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The Unshakable Things Will Be Left

G.J.C. Marchant.

Writing to the *Church Times* in January, about the National Evangelical Anglican Congress – *Nottingham 77* – John Stott made some comment on the present ‘party’ consciousness of Evangelical churchmen, to the effect that ‘Evangelicals are more of a “coalition” than a “party” ’ and also quoted Bishop Stephen Neill as to the ‘chronic individualism’ that had always prevented any party organisation having more force. Evidently things have not changed much since the time when Bishop J C. Ryle in the last century described them as ‘a rope of sand’. Nevertheless, their presence and activities are still monitored through a collection of societies, conferences and conventions, colleges and fellowships, quite apart from those that reach out across denominational boundaries. Yet, it is also clear that this does not imply any over-all shepherding into membership of such organisations. There is no co-ordinating centre; no over-all coverage. And there are internal criticisms, resistances, and the creakings of stress and strain. Not a few of these are the result of recent developments in Evangelical activities and attitudes, of which the previous NEAC, at Keele in 1967, has been seen to be both focus and encouragement. Indeed, looking back over the last forty years, it is perhaps possible to discern certain trends, of different kinds, that need to be pin-pointed in order that any assessment of the present state of things may have a proper perspective and may be seen more clearly within a fair understanding of purposes that have been in mind, of decisions made and policies adopted; and against the background of thinking about each situation, however clear or muddled it may now be thought to have been.

The Academic Revival.

The first trend we ought to recognise has been that of the *academic revival*. Before the Nazi war (1939-45) Evangelicals in the Church of England, divided into ‘Liberals’ and ‘Conservatives’ the former of whom gathered mainly in the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement (AEGM), the latter more generally met in terms of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen (FEC). The former sort were supported by men of academic distinction and therefore often of ecclesiastical dignity, and were looked

upon by the latter as deeply compromised over doctrine and churchmanship. This gave rise to Dean Inge's comment 'We no longer burn our evangelicals – we make bishops of them'. The 'Conservatives' were marked by parish and overseas evangelistic zeal, expressed in dedicated service; a fierce adherence to the 39 Articles and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (though ignoring some odd awkward points in it); an individualistic pietism, based on the Keswick Convention, where doctrines of separation between 'holiness' and 'the world' (with its clear catalogue of 'don'ts' for the godly) could not but result in an attitude to society and indeed to the rest of the Church of England of some kind of self-segregation; and beyond this, a horror of encounter with academic theology and Biblical study, and a general ignorance of it. They met up with 'Liberals' for the purpose of getting some representation in Church Assembly in that period of late Liberal-Catholic hey-day in the Church of England; but apart from this, only in some societies like the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS) and the old National Church League (NCL), or in the Church Missionary Society (CMS) did some 'Conservatives' meet some 'Liberals' on councils and committees.

In the late thirties a shift of attitude began amongst 'Conservative' Evangelicals that was largely due to the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF) and its Theological Students Fellowship (TSF). Instead of the hitherto prevalent attitude of neglecting – or indeed actually rejecting – concern for academic excellence, either as a snare to the soul or to the preaching of the Gospel, students in all faculties were encouraged as Christians, with a concern for the defence and confirmation of the Gospel, to make the most of their capacities and opportunities. From then on a growing number of increasingly well-equipped people entered the whole field, grappled with the distinctive problems, contributed articles and literature, and became involved as members of the teaching staffs in colleges and universities. More young people found a renewed confidence in Evangelical churchmanship, where previously only the most doggedly loyal could go along with the unconvincing, negatively dogmatic pietism of the time. The further results followed, that the Church of England doctrine and history, liturgiology and ethics became studied with a proper academic rigour, instead of simply in terms of a traditional interpretation where the prescribed conclusions served to limit the study. Especially was a renewed Biblical view of the church thrashed out in discussions and conferences, which supported Evangelicals in responding to opportunities of serving in the wider discussions and reforms going on in the Church of England in the post-war period.

Such a very marked re-orientation with all its encouraging side, could very well be expected, in the nature of things, to have its problems. We might consider one at this point – the development of a gap between those

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prepared to think theologically about Evangelical doctrine, churchmanship and Christian living in modern society, and those who in actual practice did not. A certain ambivalence is discernible here, which is not surprising. Those who were either unable or disinclined to enter very much into the discipline of thinking theologically, were glad to avail themselves of any work of intellectual merit that said what they wished to hear, such as The essays '*Fundamentalism*' and *the Word of God*, (IVF, 1958) but were not disposed to follow other processes of thinking through current issues. They were content to think, speak and act in pre-established patterns of traditional outlook that could be affirmed easily in simplistic slogans. The gap between the academic and the parish situation is, of course, a wider one, relating to the *whole* of the modern church, as recent comment in the press has pointed out.

It is therefore of great importance that a Congress like *Nottingham 77* should occur simply to bring Evangelicals of all kinds face to face, so that they can look together at what is really at issue, not in a confrontation between variant positions, but by coming to recognise the actual conditions of a common task, only to be ignored by some kind of pretending that it is not there. It is important in that common task to grapple with the basic issue of Biblical interpretation, and a paper at the Congress will promote a lot of discussion on this matter. It is not enough simply to quote '*sola Scriptura*' as if that decides such matters. The 39 Articles themselves inculcate one hermeneutic principle, when Article 6 prescribes Scripture as a positive test for necessary belief, and Article 20 prescribes it as a negative test for inculcated norms of practice. But more detailed insight is required in handling the text of OT and NT, and a short gathering can only highlight the problems when faced say, with a kind of thinking (and it can be found) that takes the text, even of the AV, as an undifferentiated quarry of quotation from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 for deciding any issue from credal doctrines to business ethics. It may well underline how little many Evangelicals even attempt to read their own scholarly journals, let alone attempt to acquaint themselves with issues dealt with in the Christian world at large.

Social Reaction.

The second trend that should be noted, affecting Evangelical thought and life, relates to *social reaction*. One does not need here to review in much detail the enormous social change that took place, not only in this country but throughout the Western world and indeed beyond, which began to be felt in the mid-fifties, but gathered pace with profoundly disturbing results in the sixties. One may think of the new political and social trends brought

about by the swing to socialism and the corporate state, and the welfare provisions it involved; or the new approaches to education, proclaiming the extension of child-orientated methods, of discovery, questioning and exploration, rather than passive receiving by one-way teacher to pupil methods; or a gathering momentum of technology in all areas of life, which the newly developing media of TV and the paper-back book industry interpreted in a welter of information mixed with interpretation, encouraging a materialist sophistication in an increasingly humanistic programme of values, and a more and more abrasively aggressive satire on all established standards, positions and outlooks. Released from the rigours and terrors of the war, and from the first worries over 'the bomb', Britain relaxed into fashion and fantasy, reacting to the over-stimulation by the media into a 'swinging' permissiveness as to the conduct of life, that is youth naturally quickly responded to with an iridescent sub-culture of their own, subtly played upon by moneymakers and secular reformists, busy capturing their own kinds of market.

The ensuing 'generation-gap' occasioned by the incredibly quick change in outlook towards any kind of authority, under the incessant incantations about 'freedom', together with a parallel loss of moral code – even though there was much moral concern – led to deep anxiety, and no little depression amongst many who saw nothing but 'change and decay in all around'; and that meant a large proportion of church people. There was a brave attempt to meet the situation in the field of books and radio; and the guitar was quickly baptised to understudy, if not replace, the organ in the parish church, with the 'group' instead of the choir. Evangelicals in the parishes, once they got over the long hair and 'winkle-pickers', soon responded in these terms, but with it came the subtle temptation that affected a large proportion in society: to live out a practical existentialism, discounting the knowledge of the scholar, the perspectives of history, or even more, any traditional outlooks. The innate tendency to skip the hard work, the sense of distance from the academic, and the mentality of the press-button, the instant this or that that prevailed all around have been subtle social forces that some Evangelical clergy and laity have frequently fallen for. It gave rise to 'radicals' of all kinds, including Evangelical ones, and at the same time a loosening of convictions about many matters that have acted as a cohesive tie hitherto. Here has arisen a further cause of alienation between different kinds of Evangelicals, that were further complicated by other trends.

It is also true that a new concern arose to understand the social nature of our situation and to make a response in terms of its more profound analysis. Evangelicals in the past, like so many other churchmen, had responded to the practical needs of society, particularly as to the poor, the

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exploited, and those morally at risk. But for the most part, this had been in terms of 'ambulance-work', the ameliorating of social conditions, using whatever kind of social, political or economic conditions prevailed. The development of actual fundamental criticism of the political and economic structure of society, which became expressed in the 1920s by C.O.P.E.C., led by William Temple, hardly touched Evangelical thought. There was a widespread suspicion that any truck with 'the Social Gospel' would undermine the primary task of evangelism, despite the things even General Booth had said. But this dogma (which it was) found a growing challenge as Evangelical theology recognised that sin is a corporate matter as well as individual and that its continued power over men is effected by the total conditions of their lives as much as by innate tendencies. They read sociology, social psychology as well as individual psychology and they found much in biblical doctrine and history to support. But it has taken a long haul to make this an accepted viewpoint in Evangelical circles, one reason for which, of course, has been that it was 'the radicals' who overstated the case in this area even though on the basis of different theological presuppositions which they liked to think were existentially arrived at from the actual conditions of life. The Lausanne Covenant of 1974 is something of a landmark in this situation which is not to be thought of a final statement but rather as a stepping stone.

Into this *melée* of social response, we may consider briefly the charismatic movement — again noteworthy for its effect all over Christendom. It needs to be thought about as a form of response to the social upheaval of this period. Its doctrinal diffuseness so as to accept a warm fellowship of widely variant types of church people; its fresh emphasis upon the miraculous, the ecstatic, something like 'instant' spiritual experience, liturgical and organisational freedom and spontaneity, with song, hand-clapping and movement, cannot but reflect the 'youthquake' of the pop-world, the re-orientation of the 'swinging sixties' and the tendency towards radical indifference towards doctrinal and ecclesiastical patterns. It may also be said: that the degree of new fascination about the demonic and its exorcism, is not unrelated to the wider interest in black magic, the occult, and the horrendous. At the same time, there are clear evidences of its own forms of pressuring and domination over the impressionable and the less adequate to obtain a certain conformity, that is exactly similiar to the kind of conformity to cultural patterns subtly imposed upon those who wish to feel themselves belonging to one of the current sub-cultures. It has added to the otherwise powerful forces for strain among Evangelicals and especially those in the Church of England.

But the Church of England has itself, during this period attempted to

come to terms with its changed environment, and its changing membership. Archbishop Fisher proclaimed a 'New Reformation' at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, twenty-five years ago, having already begun, what many have felt since was a time-wasting exercise, the revision of the Canons. Not that such activities were in any sense panic responses to the new conditions of life, for many of the new policies put forward had been anticipated and argued, in outline at least, before or at the beginning of the war. Contemporary terms of church life were the fundamental concerns, with 'contemporary' in society obviously meaning 'considerably different'. The terms covered the pastoral structure with its legal controls, liturgical forms alongside the Prayer book uniformity, new ways of government, developing the inherent logic of fully involving the laity, and new terms of ministry. Alongside all this and bound up with every aspect of it, greater progress in church reunion at home and the ecumenical movement overseas. The growing capacity for Evangelicals to share in all this activity was timely and welcomed; especially because as a growing body in numbers and influence, not least in the capacity to argue the case for an Evangelical outlook, their agreement was necessary for any coherent programme, and increasingly their contribution was seen as important for a genuinely Anglican expression.

Party or No Party?

Nevertheless it raises the issue – which has probably never been fully explored – whether Evangelicals in the Church of England are really a 'party' or not; do they play politics or simply rely on persuasion and 'witness'? This has itself led to some strong internal criticism because there are those who forget – or really never knew – that the Evangelical presence in the Church of England prolongs in time the complex situation emerging from the Elizabethan Settlement, which soon after manifested itself in the ancestry of High Church and Broad Church, as well as in those who, wholeheartedly influenced by the Continental Reformation, were later also much influenced by the Evangelical Revival. But there exists something of a myth of the Reformation being one simple clear-cut change, so that there are those who regard other types of churchmen than Evangelicals as something of an intrusion from without though nobosy quite knows whence. But in fact over the years, Evangelicals have pragmatically recognised the fact of the Church of England as it is, and some have accepted its actual history. They would therefore accept an estimate of Evangelical responsibility in the Church of England as (if some wish to put it so) 'making their contribution', but as they themselves would prefer to believe, and consequently urge, to keep the Church of England's face turned firmly in the direction of Biblical, Reformed and Gospel belief and outlook, translated into policies and life

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and service. In pursuit of such an aim and yet in consciousness of actual circumstances, there cannot but be situations where 'godly order' may be stated in terms less precise than may fully satisfy those who wish to have their convictions spelt out in sharp detail. But before accusations of 'compromising ambiguity' are too quickly attributed, it may be remembered that Scripture is less than specific on important doctrines, and on issues of practice (e.g. the attitude to the state, or on slavery) either shows different responses at different times (Romans 13 and the Book of Revelation) or says little at all. There *has* been harmful ambiguity and it can be repeated; it is a deceptive device to lure the uninformed into false situation; but it is not the same as the phrasing that is not so defined as to prevent men who live as Christians in the one church from continuing with a charitable acceptance of each other though holding differences in the meaning of phrases that need not be taken as contrary to Biblical doctrine. The 1662 B.C.P. has, over the years provided this very thing in the centuries since the Reformation in services for Baptism or ordination, or in the Prayer for the Church Militant in its commemoration for the departed.

It will be remembered that there was a joke going around some years ago, that Adam said to Eve as they were evicted from the Garden of Eden, 'My dear, we are in a state of transition'. It was the wry comment on the upheavals of the time, the problems of adjusting to the shaking period introduced by the aftermath of the war. As always in such situations, the personality type will play an important part in the kind of reaction that an individual will make to such stresses, and the individual will see the situation either in terms of challenge and opportunity, or a threat to avoid in some way; or again, as another moment for backs to the wall, close ranks against all comers. These latter were the characteristic reactions of fear. But the post-war world and the struggling church life in the country found many Evangelicals without those fears, but convinced that they could and must engage in the debate about contemporary Christian thinking. living and church life, including the whole issue of the kind of Church of England that was having to be shaped. They simply could not see the late Victorian fear-outlook that had become an established stance for over fifty years being the necessary typical one and past history of earlier days added its own question-mark. It might seem near-blasphemy to regard the Prayer-Book as a superb, but nevertheless a human product, and consequently, as with all things human, subject to the law of desuetude and progressive obsolescence, like the Kings James Version. But the matter had to be raised in principle and there were now many flooding back into the congregations who raised it urgently in practice. The Western world, including this country, talked a new language, thought in new terms, and saw patterns of life and

outlook upon it in such fresh terms of personal relations as to involve a widely ranging work of re-interpretation.

Different personality types amongst Evangelicals ensured variant reactions to all this; some positive in response, either in attempts at deeper understanding and appropriate action as seen from time to time, or more quick and superficial, making the most of any seeming opportunity; or again in urging and arguing that the tradition in all its details, but suitably updated in appearance, was alone necessary. Others continued to express themselves in seeking to find an inward answer, or indeed, not an answer but a continued spirituality that could leave wide areas of present life untouched, except by prayer, especially for a divine revival that would answer the basic problems. It is important that we should recognise that the variations due to different personality types, while not all capable of harmonisation, nevertheless do remind us that such different types and their emphasis are part of the variety of the Body of Christ. The adventurous and the cautious, the activist and the academic, the one sensitive to the situation and the one concerned for the riches of the inherited tradition, and the one who concentrates on the inwardness of spirituality, are all important ways of witness to the manifold controls that exercise proper directives to the ongoing life of the whole. They need to have the opportunity of interplay, not in a spirit of individualism that can only see their own particular drive as right, but in the spirit of the love that in seeking the edification of the whole, recognises that there can be no pattern that can be given a perennial authority, no belief in an Evangelical (or any other sort) of Utopia, where everything is quite correct and all can settle down to enjoy it. That is not the recipe for life in this world; only for petrification.

It is not surprising, therefore that Evangelicals have shown a readiness to change, marks of change, and amongst many a conviction that change is both necessary and yet requiring constant assessment as to direction and content. But when it means that some of the identification marks are less clear edges blurred, is this a time to call a halt; or rather to ask what it is that maintains Evangelical witness, if some hallmarks are lacking, and will be the source of fresh ones to match fresh needs? If the Westward use is as popular as the North-side; if evangelism or missionary zeal is shown by others who would not call themselves 'Evangelicals'; if collar and tie is not the sign of the Evangelical parson, even in the parish; if Series 2 and 3 give no indication of churchmanship . . . well, where is the mark of the Evangelical churchman?

Fundamental Marks.

Perhaps a lead here may be found in an unexpected source, yet from a well-known figure in the Evangelical tradition. Bishop J C. Ryle once listed

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the following five points as those fundamental to 'Gospel Religion':

1. The Absolute Supremacy assigned to Holy Scripture.
2. The Prominence of the Truth of Human Sinfulness and Need.
3. The Supreme Importance of the Work of Christ in Man's Salvation.
4. Emphasis upon the Inward Work of the Holy Spirit in the Believer.
5. The High Position given to the Outward Evidence of the Holy Spirit in the Believer.

These may seem, as first sight, a typical summary of subjective, individualistic religion, although it needs saying that, while they may be and have been the themes individualistic Evangelicalism has used for its support, 1-3 of the five points are not properly speaking subjective. It also needs saying, especially in this highly communally-conscious world in which we no doubt shall be living for a good while, emphasis on the individual will be no small service that Christians generally and Evangelicals among them especially, can do for mankind. This at once leads us to recognise that it is not possible to think of the individual isolated out of his social context, and this is an issue of man in society, in his world, and the Christian in the church, and the church in the world, that must necessarily be an important presupposition for thought and outlook that Evangelicals must develop, in their own way, and as part of their spirituality.

Will these five emphases, taken as an integrated set of *priorities together*, within the wider context of Christian doctrine, serve to unify and identify Evangelical responses to issues in society and in the church generally? It is easy to see them as guidelines for the individual Evangelical in his involvement with academic, political, economic, industrial concerns, or in social or pastoral programmes, exercising a discipline upon each as he finds himself facing different decisions without a codified list any longer of do's and don't's, but about which he will confer with others to find group assistance and encouragement in the task. But is it so easy to see them acting like a rudder, to swing a whole shipload of structures of a social or ecclesiastical nature in a certain direction that would be characteristically 'Evangelical'?

It needs to be emphasised that the stark simplicity of this group of priorities is its strength, as long as no other element is allowed to have a co-ordinate priority. This would be the obvious concern it would call forth from those who would wish to add to or subtract from its radical nature. They actually spell out somewhat the *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide Solus Christus*. But they are so simple that they must be allowed to prod the mind from the simplistic to explore how their impact is to be recognised on a wide variety of situations, where different types of personality may see

their light variously slanted. Their inter-relation means that each exercises a significant impact upon the others; thus human sin and need is not just a deduction from experience but seen in the light of Scripture witness about man's nature and state; in the light of Jesus Christ as Saviour; in the light of the Holy Spirit's work of renewal and sanctification; or again, the study of Holy Scripture is not a bibliolatry or a new scribalism, nor is its authority a codified form for imposition in the way the Jews used the O.T. It is the means God uses to approach men in their changing historical conditions but in their abiding personal and spiritual condition of sin and need, in his merciful lovingkindness revealed in Jesus Christ as Saviour, and in the ministry of the Spirit. And so on. The outward evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit relates, again, not just to the life-style of the individual Christian, which needs to exemplify the genuine freedom of the renewed man in Christ, conscious that he is still part of sinful humanity and called to judge himself according to the word of God; but also the way the church responds to the Lordship of the Spirit, to order its life under the discipline of Scripture, but not necessarily to be controlled rigidly by its past. Yet at the same time it will not allow itself to believe every spirit — nor every assertion that this or that is 'the leading of the Spirit'.

If these five priorities of outlook were taken as properly indicative of Evangelical life and witness, it is clear that they leave open to the future many matters on which in the past there has been a fairly clear-cut line. It could be that to accept that situation would be to recognise, as the development of historical understanding helps, indeed requires, us to do, that the way human society has been developing from rigidly authoritarian structures and scholastic rationalist thinking, necessarily means that everyone's ways of thinking and evaluation of situations are having to be more open; there is a relativising, reappraising process likely to go on, which is not the same as a reductionist relativism, where all criteria are lost in the assumption that 'anything goes'. Humanity may well be on the march, not knowing very much where; with it inevitably goes the Christian pilgrim, knowing his calling is to be this, (though sometimes forgotten in a static society), and therefore treasuring a chart and compass which has been provided. We might think of these five priorities as providing just that, and if we find others, who are using the same, going the same way, it will be an experience to value and not to fear. It is essential to know and rely on what is really lasting in the flux of time and circumstance, for in this inevitable processes of change, it is only these 'unshakeable things' that are left which provide the resilience and growing maturity that grows in obedience to Christ.