really come from God; by trying we make proof; by doing we come to truth.

In a similar indictment against the Evangelicals, Newman preaches against the pitfalls of 'Unreal Words' another of his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. His quip, 'To make professions is to play with edged tools, unless we attend to what we are saying' (PS v, 33), capsulizes his sentiment. He develops the incongruity between what people often says and what they truly feel, especially with regards to religious emotions.

'Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness' severs Newman from the Evangelical movement since he now thoroughly rejects the efficacy of a sudden 'conversion' to insure salvation.

⁸ John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification* (London: Longmans, Green, 1914), 340–341. (Hereafter Jfc.)

⁹ Edwin Abbot, *The Anglican Career of John Henry Newman* (London: Longmans, Green, 1898), 106.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), viii, 113–114. (Hereafter PS).

It follows at once, even though Scripture did not plainly tell us so that no one is able to prepare himself for heaven, that is, make himself holy in a short time; . . . there are others who suppose they may be saved all at once by a sudden and easily acquired faith. (PS, i, 10)

In his recent work, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman*, Ian Ker corroborates Newman's rejection of Evangelicalism in his discussion of a criticism often made against Newman, specifically his excessive severity. This severity has been attributed to the Calvinistic Evangelicalism which accompanied and followed his adolescent conversion of 1816. Ker says that Newman was not only well aware that his sermons moved in this direction but also that 'the bias was quite deliberate on his part and, far from emanating unconsciously from early influences which he had consciously disowned, the sternness was a studied reaction against Evangelicalism.'¹¹ His documented severity has everything to do with his own conscious and deliberate rejection of Evangelicalism, and very little says Ker, to do with any latent Calvinistic puritanism lingering from his conversion as a youth.

Edwin A. Abbot also offers some important observations as to why Newman was breaking with Evangelicalism. For Newman it gave no definite answer to the question, how is one to be saved? He rejected the private interpretation of Scripture for he felt this process was open to absurdity, hypocrisy, and immorality. Yet if individuals could not do this, who was to do this for them. Newman himself felt that he was inadequate to the task, for he knew himself to be misled and in need of further assistance. It was this realization that turned him to the Primitive Church and the traditional interpretation of Scripture which it handed down. Yet Newman never totally abandoned Evangelical teaching.

Remnants of the Evangelical Influence

The final portion of this article examines those traces of Evangelicalism which remained in Newman's preaching and other works. In a postscript to an essay written in 1835 and later included in Newman's *Essays Critical and Historical* he states concerning Evangelicalism:

All over the Protestant world, . . . the survival of religious feeling during the last century took peculiar form, difficult indeed to describe

¹¹ Ian Ker, 'The Preacher' in *The Achievement of John Henry Newman* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1990, 85.

or denote by any distinct appellation, but familiarity known to all who ever so little attend to what is going on in the general Church. It spread, not by talent or learning in its upholders, but by their piety, zeal, and sincerity, and its own incidental and partial truth. (Ess., i, 96)¹²

Here he professes some of the merits of the movement, a movement which he once professed. In another of his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 'The Religious Use of Excited Feelings' Newman produces a conciliatory text which does not totally reject the import of religious feelings but does not see them as an end in themselves. He regards them as an aid for a developing faith. He writes:

At the very best these latter are but the graceful beginnings of obedience, graceful and becoming in children, but in grown spiritual men indecorous, as the sports of boyhood would seem in advanced years. (PS, i, 122-123)

These two passages convey a tolerant but not totally approving attitude towards Evangelicalism. However, his earlier work expresses an even closer affinity to the movement. He was ordained in 1824 and was supposed to be an Evangelical up to 1828 or even later. Prior to the influence of Whately and other Liberals the Evangelical tendencies are prominent in his sermons of this period.

Another tendency which links Newman back to his Evangelical period is that of self-knowledge. In this area he dissuades people from gazing too much on the self. Yet he himself is constantly aware of his own self-knowledge especially in reference to his relationship with God. In other instances he stresses the need for developing good habits, good internal dispositions which have great significance for the development of the moral and spiritual aspects of our lives. This links Newman with the Evangelical practice of living out our gift of faith.

Newman's emphasis on sin and sinfulness also reflects a link to his Evangelical roots. In Sermon VII of his first volume of the *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, he reminds us of the narrow way:

Lastly, I have all along spoken as addressing true Christians, who are walking in the narrow way, and have hope of Heaven. But these are the "few." Are there none here present of the "many" who walk in the broad way and have upon their heads all their sins, from their

¹² John Henry Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical* (London: Longmans, Green, 1901), 96. (Hereafter Ess.).

baptism upwards? Rather, is it not probable that there are persons in this congregation, who, though mixed with the people of God, are really unforgiven, and if they now died, would die in their sins? (PS, i, 94) At this time Newman would seem to admit the possibility of salvation for everyone yet would hold that very few would attain it.

The final area which manifests Newman's link with Evangelicalism is that of preaching itself. Ian Ker points out that the eight volumes of *Parochial and Plain Sermons* account for nearly a quarter of the thirty-six volumes in the collected uniform edition of the works.¹³ Despite his renown as an historian and theologian Newman was a model preacher. It is not our intention here to explore Newman's personal theology of preaching; however, he outlines this thoroughly in his essay 'University Preaching' found in his *Idea of a University*.¹⁴ Here we find great emphasis on the role of the preacher and the importance of preaching, especially Gospel preaching—two significant points he holds in common with the Evangelicals.

From the Evangelicals, Newman received the significant themes of sin and grace. The human person was seen as reprobate and in need of salvation. Newman became disillusioned with the notion of sudden conversion and what he saw as the unreal words that often accompanied an especially emotional religion. Newman knew that outward display was no promise of true religion. He proclaimed vehemently that the fact that one is a believer is no guarantee of sanctity. There is too often a disparity between the faith one declares and the faith one has in one's heart. Newman knew human nature well and could not continue to subscribe to such a faith. However, I contend that he remained focused on the themes of sin and grace and retained in some form or another teachings he received from the Evangelicals.

Abstract

Newman professed to have abandoned the last remnants of Calvinistic doctrines under the influence of Edward Hawkins. Despite Newman's claim of abandoning Evangelical teachings, it is clear they strongly shaped his life and future work either as a source of insight or a point of controversy. I also think this influence can be readily seen in the preaching of Newman. In this

¹³ Ker, *The Achievement of John Henry Newman*, 74.

¹⁴ John Henry Newman, *Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, Green, 1929), 405.

article I will investigate the Evangelical influence upon John Henry Newman. It will examine the Evangelicals' influence on Newman, his preaching and work in opposition and rejection of such influence, and the probability that such sway remained present in Newman's thought.

Vinoth Ramachandra

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