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Anglican Evangelicals in Crisis. The Problem of Pharisaic Yeast—Luke 12:1-11

Melvin Tinker

No one could have failed to notice that as a national firefighter's strike began to loom large on the public horizon, the media decided to have a nostalgia fest. Out came the footage of the streets of our major cities piled high with refuse, crowds of trade union activists marching down Whitehall and political commentators uttering the dreaded words: 'Winter of Discontent'. This was the ghost of Christmas past spirited up to haunt the present; guaranteed to strike a chill into the heart of any Government. It was back in those dark months of 1978-79 that the Sun newspaper ran the headline, purporting to be a quote from the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, having just returned from sunnier climes: 'Crisis, What Crisis?' Some said that helped lose Labour the General election. But Callaghan didn't actually say that. What he did say was: 'I don't think other peoples in the world would share the view that there is mounting chaos.' So spin was operating back then. 'Crisis?' Surely, it is all a matter of perspective?' Not really. Those were real bags of rubbish on the streets and those were real buildings burning down. That was real inflation spiralling away and those were real people marching who were most certainly full of discontent!

When we stand back and look at our situation today in the Christian scene, protestations not withstanding, we can say that we are facing a crisis, a crisis in the Church generally and in Anglican evangelicalism in particular.

First, there is a crisis in the Church *in* England as well as the Church *of* England. Whichever statistic you care to consider, the overall direction is the same—downwards. Overall or on average, the churches lost one fifth of their members or attenders during the 1990s. The Church of England has the smallest average congregations of any denomination in England. Back in 1998 it was 60 on a normal Sunday. I would suspect it is lower than that now, which seems to be the implication of the most recent report, "Hope for the Church", which predicts that if the present rate of decline continues some diocese will

simply not exist by 2008. Of course the Church will, like James Callaghan, try and put a positive spin on things as we see in the 'Year in Review' produced by the Church of England. On the back of the 2001 edition we are told that there are 9,500 stipendiary clergy, including 114 bishops, as if we are to take some comfort from that. What is not said is that these figures reflect the fact that the number of stipendiary clergy has more than halved since the late nineteenth century and the number of Bishops has more than quadrupled. We are a denomination in meltdown.

In the Church of England there was one interesting and encouraging statistic however. Negatively, overall the decline in the C. of E. has been twenty-three per cent. But there has been some small growth, two per cent amongst evangelicals. But that two per cent was averaged not only from charismatic Anglican evangelicals who declined by twenty-one per cent, broad Anglican evangelicals who declined by twenty-three per cent, but also mainstream Anglican evangelicals who grew by an amazing three hundred and twenty per cent. And so it is ironic when pressure is exerted for evangelicals to become more broad and inclusive in their approach when these are the very groups on the decline. However, we can't be complacent since all Anglican Evangelicals only make up twenty-four per cent of the entire C. of E. But these figures may suggest that whatever future there might be for the C. of E. it lies with the mainstream evangelicals and so this is not a time for us to start accommodating by losing our nerve.

When we turn to consider Anglican evangelicalism in particular, the suggestion being made is that there is a threefold crisis. But before we look at each one of these in turn we shall approach the matter indirectly via the Scriptures, for Jesus' teaching in Luke 12 is more pertinent to our situation than we dare to admit.

In Luke 11 Jesus has just engaged in the most stinging attack on the religious establishment of his day, or to be more precise, its religious leaders—the Pharisees and scribes. Then in 12:1 he turns to his disciples, those in key leadership positions within his movement and says: 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.' What is the hypocrisy of which Jesus speaks? It is the disparity between privately held views and public profession (vv. 2-3). This is unpacked for us earlier in chapter 11. The first characteristic of

hypocrisy is its concern with *external appearance at the expense of internal character* (vv. 39-41) and that it is also overly *concerned with gaining public applause to the neglect of positive moral influence* (vv. 43-4). Why should this be a particular danger to Jesus disciples so that he has to warn them about the small but invidious effect of hypocrisy which penetrates like yeast? Because of 12:1—‘A *crowd of many thousands* had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another’. That is when the temptation to play the hypocrite is bound to come. That is when we will want to impress the crowds in order to retain the crowds and influence the crowds. We tend to think of Pharisees and scribes as those whose aim was to make keeping the Word of God hard. But their intention was the opposite- the rules and regulations were added to make it *easier* to keep, so that a moral and spiritual check list could be drawn up and gone through ticking each one of as they went along. The result was that people were being prevented from entering the kingdom of God, (11:52). By so softening the force of God’s Word people mistakenly thought they were all right and so didn’t need a Saviour. In short, false security is being engendered. Which one of us have not only felt the pull of this but actually succumbed to it, not to say offensive things, even to sound evangelicals because we might lose them?

But even more negatively, what lurks beneath the lure of hypocrisy is *fear* which Jesus deals with so powerfully in verses 4-11. It is fear of unpopularity, of being ostracised or being persecuted which leads in the first place to accommodation—modifying our practise so that it becomes acceptable even if it is at odds with the principles we hold private—until eventually those principles themselves are modified so that the practice becomes justified. When we look at what happened to Peter in Galatians 2:11 we can see how necessary Jesus’ teaching was. Is it possible for professing evangelicals to find themselves in verse 8, refusing to acknowledge Jesus before men? Most certainly. This does not necessarily mean an outright denial of the divinity or saving power of Christ, though it might amount to an *operational* denial if, for example, we allow that salvation is to be found outside Christ in other religions. But we can equally disown him by playing down the more uncomfortable aspects of his teaching. Do we really think that it is possible to honour the person of Christ while at the same time whittling down his teaching? We have spoken of an *operational* denial for it is only too possible to be preaching sound sermons to our congregations each Sunday, and even being bold in our declarations from the pulpit, but if that is not backed up by action on the ground, active in those

areas where the honour of Jesus is being impugned, then we are no better than these Pharisees. We may be courting the applause of our sound congregations but because we are not following it through elsewhere we are short changing them nonetheless, because two things will happen. First, other people will follow our example—as Barnabas followed Peter in Galatians 2. Preachers cannot expect their people to stand out in the rough and tumble of the workplace if we are not willing to do so in the rough and tumble of our denomination. Why else does Jesus address his disciples here, his right hand men, before talking to the crowds? They are the key people. Secondly, the surrounding rot in the structures will eventually work its way down or inward to the local congregation sooner or later when there may be less evangelicals to pastor them or more ecclesiastical officials to bother them.

The alternative to hypocrisy is stark and clear (v. 1) we will be brought before the authorities. This as we know is already happening. In November, 2002, a Vicar and PCC in the North of England passed a motion which they sent on to the Bishop saying that they would not be welcoming any bishop or minister to their church who held the same views as Rowan Williams. The Bishop replied that this would have serious implications for that church in the future when it seeks to replace its Vicar and in the present as the Vicar's position as Rural Dean is now under threat. What will it be like, say, ten years from now?

Luke 12 is where many of us are today and we need to be on our guard and that provides the sackcloth for the rest of this paper.

There is a threefold crisis within Anglican evangelicalism. A crisis of *conviction*, a crisis of *courage* and a crisis of *creativity*.

First, there is a **crisis of conviction**. It has to be admitted that it is difficult to hold convictions about anything within today's secular climate where truth is relative and the only absolute is that there are no absolutes. You may express what you feel, but not what you think, especially when the latter has a universal truth claim attached to it for smacks of intellectual imperialism. You may share perspectives but not convictions—save those which are in line with the political correctness of our age. Such an atmosphere has slowly corroded mainstream, historic, confessional evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is now seen more as a flavour rather than a full blooded confessional movement. Some are

evangelicals by association rather than conviction, they just happen to be drawn to a particular brand of Christianity which may just happen to suit them temperamentally. For some they find themselves within an evangelical orbit more by accident than by design. Sure, evangelicalism may be tolerated as one strand of Anglicanism which might make its contribution (usually in style of public worship or its zeal for evangelism) but to dare to claim that it embodies at its best historic New Testament Christianity and so is the only authentic version of the faith on offer and therefore best expresses historic Anglicanism as enshrined in our formularies (which in the past has been the position of men like John Stott and Jim Packer) that is too much to take. Then such thinking will be dismissed even by some of its adherents as outmoded, tied too closely to a modernist mindset with its concern for propositional truth, evidence, coherence and the like for as we are often told we live in a post modern age.

We must not underestimate the influence po-mo (post modernism) has had and is having even within evangelical circles. For as start, at the level of the street it is pervasive. I would guess that many of the students at some of our more established university evangelical churches and elsewhere will be somewhat taken aback to hear that some church leaders are antagonistic to the appointment of Rowan Williams as Archbishop of Canterbury, who himself is typically postmodern. Why is that? It is because of the intellectual and cultural atmosphere in which they live and move and have their being. The ultimate sin today is the sin of intolerance, of that we must be resolutely intolerant. It is not 'nice' to say someone is wrong. The church growth analyst Leith Anderson writes: 'We have a generation that is less interested in cerebral arguments, linear thinking, theological systems and more interested in encountering the supernatural. The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.' And, as we shall see, that is why Rowan Williams is the Archbishop of po-mo *par excellence*. Anderson then goes on to cite a young man who says he likes the Bible, John Calvin and the high priestess of the New Age, Shirley Maclean, and says that each is equally meaningful to him. When that sort of mindset infects evangelicalism what sort of congregations are you going to have? It will be ones where what was once considered to be immorality will be on the increase. What sort of leadership will you be cultivating in our theological colleges? The answer: one where the term evangelical is little more than a fashion statement. As David Wells puts it,

'As evangelicalism has grown numerically, it has seeped through its older structures and now spills out in all directions, producing a family of hybrids whose theological connections are quite baffling: evangelical Catholics, evangelical liberationists, evangelical feminists, liberal evangelicals, liberals who are evangelicals and charismatic evangelical. The word 'evangelical', precisely because it has lost its *confessional* dimension has become descriptively anaemic. To say that someone is an evangelical says little about what they believe.' He is absolutely right.

We might also ask: what sort of evangelism will be engaged in? It is something of a parody, but those who have read enough of what some professing evangelicals are advocating today will know that it hits the nail firmly on the thumb! Here is the new post-modern Paul on Mars Hill—

People of postmodernity, I can see you speak in many language games and are interested in diverse spiritualities. I have observed your pluralistic discourse and the fact that you use many fine vocabularies. I have seen your celebration of the death of objective truth and the eclipse of metanarratives and I declare to you that you are right. As one of your own has said, 'We are suspicious of metanarratives.' What you have already said, I will reaffirm with a slightly different spin. We have left modernity behind as a bad dream. We deny its rationalism, objectivism and intellectual arrogance. Instead of this, we affirm the Christian community, which we profess that god is the strand that unites our web of belief. We have our own manner of interpreting the world and using language that we call you to adopt yourself. We give you no argument for the existence of God, since natural theology is simply rationalistic hubris. We are not interested in metaphysics but in discipleship. For us, Jesus is Lord. That is how we speak. We act that way too, it's important to us. And although we cannot appeal to any evidence outside our own communal beliefs and tradition, we believe that god is in control of our narrative. We ask you to join our language game. Please, Since it is impossible to give you any independent evidence for our use of language or to appeal to hard facts, we simply declare this to be our truth. It can become your truth as well, if you join up. Jesus does not call you to believe in propositions but to follow him. You can't really understand who we are talking about until you join up. But after that, it will be much clearer. Trust us. In our way of speaking,

God is calling everyone, everywhere to change his or her language game. To appropriate a new discourse and to re-describe reality one more time. We speak such that the resurrection of Jesus is the crucial item in our final vocabulary. We hope that you will learn to speak this way as well.

That could be Rowan Williams speaking, but it is, in fact, Douglas Groothuis in his excellent book 'Truth Decay'. This is why the appointment of Rowan Williams is so crucial, disastrous and is likely to change the future direction of the Church of England for the worse. What is being subverted by Rowan William's methodology is truth. Truth that is universal and can be expressed in propositions. The god of Rowan Williams is not omnipotent—he struggles to communicate at all. The Scriptures are certainly not divine revelation but contain within them *attempts* at divine revelation. The only thing we can know is that we don't know. What is considered to be appropriate is to be worked out within the community of faith. This can and does change. But given that revelation is so opaque and corrupted as it comes to us via the bible writers who are locked into their own language game, and then into our communities with our language games and corrupted further by all the baggage and mishearing and misunderstanding we bring to the text, then at the end of the day we are left with the classic post-modern position, might is right. It is the battle of interest groups. And so attempts will be made and are being made to change the climate of opinion to ensure that the gay interest group, for example, wins out in the end. There is no final court of appeal—scripture or tradition or even experience—for these too are corrupted and contaminated. Of course, it is never a fair game these people play. As mainstream evangelicals our exegesis and hermeneutics might be suspect by the advocates of deconstruction, but it is interesting that there is always at least one person who claims to have seen through it all—in this case, Rowan Williams. So while in his book *Open to Judgement* he can write, 'In Scripture is God's urgency to communicate, here in scripture is our mishearing, our misappropriating, our deafness and our resistance.' But how does he know that? Might this not be a case of Rowan Williams mishearing and misappropriating? If everything is so uncertain, how can Rowan Williams be so certain? And if he can be so certain, then surely he should at least extend to evangelicals the courtesy of at least allowing the possibility they might not only be certain in what they say, but right in what they say?

But if evangelicals have at least tacitly bought into the relativist position, it is going to be very difficult not to go with the flow and resist such an appointment.

We have all suffered from cultural attrition and the consequent desensitisation. Can we honestly believe that say, twenty years ago, evangelicals would have been prepared to accept in a position of significant leadership someone who approved of gay sex? Hardly. But some are now. 'Oh,' they say 'we don't agree and we must dialogue and try and persuade.' Fine. But not while the man occupies such a position. Given what the scriptures say on the issue it is unthinkable that such a position should be held. Would we be happy to have someone who thinks that paedophilia is OK in some circumstances? You may well reply that would be so grotesque and unthinkable, in fact, impossible. But that is exactly what would have been said by evangelicals over the gay issue twenty years ago.

The basic question is: Do we believe in truth? Do we believe that truth matters? Yes, there may be a hierarchy of truth, there are first order truth and second order truths, of course—but do we believe truth is of concern to God? After all he is the God of truth. His word is truth. Do we believe that there are eternal consequences for obeying or disobeying the truth? Do words matter? Well, according to Luke 12 and the teaching of Jesus the answer to each of these questions is in the affirmative, v. 3 and v. 8 'What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs....I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God'. If we do not feel the force of this, that is simply a measure of the extent to which we have been compromised. The result? — there is a crisis of conviction.

Largely arising out of this comes a **crisis of courage**. It is striking how the matter of fear lies behind the drive to play the Pharisee. Luke 12:4: 'I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.' But it is very difficult not to be afraid sometimes. Dear Cranmer was terribly afraid as he lay all alone in that cell and who can blame him that he faltered and recanted on the doctrine of the mass? But at least he then had the courage to go to the stake and first of all place the hand into the flames which had signed that recantation. And today evangelical ministers are afraid. What

is going to happen if I am a team Vicar I don't have security of the freehold, then what when my contract comes to an end? Ordinands at college what are they going to do? Well, they are not going to openly deny Christ, but the pressure is on to keep quite and your heads down and not to say *anything*, because it will upset the smooth running of the theological college, as well as stymie the chances of getting a decent curacy, after all 'I have a wife and children to provide for'. You bet they are afraid! And those ministers that do have freehold, they can be afraid too. Will they be allowed a curate? Will the PCC support them? Part of the problem of living in a cultural climate like ours where the thought police are always on patrol, rooting out any un-Politically Correct comment is that it engenders fear. In fact the power of the PC groups is dependent upon that fear, without it they have no power at all. The same is the case with the church. Some issues cannot even be openly discussed in a rational and courteous manner because some people might be 'hurt.' The fact that the greatest casualty of all is truth seems to be neither here nor there. The result? We are afraid. How is that fear to be countered? Paradoxically by fear. Having a greater fear of God, (v. 5), 'But I will show you whom you *should* fear. Fear him who after killing the body, has power to throw you into hell (he is talking to his top executives here—the apostles). Yes, I tell you fear him.' But this one whom we are to fear is also the one we are to trust, (v. 6), 'Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. *Don't* be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.' Be afraid so that you won't be afraid. But be afraid of the right person—God not man.

One of the constant criticisms of REFORM that has come down through the years even by folk on the council is: we must be careful of bad PR. It is difficult to think of *any* godly movement that ever avoided bad PR. If the greatest of them all, who never put a foot wrong was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton what chance do you think we are going to have of getting a good write up.

What was it that enabled our evangelical forbears to have the courage to do what they did against so much opposition which makes our concerns appear trivial in comparison?

Bishop Warburton warned everyone that John Wesley was, 'a wily and malignant hypocrite'. That would have hurt and done more than its fair share

of damage. It was also put about that Wesley was expelled from Oxford for gross immorality and that Whitefield was an anarchist plotting a bloody revolution—very dangerous stuff that was when the whole country was on awash with plots of the Pretender. Some of the Methodist preachers had glass ground into their eyes, their houses burnt down. And then we romanticise the Revivals! Of course the opposition could be more subtle and even more difficult to cope with. So John Berridge of Everton was called to appear before his Bishop who had received so many complaints from fellow clergy that he had been preaching outside his own parish—would you believe? And so the Bishop threatened him. When that failed he changed tack and began to entreat him. ‘Berridge’ he said, ‘you know have long been your friend and I wish to be so still. I am continually teased with the complaints of the clergyman around you. Only assure me that you will keep to your own parish; you may do as you please there. I have but a little time to live; do not bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.’ Do you know what Berridge said after this ordeal? ‘I could bear the threatening, but knew not how to withstand entreaty, especially the entreaty of a respectable old man.’ That is where our courage fails doesn’t it? ‘We had better not take precipitate action otherwise our work might suffer. So long as we can get on with work in our own parish, let it go. We had better keep on side with the Bishop or our hopes of church planting might be jeopardised, our staff might be reduced. And after all the Bishop, even though he may be a heretic has been so supportive.’ Of course, one is not saying we should be belligerent for the sake of being belligerent. But what if the Gospel demands that money is withheld from the diocese so that it can be redirected to authentic Gospel work? What if the needs of our nation are such that church planting must take place across parish and diocesan boundaries? Do we hold back or go forward? Our evangelical forefathers knew what to do and they did it.

They also paid the price for it too. But then they really did believe the words of Jesus when he said, ‘Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.’ We have turned that on its head. For the Anglican evangelical we are blessed when people say all sorts of good things about us, how they value our contribution, when we are made canons and dignitaries and bishops and archdeacons, then we are blessed indeed. The only time someone suggested that George Whitefield be made a bishop was in order to stop him evangelising. Of course they never did.

It is not insignificant that this teaching of Jesus was given to the disciples *collectively*. We do need each other to support and encourage one another when we are up against it and to correct each other when necessary as did Paul with Peter. It can be very lonely being a leader, even lonelier being a leader taking a stand.

Why was the Eclectic society founded in London in 1783? It was to encourage the few evangelical clergymen there were in London in those days. For thirteen years William Romaine was the only evangelical clergyman north of the Thames. When John Newton went to Woolnoth in 1779 for another twenty years these two remained alone—twenty years! South of the river, there were a handful more, but only a handful. They had the courage to stick it out, and one of the means God used to enable them to do that was by meeting together, keeping each other on side. That is exactly what we need to do.

The third crisis in Anglican evangelicalism is a **crisis of creativity**. One of the most impressive features of our evangelical forbears was their genius for practical innovation. If they encountered problems they sought to find way around them. Their aim was to get the Gospel out and so they would employ any legitimate means to do that—legitimate by God's standards not ecclesiastical authorities, although they did try and work within the system when they could. And so they established special lectureships to enable evangelicals preach in non-evangelical churches, proprietary chapels which Bishops allowed to be built which from their point of view was the simplest way of coping with an increasing population. In spite of tremendous opposition CPAS was enabled to provide for lay assistants. Of course one of the many differences between then and now was that the Church of England was less centralised. Surely, we need to recapture some of that creative spirit pioneering of the evangelicals of the 18th and 19th centuries? We see some of that taking place with initiatives such as the 9:38, the Big Issue and some are trying to get things moving to encourage a national strategy for church based student work. But there is room for more thinking and co-operation. How can we proceed with more church planting across parish and diocesan boundaries? How can we secure good theological training for ministers in view of what the latest working party on funding and training in the Church of England is likely to propose—regional centres with a theological mix? How can we help fund gospel initiatives in the more needy parts of our country—especially the north

of England and get ministers in these places? What can be done to ensure that evangelical ordinands are placed in evangelical parishes? What should we be thinking of doing if a measure for women bishops does get through and the Act of Synod is revoked? Surely, now is the time to be thinking of these things and we should be taking steps to co-ordinate such thinking, rather than reacting when it is too late.

Over a hundred years ago Bishop J. C. Ryle contrasted the evangelicals of his time with the evangelicals of the Great Awakening. See if these words ring any bells with you as you think about our present situation:

‘Wherein do Evangelical churchmen fall short of their great predecessors in the last century? They fall short in doctrine. They are neither so full nor so distinct. They are too ready to fence and guard and qualify their teaching as if Christ’s Gospel was a little baby that could not be trusted to walk alone. They fall short as preachers. They have neither the fervour, nor fire, nor thought, nor illustration nor directness nor holy boldness...which characterised the last century. Above all they fall short in life; they are not men of one thing, separate from the world...indifferent to man’s opinion, regardless who is offended, if they only preach the truth, always about their Father’s business. Ease and popularity and the absence of persecution are ruinous to some. Political questions eat out the vitality of others. An extravagant and excessive attention to the petty details of parish machinery withers up the ministry of others. An absurd straining after the reputation of being ‘intellectual’ and original is the curse of others. A desire to seem charitable and liberal and to keep in with everybody paralyses the ministry of others. The plague is abroad. We want a revival amongst evangelical ministers.’

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