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There is a clear biblical doctrine of laying hands as a sign of separation for specific ministry, but there is less clarity in the evangelical understanding of it.

In the matter of the occult, however, we need an understanding of the limitations of the power of the Second Kingdom, and we also need a doctrine to express the measure in which the Church has authority to withstand that power. The current practice of 'binding' that power (and even more the 'releasing' of the Spirit) raises many questions which demand biblical, and not merely pragmatic and existential, answers. [p. 48](#)

The issues raised in this paper are so great that we cannot reasonably expect any comprehensive response to emerge within the time scale of our conference. But a start may be made, and it may be that some way might be found so that the churches could be helped forward through these crucial times. [p. 49](#)

The Future of Australia's Evangelical Heritage

David Parker

Evangelical Protestantism as it was founded in Australia in the middle part of the 19th. century produced good results in a remarkably short time. Despite the notoriously degraded nature of the society in the days of the penal colony and the low level of church affiliation, by the end of the century, most of the country's 3.7 million citizens were at least nominal Christians (96.5% by the census figures), churches and denominations were firmly established across the entire continent and Protestantism was recognized as broadly evangelical, although, even then, there were signs of changes to come.

To jump a few decades to the middle of the 20th. century, despite widespread secularization of society at large, evangelical Christianity still seems to be thriving with scores of organizations, many church buildings, colleges, missionary bodies and evangelistic groups. Admittedly, it did not share the same prosperity and popularity on a national scale as evangelicalism in the United States, and it had no history of large-scale awakenings which had shaped the culture of the country, but it was still an impressive result. All the same, by the time of the bi-centenary, some leaders spoke of the apocalypse of secular humanism while others, perhaps surprisingly, have gone on as seeing signs of a coming nation-wide revival.

There is no doubt that, in the 1880s, when the churches were firmly established, Protestantism was at the height of its power as a social force. It was also strongly evangelical in character, clearly aware of its own nature and universally recognized as such. But 'evangelical' is a notoriously slippery term, especially in the hands of the secular media and others who do not understand it! It may mean evangelistic, reformed, fundamentalist, revivalist, neo-evangelical, Protestant, wowserish, a 'Bible basher' or just simply someone who reads the Bible for inspiration and guidance. It is time to look at this term more closely in the context of Australia's Protestant heritage and to try to define its local form.

In the first place, Australian Protestantism is evangelical because it has formal *historical links* with the 18th. century evangelical revival through the Anglican church and

the various Protestant denominations which were established in this country, including especially the various branches of Methodism. In a wider sense, Australian Protestantism is evangelical through its heritage in the Reformation, although it is not common to use the terminology of Europe and Latin p. 50 America where 'evangelical' merely signifies 'Protestant' in contrast with 'Catholic' or 'Orthodox'. There is also a narrower sense: evangelicals often show firm loyalties to the organizations, missions and churches in which they have been converted and have found fellowship, nature, training and service even long after the event. This is true especially where there is a significant proportion of converts from a previously unchurched background.

But more significantly, Australia's Protestantism has certainly been evangelical in the sense of being *evangelistic*, at least in intention, and to a large extent in fact. Personal and corporate evangelism have been the norm for the scores of local churches which dot the country where their programmes are oriented to sharing the gospel in every possible way and where their members are schooled in the need to bring their friends and contacts to a personal knowledge of Christ. Not surprisingly, there have been many specialist evangelistic organizations led by well-known individuals such as Lionel Fletcher, who are well-appreciated even overseas for their ministry. As already mentioned, this has resulted in the growth of the Church from its early stages to the point where virtually the whole of the country has been covered, even if every person has not yet been reached or won for Christ. In some cases, revivals matching in intensity some of those overseas have been reported in limited areas. According to many observers, significant sections of the nation were on the point of a classic awakening during the first Graham Crusades in the late 1950s.

Closely connected with this evangelistic zeal at home has been a concern for *overseas or foreign missions*. Despite the fact that Christians in Australia were faced with an enormous task in evangelizing and christianizing their own countries. So from Samuel Marsden's early efforts amongst the Maoris of New Zealand and the ill-fated work amongst the Australian aborigines, until the massive effort in the Pacific Islands (especially Papua New Guinea) following the Second World War, missionary work has featured prominently on the Australian Protestant agenda. This is seen especially in the establishment of large numbers of inter-denominational missionary societies which have often secured the support of leading churchmen also. There is a large infra-structure for recruitment, training, prayer and financial support lying behind these groups. Closely linked in with this effort are the Bible and Missionary colleges, 'Keswick' Deeper Life Conventions, and student ministry of Inter-Varsity Fellowship (or AFES) which help the missionary effort in various ways as well as fulfilling their own special functions.

An essential dynamic for this evangelistic and missionary effort was p. 51 the *characteristic spirituality of evangelism: pietism*. Ever since the days of John Wesley's vital contacts with the Moravians in the 18th. century, evangelicalism has focused its attention on the 'religion of the heart'. Authentic personal faith in Christ, a definite conversion experience and a continuing sense of God's call and guidance channeled through personal, family and corporate prayer and Bible study: these were the marks which identified the evangelical. So 'revival' (conversion, moral renewal and an awareness of God's presence) was expected, prayed for and often experienced at least in measure. As Bollen has noted, Protestantism came to this country already revived and this remained the norm. Thus evangelicalism can be distinguished quite clearly from other traditions, especially sacramentalism, forms of Christianity which focus on social and moral issues and even pentecostalism, which has been so influential of late through the charismatic movement.

Pietism, which came into evangelicalism from its German roots, found a receptive soil because already there was a strong element of intense personal religion in English

Protestantism as a legacy of 17th. century Puritanism. These two movements reinforced each other to produce a form of Christianity which placed a great deal of emphasis upon individual experience and the 'serious call to the devout and holy life' and less upon purely intellectual, social and ecclesiastical concerns. In Australia they were further aided by the demands of the pioneer situation which first of all called for a religion that was practical and relevant. There was little future for a purely formal or abstract faith.

THE PURITAN ETHIC

But in the moral degradation of the Australian penal colonies, it was the *Puritan ethic* which was most significant. Called upon by the governing powers to fulfil the utilitarian role of 'moral policemen', the clergy, supported by their Puritan theology, willingly cooperated. Although many fair-minded people acknowledged the need for serious moral and social reform, the 'wowser' impulse was planted early, and its fruits have lasted long, giving evangelical Christianity the doubtful reputation of a rather over-zealous and legalistic watch-dog on the nation's behaviour. As important as it was to express a concern for Christian moral values, this line of approach did little to manifest the spiritual power in the gospel in touching the lives of even the most hardened with redeeming grace. John Newton's evangelical experience of 'amazing grace' did not seem to be typical of early Australian P. 52 Christianity, and once set in its mould, the pattern was hard to break. The English 'free church conscience' never quite manifested itself as a positive social force in Australia where the emphasis was much more on personal issues.

Australian Protestantism was, of course, also evangelical in a *doctrinal sense*. First of all, it was biblical in theological method, giving ultimate authority to the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. It was also biblical in doctrinal content, basing itself upon the orthodox creeds of the early church and the evangelical teaching of sin, grace and salvation through Christ's atoning work as formulated in the Reformation confessions.

Although there were differences of emphasis and interpretation amongst the various Protestant denominations (often quite serious), there was wide agreement on the basic doctrines and messages of Christianity, as the host of co-operative inter-denominational ventures in evangelism, missions, holiness teaching, Bible training and social welfare work indicate. In fact, certainly in regard to the biblical truth evangelical teaching sometimes came close to militant fundamentalism which defined orthodoxy too narrowly and took an offensive attitude to those who differed, even in the slightest degree.

Liberal views were common enough, especially in later times, to warrant an evangelical reaction but generally in Australia, pietistic influences were stronger, so that doctrinal differences were ignored as long as evangelical experience was not undermined. There were only a very few occasions where a genuine fundamentalist-modernist controversy took place, and even some of those were not followed through with the same zeal as in the United States where churches and whole denominations were split over the issue of modernism. But the firm commitment of Australia's Protestants to traditional evangelical doctrines did contribute to an often ugly sectarianism which was one of the most serious and long-lasting blemishes in our history. It had far-reaching consequences for the society as a whole, and it is not surprising that in more recent times, by way of reaction, interdenominational and ecumenical activity have been major forces in Australian Christianity. But it may be questioned whether the older doctrinal differences and tensions have been satisfactorily resolved or merely by-passed. Evangelicalism has some distance to make up in developing a properly worked-out theological position and method to cope with this legacy.

Finally, as a result of these causes Australian evangelicalism has exhibited a strong voluntarist tendency in ecclesiastical polity, i.e. the belief that the church should be spiritually independent of the state [p. 53](#) and other structures of society. For example Dr. John Dunmore Lang was persuaded of the value of this approach during the course of his ministry, thereafter seeing it as harmonious with evangelical beliefs. But it was already a key factor in the establishment of the 'free' or 'dissenting' church groups. Even in some evangelical Anglican churches, not only are the 'high church' and 'sacramental' doctrines of some of their sister churches rejected, but there are also distinct tendencies in a 'voluntarist' direction in church structures and attitudes to ecclesiastical authority.

But this tendency is most clearly seen in evangelicalism generally in the enormous proliferation of voluntary associations for almost every conceivable purpose. However this voluntarist principle operates within an overall ecclesiastical structure which is heavily bureaucratic. This means that one is identified by organizational affiliation rather than by confessional belief, which causes consternation to those who do not understand the dynamics and who prefer it otherwise. In such circumstances, voluntary organization, independent churches and also smaller denominations which are not integral parts of the main denominational structures operate in a world of their own. Thus there has also been created in Australia a situation of separate development where the various organizational groupings pursue their own programmes and exist under their own guidelines with little reference to each other.

The implications of the voluntarist tendency need to be studied carefully. If evangelicalism focuses on God speaking through his Word and the evangelical experience, rather than upon ecclesiastical structures and authority, then there can be no place for a loyalty to a denomination and authority that over-rides fellowship with believers of other traditions. This principle could have a radical impact on church life if carried to its logical conclusion. But evangelical groups working on an inter-denominational basis have so far generally skirted around the problem by the traditional policy of focusing on issues where there is agreement rather than following through the implications of their evangelical theology.

So in defining evangelicalism in Australia, it is important to take these factors into account and to recognize that it is a complex movement. Although in practical terms there has been a good deal of outward unity, it is probably more accurate to refer to it as a coalition centred on a common evangelical experience of God's saving grace in Christ.

Accordingly, 'it is not yet possible to judge the standing of an individual or a group in relation to evangelicalism merely on the basis [p. 54](#) of their attitudes to one of these factors, because there may be major differences with regard to others. Currently, the coalition shows signs of instability, and so evangelicalism does not exist as a strongly unified movement except on the basis of experience, which is a notoriously unreliable basis for long term relationships. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that evangelicalism should be fragmenting.

Also, like the rest of the Church in Australia and early society generally, evangelicalism has been on the whole derivative and secondary rather than creative. The Church was transplanted from its original British setting for the migrant people it served. In the pioneer, colonial context, a practical response to the needs of the day seemed to be called for rather than something creative or even adapted to these new surroundings. As Hugh Jackson has put it, 'Originality was not the need of this generation. Reassurance was.'¹ Thus the church (and evangelicalism along with it) was strongly conservative, but the weaknesses soon showed up when in the 20th. century changes began to take place in the

¹ *Churches and People in Australia and New Zealand, 1860-1930*, Wellington, Allen and Unwin, 1987, p. 47.

local Australian culture and in the nature of the Christianity which was being imported from overseas.

Australian Christians responded to these changes in various ways. Some accepted them easily and modified their own beliefs and practices accordingly. Thus almost unnoticed there began the gradual trend towards a 'formless liberalism' (Jackson) which became distinctive of large sections of the church. Others reacted strongly against the 'modernization' of traditional Christianity in areas of doctrine, biblical scholarship, morals and spirituality. In some cases there were loud protests, but they were generally ineffective in halting the process because they were usually made from too narrow a base and lacked strong conceptual foundations. At best, these protests affected only the small segment of the conservatives within the churches and served only to confirm them in their views. Thus the trend towards 'separate development' was greatly accelerated until the division between 'evangelical' and others was absolute.

Both liberalized and evangelical sections of the church were quickly becoming peripheral to the community generally, because on the one hand there had been a loss of the distinctive messages of Christianity, and on the other Christians had become reactionary, defensive and inward-looking. Despite valiant attempts to reverse the trend by means of new efforts in Christian education, youth work, stewardship, the use of the media, ecumenism, church extension and evangelism, the p. 55 church was becoming more isolated and irrelevant to the day-by-day lives of the people. The outcome of this process of change was solidified in the 1960s and 1970s. By this time the conservative evangelical momentum of the earlier part of the century had almost subsided, and Australian society at large had thrown off its nominal adherence to Christian values, becoming quite secular.

THE 1980S

Foremost in the new developments were attempts by the new generations of highly educated Christians to come to grips with the changes in society. This produced a long list of sociological and historical studies of the Australian people and church. This provided fertile soil for the introduction of the Church Growth School, which relied heavily on sociological principles for its success, and at the same time satisfied the characteristic pragmatic evangelical drive for speedy, tangible results in outreach and church planting. It also meant a new awareness amongst evangelicals of socio-political activity and encouraged a more holistic approach to Christian witness and ministry. Some interpreted this in a politically and socially radical sense, but others reacted strongly against many of the developments and therefore became part of a 'new Christian right'. Study of society also brought with it a vivid awareness of the unmet needs of people, especially in Australia's large urbanized centres, and the churches' historical inability to cope with them. This spawned new initiatives in community-oriented ministries, and the restructuring of churches to emphasise small group activities. There was also an attempt to develop a 'theology of everyday life' to buttress some of these developments intellectually and in practical terms.

Attention was also given to education in these new developments. Concern over some apparent trends in the public arena caused some conservative Christians to turn again to Christian schooling as a serious option. Despite the cost and inconvenience, primary and secondary schools, often attached in traditional form to local parish churches, were established and conducted on any of several different principles. In some cases, attempts were made to move into the tertiary area as well; but with little prospect of success. Groups such as the Creation Science Association tackled the fundamental philosophy

underlying the humanism they believed was permeating public life by proposing new ways of approaching science, while groups like Scripture Union successfully marshalled the devotion and creative skills of the new generation of Christian teachers to develop innovative methods of [p.56](#) evangelism in the state school system. In the theological area, churches and missionary societies again saw the value of recognized degrees, and re-structured their colleges to take advantage of new opportunities to provide their students with effective training. Other individuals, as part of the growing intellectual elite, took up higher studies in secular institutions and sought to bring Christian principles to bear upon business and professional life, although widespread success in this area has not yet become apparent.

Traditional church organization and functions also came under intense scrutiny, and were regarded by many as incapable of handling the new demands. This led to the application of secular management principles of church activities, in some cases resulting in the creation of strongly hierarchical, monolithic structures centred around a dominant, highly-gifted personality and a stream-lined system of administration which was geared to marshal the laity into more efficiency and greater impact. But the 'superchurch' syndrome has its own problems and is not of universal appeal. In other cases, churches turned to various forms of inter-church cooperation to share the limited resources more effectively. In most cases, classic doctrinal statements on church polity and the ministry need to be radically reworked if they are to take account of these changes.

While re-structuring of the externals of Christian activity was an important (if somewhat traumatic) exercise, considerable attention was also being given to the spiritual dimension. Most prominent was the development of the charismatic renewal movement which affected virtually every denomination and also produced the unusual phenomenon of fast-growing mega-churches. To the surprise of many this movement (which had much in common with classic Pentecostalism) attracted ordinary Australians because of its contagious spiritual intensity, apparent spontaneity in worship, a highly organized, business-like approach to ministry, visionary leadership and an element of novelty. But even so, it was still only a small movement in comparison with other Christian traditions and the community as a whole and it remained rather volatile. In the 1980s, there were some signs that the movement as a whole was maturing, but despite its contribution in invigorating sections of the main-stream churches, its long-term future as a force for renewal is still not clear. But there were other responses as well, including renewed efforts in revivalism, the development of the Christian music industry and for some, the reexamination of classical forms of Christian spirituality centred upon such activities as retreats, meditation, spiritual direction and the sacramental life. [p.57](#)

Attempts to engage Christians in more effective, organized Bible study should also be seen in association with these developments. New organizations were commenced providing systematic instruction, courses, seminars and literature, while theological and Bible colleges found many lay people willing to undertake quite advanced courses of study. Some apparently fruitless attempts were also made to contextualize theology itself to the Australian scene, but there was also a significant recovery of interest in classic, confessional theology, which was, in some cases, a reactionary movement with little to contribute for the future.

Undoubtedly, some worthwhile results flowed from all this activity, but for many it must have seemed confusing. It certainly resulted in fragmentation and an apparent loss of direction and purpose as groups and individuals vied with one another for the support of the limited evangelical public. It seemed that, despite the frenzied activity within evangelicalism, the movement as a whole was muscle-bound. There was no longer any prior commitment to a particular theological position which could be identified as

‘evangelical’, but only a general orientation which, in true Australian style, was judged pragmatically by its immediate outward effectiveness and was therefore subject to superficial modification as the occasion dictated. In some cases this was because people were aware of the dangers of unwarranted dogmatism; but for others it was simply a matter of ignorance, *naïveté* and even apathy. In any case, the community at large was still as far away as ever from a living faith in God!

THE FUTURE

So what about the future of Australia’s evangelical heritage? Australia’s history has been unfavourable to the growth of a large high-profile doctrinal movement, such as evangelicalism. As a self-conscious, crusading force for renewal, evangelicalism was never very welcome, even from the beginning. As John Barrett observed, ‘A tolerant support of the denominations was the positive characteristic of the Australian colonist, just as his negative qualities were skepticism of exclusive denominational claims and phlegmatic moderation in spiritual things generally.’² Apparently, there was no room for religious crusaders then, or now! **P. 58**

Some would advocate that evangelicals should keep going about their business in much the same way as always, implying that the old is good, and that resistance to the truth can always be expected! But it is difficult to find much evidence today for the existence of a cohesive evangelical movement with clearly defined common beliefs and objectives to inspire and guide it. There is only a historical tradition and some half-remembered clichés to call upon. It appears that evangelicalism as an identifiable movement for renewal and growth has been eclipsed by other more virile and appealing forces (such as ecumenism, fundamentalism or the charismatic movement). Consequently, it seems in danger of disappearing altogether. If this is so, the question must be raised, ‘Should something be done to prevent this happening, and if so, what?’

For many the answer is, ‘No, let it die. It has served its purpose and outlived its usefulness.’ There is no room in today’s busy world for mere tradition and sentiment, so let there be no sadness for its passing. In any case, this era needs a new mode of Christianity, and does not need the re-creation of the kind of context in which evangelicalism flourished. Today, it is enough to be Christian without concern for additional identification—it is authority that counts. The future must be open-ended, not fettered by a prior commitment to party ideals.

Perhaps there is something to be said for this assessment, especially when one keeps in mind the contemporary ethos and the historical origins of evangelicalism as a movement for reform or renewal within the wider church. Its role then was as clear as it was urgent. Certainly, if the context and needs have changed with history, so too may the response. There is no excuse for keeping a movement going just for its own sake. But it may be argued that the central message of historic evangelicalism is still not fully and clearly represented in other existing Christian traditions, although they may have re-discovered one or another of its emphases, such as the need for personal faith or the importance of private prayer and Bible study. It needs to be stressed that, at its best, evangelicalism also stood as a more biblical alternative to a ritualistic and sacramental version of Christianity, barren scholasticism, liberalism, sceptical biblical scholarship and the social gospel movement. If this be the case, there is still a need for a mature evangelicalism.

² *That Better Country*, MUP, 1966, p. 192.

But it also must be admitted that the ideals of evangelicalism need working out afresh for the contemporary situation. Thus 'wowsers' may have expressed a vital and necessary conviction about the ethical concerns of the day, but now evangelicalism must address itself to such intricate questions as bio-ethics and justice in a nuclear age. [p. 59](#) Similarly, it is not enough merely to assert the authority and sufficiency of Scripture; the significance of these affirmations must be articulated in relation to the questions of modern biblical scholarship and hermeneutics. Voluntarism is no longer expressed in terms of a protest against establishment and patronage, but needs to be examined in the light of leadership of the church in the 'global village' of the 20th. century and the place of spiritual gifts. Then there are moral issues that face Christians living in the 'lucky country', such as employment, industrial relations, wealth and poverty; Christian family life; the handling of leisure, recreation and entertainment.

To cope with such issues, theology is needed, and sophisticated skilful theology at that! Evangelicals should be relieved to hear this; but how should it be done in an Australian context? The deductive, rationalistic approach of traditional orthodoxy so well practised by evangelicals is foreign in a climate where you act first and then think about the meaning afterwards, if at all. It is equally foreign to an attitude that despises theory, principles and ideology (even in political concerns, to allude to a recent well-publicized prime ministerial utterance) and gives recognition only to practical issues and contemporary relevance. It is not immediately clear how this kind of thinking can be reconciled with a system like evangelicalism that takes as its starting point such a notion as the authority of Scripture, and in all its thinking makes allowances for the fallen state of humankind. And so it seems that the evangelical's love of theology turns out to be a considerable liability in communicating with Australia. But evangelicalism cannot compromise its beliefs in this area without destroying itself.

The key lies not in the theological arena alone, but also in the realm of the practical—which is also a classical evangelical strength, at least in principle. As a reform movement, evangelicalism has laid great stress upon the vital importance of genuine faith and authentic Christian living. In fact, this is what gave it meaning over against the nominalism and moral laxity of English Christianity in its early years. It was also a major 'plus' in colonial Australia, although often misunderstood and mis-handled. It will also be the secret of communication with modern Australia.

As history has demonstrated, when Christians of any persuasion live out the radical demands of Christian faith in integrity and spiritual power, there is no shortage of inquirers. Evangelicals in Australia need to re-learn this lesson. If their faith still has the meaning they profess, let that meaning be demonstrated in daily life with greater strength of personal character and integrity, with a better apologetic for the faith [p. 60](#) in the 20th. and 21st. century and with deeper compassion and greater commitment to the real lives of men and women in this world. When this occurs, there will be many opportunities to explain the 'reason for the hope that lies in us' as people feel compelled to search after the secret of such moral and spiritual power. In this way, the future of Australia's evangelical heritage will not only be assured but will prove to be the benefit we all believe it is, under God's good hand. [p. 61](#)

The Church amidst suffering in Sri Lanka