

Currents of Change: Trends in Anglican Evangelical Theology Today

by **Melvin Tinker (1995)**

There is a story of a group of British soldiers who got lost in the desert during the Gulf War. They eventually stumbled across an American General who was surveying the scene. "Do you know where we are?" the men blurted out. The General, very annoyed that they were improperly dressed and hadn't bothered to salute or address him as "Sir", indignantly replied, "Don't you know who I am?" "Now we are in real trouble," said one of the soldiers. "We don't know where we are and he doesn't know who he is!"

In many ways the purpose of this address is to try and ascertain where we are in terms of Anglican evangelical theology, for I believe that there are now certain cracks appearing which indicate several weaknesses in its basic foundations.

What I hope to do is to offer a critique of some present trends in Anglican evangelical theology, together with some constructive correctives; and what I hope to present are selected examples which illustrate such trends with accompanying comment rather than in-depth analysis. There are two reasons for selecting these examples. The first is that they touch upon issues of fundamental importance for evangelical belief and practice, and, second that the writers involved are quite influential amongst Anglican evangelicals and therefore their views require serious consideration.

The misuse of the biblical concept of the Kingdom of God

I wish to begin by drawing your attention to the way certain biblical concepts are presently in danger of having their biblical sense obscured and other meanings gradually attached to them. For example, we can look at how the term "the Kingdom of God" is being employed by some evangelicals.

Consider the way in which the term "Kingdom" is now frequently used as an adjective. Books are appearing thick and fast with titles such as "Kingdom Living", "Kingdom Ministry", "Kingdom Praying". Indeed, it appears that one sure way of gaining a ready market for a book is to have the term "Kingdom" appearing somewhere in the title. This, however, is not the way the New Testament uses the term. It is the Kingdom of God ("he basileia tou Theou"), the focus being upon God who exercises his kingship, but even this has to be qualified, given the New Testament's emphasis upon God's saving, kingly rule exercised through Jesus Christ. Hence, George Beasley-Murray gives the helpful rendering "the saving sovereignty of God". In other words, a conceptual distinction has to be made between the "universal reign of God"

which carries the sense that God is sovereign ruler over all (Psalm 145:13), and God now ruling through Christ (Ephesians 1:20-23), and the "Kingdom of God" understood with specific reference to Jesus Christ and salvation. The latter is a kingdom which must be sought and entered into. It requires poverty of spirit, submission to the will of God and an entering through the "narrow gate" (Matthew 5:3; 7:21; 7:13). Indeed, one has to be born from above even to see this kingdom (John 3:3). This is a spiritual kingdom, one which is "not of this world" and therefore it is not appropriate to use worldly means to achieve its ends (John 18:36). To come into this aspect of the reign of God is to enter into eternal life - the sphere of salvation.

Why is it important that attention be drawn to this? For the simple reason that such a distinction is being overlooked by some evangelicals, with far-reaching implications for the way we understand both the nature of the Gospel and the way in which God extends his saving rule in the world.

Amongst those who would wish to bear the title "radical evangelical", the New Testament sense of the term "Kingdom of God" is being seriously misused and reduced to the idea that "God rules". Those who adopt this position maintain that wherever social justice and peace are promoted, there we are to see the Kingdom of God, even if Christ is not acknowledged or salvation experienced. One leading advocate of the "Kingdom" approach to social ethics writes: "Jesus' rule and action are cosmic. He has disarmed the principalities which create division in society. Where we see barriers broken down, can we divorce this from God's will seen in Christ's victory over the powers on the cross? (eg between Jew and Gentile, slave and free... in Galatians 3:28)" and "this understanding gives us a basis for seeing God at work in society beyond the church, applying the effects of Christ's victory on the cross through social change". Another leading exponent of this position states: "The Kingdom comes wherever Jesus overcomes the power of evil... Jesus' death was also a decisive victory over the disordered and rebellious structures of our socio-historical existence."

Such statements are very reminiscent of the "Social Gospel" movement which developed in the USA at the beginning of this century under the theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch was a thorough-going theological liberal, adopting a theology of the Kingdom of God espoused by Albrecht Ritschl. However, as White and Hopkins insist "the theology of Walter Rauschenbusch was rooted in evangelical piety". He condemned the toleration of sin in society and through social change sought to assist in the practical realisation of the Kingdom of God in the world. He also saw the "un-Christianised" nature of American capitalism as being a stumbling block, preventing non-Christian nations responding to missionary work. The cross, however, did not figure largely in his theological framework, whereas it is

central to the understanding of the new radicals (e.g. "Wherever evil is overcome in society, it is due to the work of the cross").

Nonetheless, there are similarities between the old social gossellers and the new radical evangelicals. Both have the Kingdom of God as their theological centre-piece for mission. Both see social action as being integral to mission and forwarding the Kingdom in the world. Both see non-Christians as in some way experiencing the redemptive scope of the Kingdom. As Brian Stanley observes: "This is extremely difficult to distinguish from the claim of Rauschenbusch that wherever corporations abandon monopoly capitalism for the "law of service", or undemocratic nations submit to real democracy, therewith they step out of the Kingdom of Evil into the Kingdom of God".

In extending the term, "the Kingdom of God", to embrace people and actions which are not Christian, a most serious misuse of a fundamental biblical concept is taking place. What Scriptural warrant is there for claiming that "where evil is overcome in society this is due to Christ's work on the cross"? Much is made of the reference in Colossians and Galatians to the defeat of the "elements of the universe" ("stoicheia tou kosmou"), as if it is crystal clear what these "powers" are, and that whatever influence they have in the socio-political sphere can be altered by political change which can be traced back to the cross. However, it is highly questionable that this is a correct reading of the term as employed by Paul. Certainly in Colossians it would seem that the main thrust of Paul's argument is that it is as people become Christians, now living under the Lordship of Christ, that such spiritual powers are denuded of their influences over them. Similarly, it is questionable whether the "principalities and powers" of Ephesians 6 can be identified with political structures as some like Ron Sider and John Howard Yoder have proposed.

It is also implied that the miracles and healing ministry of Jesus can be understood, not simply as signs of the inbreaking of the Kingdom into the present age, but as equivalent to present-day efforts to bring about justice in society. Indeed, some go further and claim that any movement, Christian or not, which occurs to establish social justice and righteousness, is to be interpreted as having the same character as Jesus' Kingdom acts of power and healing. One must ask whether the Bible is being handled properly to justify such thinking. Thus, when it is said that wherever just relationships are established, we are to take these as signs of God's Kingdom, and Galatians 3:28 is cited in support, it must be pointed out that Paul is referring to what happens in the church as a result of people hearing the Gospel, and not "just relationships" in society at large.

The great commission, the example of the early church in Acts, and Paul's teachings in his epistles, all show that the way the saving Kingdom of God relates to God's wider rule at this present time is through people being converted, adopting new priorities and values. Such people then seek to

improve the lot of their fellow-men out of obedience to Christ and his call to fulfil the law of love. It is in making disciples and the working out of that discipleship in society that cultures are transformed. Russell Shedd's comment is worthy of consideration within this context when he writes: "Replacing unjust structures with more equitable ones will finally be crowned with failure unless a far more profound transformation is wrought in the men who establish them and wield their power. For this reason evangelicals must ever contend that the first responsibility of the church is the proclamation of the gospel, and depend upon the consequential spiritual change wrought by the Holy Spirit to create a community in which the unconverted may see a model of the Kingdom of God". The church itself, although it is not to be identified with the Kingdom of God, is the locus in which Christ's rule should be most visibly and clearly expressed. As such, Christians, individually and collectively, should both put society to shame, and indicate the way forward to more wholesome God- approved patterns for living.

If the New Testament understanding of the Kingdom of God is not adhered to, the result will be "another Gospel", one in which redemption from sin is absorbed in policies for socio-political change. Salvation is then conceived as rescue from structural sin rather than from the wrath to come.

False relations between doctrine and experience

Secondly, I want us to look at false relations between doctrine and experience. The relationship between Christian doctrine and Christian experience is much more intertwined than we often suppose. There is a sense in which doctrine enables us to interpret experience. For example, in talking with a non-Christian who may be experiencing some sense of meaninglessness, the doctrines of creation, the nature of man and the consequences of the fall could be brought to bear so that the experience may be correctly understood as a prelude to presenting the Gospel. However, it is vital to stress that it is in and through Christian truth that one comes to experience God.

Not all view doctrine and experience in this way. One writer describes the relationship between doctrine and experience as follows: "Underlying the Christian faith is first and foremost an experience, rather than the acceptance of a set of doctrines. The New Testament bears powerful witness to the experience of the first Christians - an experience of the presence and power of the risen Christ in their lives, charging them with meaning and dignity... The essential purpose of Christian doctrine is to provide a framework within which the experience of the first Christians may become ours". Elsewhere he writes "Experience of God provides the stimulus to develop doctrines about God. Thus the Christian belief in the divinity of Christ did not arise as an intellectual theory, but through the impact of experiencing Jesus Christ as God". But is this actually the case?

In countering what can be called incipient gnosticism, John in his first letter writes: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and touched with our hands - this we proclaim to you concerning the Word of life". Howard Marshall in commenting on these verses writes: "Our writer here wants to emphasise that the Christian message is identical with Jesus; it took personal form in a person who could be heard, seen and touched". In other words, the apostles' experience of Jesus was not simply some existential "I-Thou" encounter which led them to search around for appropriate concepts to express that experience. Rather, the experience itself involved hearing propositional truths - teachings - received from Jesus about his person and work, explained within the framework of the Old Testament Scriptures. What is more, the apostles' Spirit-enabled task was to "witness" to Jesus, bringing other people to faith through their message (John 16:13; 17:20). It is by embracing this message (with definite doctrinal content) that fellowship is had with God and other believers (1 John 1:5). Certainly this is more than intellectual assent (assensus), it is whole-hearted trust (fiducia), but doctrine/teaching does not follow some experience of God, it is the means by which we come to recognise him and so experience him. Furthermore, it is as revealed truth is embraced, animated by the Holy Spirit, that a whole host of other Christian experiences are to be had, such as conviction of sin, repentance, forgiveness, joy unspeakable. 1 Peter 1:3-12 is most instructive here.

The relationship between doctrine and experience is such that belief in erroneous doctrine can generate erroneous experiences, which if not anti-Christian may well be sub-Christian. To help us understand how this is so, let us think of the way language functions in general. Language is used to talk about things (informative) and to think about things (cognitive). It is also used to get things done and bring about a change of affairs; promises and commands do this (performative). Language is also used to express and elicit feelings (expressive and evocative) as well as bind people together in a common solidarity (cohesive). Doctrines function in much the same way. They relate truths about who God is and what he has done (informative). They provide categories by which we might think about God and ourselves aright (cognitive). They can bring about a state of affairs, so that for example, in hearing and responding to the doctrine of justification we are declared to be in a right relation to God (performative). Through doctrines about the holiness of God, his saving righteousness and so on, our feelings may be stirred to adoration (evocative) and, by using the appropriate language of praise and penitence, we may express such feelings (expressive). Furthermore, through adherence to common doctrines, biblical ones, we enjoy a common evangelical solidarity (cohesive).

Therefore we can see that far from Christian doctrine being some sort of mould by which formless experience is given shape, it actually gives Christian

experience its distinctive character. Thus to change doctrines which function in the ways just outlined is very serious indeed, for if such changes are substantial what results is something other than Christian experience. What counts as Christian experience will, in part, be determined by the doctrinal grid through which it comes. If that grid is not biblical the experience will not be Christian. I can give a personal example of what I mean. When I was a student we had a speaker at the Christian Union who, with impressive rhetoric, told us that he had received "a word from the Lord" loosely based on John 15 that there were two types of Christian: those who were servants of God and those who were friends of God. The servants of God had a dutiful service, but the friends of God were those who, having been baptised in the Spirit, knew a joy and intimacy which the others could only envy. "Which are you?" he challenged. "Which do you want to be?" he enquired. The answer, of course, was a foregone conclusion. Practically everyone in the meeting, including myself, felt impressed, convicted, and cast down. But was such an experience "Christian"? The answer must be "No", for no such division of Christians is to be found in Scripture and no alleged "filling" of the Spirit is proffered as a solution. The truly Christian experience came for me later, when, in the light of Scripture, I reflected upon what had been said and saw the teaching to be bogus and realised afresh the wonderful liberty of being a child of God.

Now we can see why a Bible-centred ministry is so vital to the spiritual well-being of the Church and why evangelicals, of all people, should not give way to other things which would displace it. It is through such ministry, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, that people's minds are shaped and hearts are moved to know, obey and then experience God as he has revealed himself through his Word.

Subversive Hermeneutics

The third area I want to consider briefly is the adoption, by some evangelicals, of a hermeneutic which is ultimately subversive of the supreme authority and sufficiency of Scripture. In an article which began life as a sermon and which will soon appear in published form under the title "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us", one Anglican scholar has argued that those who have changed their mind on the issue of ordaining women to the presbyterate have done so in the light of certain recent changes. It is acknowledged that society has changed and is "impatient with the few remaining bastions of male privilege. The church, and therefore the Gospel, is for many tarred with the brush of chauvinism and of injustice". The church too has changed, moving away from the one man band form of ministry, causing many to appreciate the ministry of women. But thirdly and perhaps most significantly, hermeneutics (the principles and methods applied in biblical interpretation and application), has changed, particularly under the influence of what is sometimes called the "new hermeneutic". "So now," says the writer,

"we have come to realise that it is possible, on some issues, to argue in quite opposite directions from Scripture, depending on what texts you take as your starting point, and what relative weight you give to different aspects of the whole scriptural revelation." Having acknowledged the traditional approach to this matter, namely considering those texts which seem to apply specifically to the issue - 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14, 1 Timothy 2 and so on, he suggests a different approach. This is to look at the broader sweep of Scripture, one which sees women in the Old Testament from time to time taking a leading role, the way in which Jesus related to women and challenged conservative Jewish attitudes and the alleged "impressive way" Paul viewed women (gleaned from the way he greets and speaks of certain leading women in Romans 16). So he writes "The effect of this chapter is so striking that one wonders how it could derive from the same Paul who is responsible for 1 Timothy 2:12. If it does, as I believe, then the question must surely be raised whether Paul meant in that passage quite what he is generally understood to have meant, or whether there was something specific to the situation in Ephesus at the time which caused him to make a more restrictive ruling apply".

So we have a choice "whether, we take our stand on 1 Timothy 2 and related passages, and somehow make the prominent role of women in first century Christianity fit in with them, or we start with the more general picture as it is summed up in Galatians 3:28 and ask how the more restrictive passages can be explained in that context". "In addition," he says, "we have to face the more demanding hermeneutical question that even if we follow the traditional reading of Paul, how do we apply that teaching to the very different circumstances in which we find ourselves today?"

There are several issues here.

Firstly should we not detect warning signals when it is admitted that one of the main stimuli for a re-examination (and re-interpretation) of biblical texts is changing attitudes in society? So, Paul accommodated his teaching to the culture of his time (and from one point of view was inconsistent, going against the principle of Galatians 3:28), and we are to do the same. Does this mean that if our society developed in a more male dominant direction then we had better read Paul again and go back to a more traditional interpretation?

Secondly, the writer inverts a very important principle of biblical interpretation. Instead of reading passages which clearly and specifically deal with an issue - e.g. eldership/teaching ministry within the church - and reading the less clear passages in their light, it is suggested that the more obscure passages, such as the listing of women in Romans 16, are taken as key, and the more specific passages such as 1 Timothy 2 are viewed against this backdrop, thus not only explaining them, but explaining them away as culturally specific.

The fact is that Paul, in the one clear passage dealing with the issue, refers back to the creation order for his ruling and not to the specific context of the church situation. Thus, we need a hermeneutic which will enable us to transpose this principle of headship, that is, Christ-like male leadership and teaching, to the situation in the church today, and not a hermeneutic which violates it.

My main concern with a hermeneutic which emphasises the difference between our world and the world of the New Testament over and against the similarity, is that too much weight and influence is given to the prevailing beliefs of the present day. I cannot help but see a parallel between the arguments used for the ordination of women - relativising those texts which address the issue and the arguments for legitimising practising homosexual relationships. Supposing the prevailing attitudes in society were to change to such an extent that, to modify the words of our writer, "it became impatient with the few remaining bastions of heterosexual privilege and began tarring the church, and therefore the gospel, with the brush of homophobia and injustice", does this mean that we should go back to the Scriptures and reinterpret those texts which appear to rule out such practice? If we are to be consistent, then the answer must be "Yes", and conveniently a hermeneutic is ready at hand to enable us to do so.

In fact this has already started to happen. I am quoting from part of an article which appeared in Anvil and we will note the formal similarity in the argument used to legitimise homosexual relationships and the arguments we commonly hear to justify the ordination of women to the presbyterate. Referring to Romans 1:26-27: this writer says, "Paul's argument is Greek in form. He draws on the notion of the natural (*physis*) which was very important in a wide range of Greek philosophies (but relatively unusual in the biblical tradition). It is a word which means more than "normal" or "conventional", but it does not mean "natural" in the sense of a fixed law in physical nature of a purely factual kind. The natural is not that which is simply observed in nature, but rather it is a human, moral reflection on the natural world. It includes a sense of human judgement which can be enshrined in cultures and laws. Thus, when Paul speaks of it being natural for women to wear their hair long (1 Corinthians 11:14), he is using the word in a typically Greek sense... I suggest that Paul's argument in vv26ff is similar to that in 1 Corinthians 11:14. Based on his own moral reflection of the natural order he comes to the conclusion that male/male and female/female sexual relationships are idolatrous... My argument is that, based on the openness to reflection of the concept *physis*, we need not necessarily share his conclusion today. It is significant that Paul and his world had no word for homosexuality. They did not know that some human beings have a sexual orientation that seems deeply fixed in a homosexual mode. As a consequence, they lumped together pederasty, homosexual prostitution and sexual debauchery. It seems to me

that we could claim today that loving and committed homosexual relations are natural within the Greek sense of the word phusis..."

He then goes on to say: "Because it uses a moral argument based on the Greek phusis, Paul's reasoning in vv26ff means that in our different empirical and moral setting we can come to a different conclusion in the specific case of committed homosexual relationships. We can thus remain faithful to the deep argument of Paul's text ..." And the conclusion is as follows. "We ought to accept homosexual relationships that are not idolatrous as being part of the variety of creation. Those who are convinced under God that this is the form of life that they are called to ought to be respected, whether they are lay or ordained". Isn't that amazing? To have a hermeneutic which can lead us to say the exact opposite of what Paul is saying and at the same time claim that we are being faithful to him. That is brilliant. In fact it is wicked.

I am reminded of something Carl Henry wrote a while ago. He said "In recent years a type of theft has emerged as some fellow evangelicals wrest from the Bible segments that they derogate as no longer the Word of God. Some now even introduce authorial intention or cultural context of language as specious rationalisations for their crime against the Bible. Much as some rapist might assure me that he is assaulting my wife for my or her own good, they misuse Scripture in order to champion as biblically true what in fact does violence to Scripture". That is where we are heading.

A new commitment

Of all the weaknesses reviewed, this last one is perhaps the most worrying. In conclusion let me raise one or two points.

What does it mean to hold to the authority of Scripture? One helpful way of considering this question might be to think of the way any form of communication functions. In this regard, valuable assistance can be afforded by the insights provided by brain science at the level of communication engineering, as propounded, for example, by the late Professor Donald MacKay. Put simply, any form of communication (whether true or false) is designed to shape the way we relate to things, what is called our "conditional states of readiness". How this works can be illustrated by way of analogy. In a railway shunting-yard there will be a signal-box of levers. When the levers are set up in a certain pattern, the yard is "conditionally ready" to deal with traffic in a corresponding way. Change the pattern of the switches and you change the conditional readiness to cope with the traffic. Words can be thought of as specially designed tools for adjusting the switch settings of our brains - having a shaping function, so that we can become ready to act. So, for example, if I say "It is raining" your conditional states of readiness are changed to reckon with that fact - so you might decide to get out your umbrella, collect in the washing and so on. The point is that by this

communication you are prepared and enabled to act if you choose to do so. It is the same with God's communication to us through the Bible. It is designed to shape the way we relate to reality - the reality of God, the world, each other and so on. Hence Jesus' often misquoted statement in John 8:31; "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free". Understanding and obeying the truth of God coincide here. It is impossible to have obedience without understanding.

The implications of this are quite far-reaching.

Firstly, it is an incentive to put teaching where it ought to be, namely at the centre of Christian ministry. For it is through proclamation, teaching and admonishing (Colossians 1:28), that people's state of readiness is shaped so that they will think and behave in God-approved ways. We must not underestimate what happens Sunday by Sunday, or on any other occasion when God's Word is opened.

Secondly, it means that, in addition to attempting to be as accurate as possible in conveying Christian doctrine, we must pay close attention to the non-verbal aspects of our communication, which can be just as effective in their shaping effect on people's minds as the actual words used. By this, one does not simply mean the manner, intonation and demeanour adopted in preaching (although these things are included), but, for instance, the "style of worship", the form as well as the content of the services. Are these subject to God's authority? Are they designed to have the shaping effect in people's lives that God intends, such as promoting reverence and holy joy? Or is something else being conveyed such as: "This is being done because it is sixteenth-century language" or "Worship is having a happy self-indulgent time with good vibes all around"? To acknowledge the authority of Scripture in practice means acknowledging and submitting to God's right to shape our conditional states of readiness.

This brings us to our third point, namely the extent to which we are submitting to that authority can in part be gauged by our responses to situations as they arise. In other words, our behaviour often serves as a fair indicator of what our true beliefs are and what is really exercising its authority over us. For example, in spite of what Article Six of the Thirty-nine Articles says about the authority of Scripture, in practice many Anglican evangelicals are more or less being required to adopt as an article of faith that only "priests" can officiate at Holy Communion. This is not required by Scripture and one may argue that a good scriptural case can be made that it should not be so. What are Anglican evangelicals' conditional states of readiness with regard to such matters? Are we being ruled by God's Word or by denominational regulations? What are we willing to do about it?

There must be a new and deliberate undertaking by Anglican evangelicals to promote the belief and practice of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. This will involve exposing and resisting some of the trends that have already been noted. It will involve encouraging ministers in particular to develop and maintain the priority of the teaching ministry and to call for those who are so gifted to engage in doing the necessary theological graft to promote a coherent and contemporary evangelical theology for our generation. This will not be doing the theological equivalent of reinventing the wheel, but it will be part of contending afresh for the faith delivered once for all to the saints. And it is to this task that all evangelicals must commit themselves with renewed vigour.