

The Crumbling of Evangelicalism

By Malcolm H. Watts

If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do? (Psalm 11:3)

In recent years, due to repeated attacks on fundamental biblical doctrine and principle, the cause of Truth among us has been terribly undermined. The results are for all to see. Ministers and churches, once known for their faithful stand, have been moved from their formerly held positions (in many cases without realising it) and are now in a state of complete confusion.

In the evangelical world, foundations once thought unshakeable are presently crumbling before our very eyes. We must identify the movements responsible for this:

1. The Ecumenical Movement

First, we must identify the Ecumenical Movement. This movement effectively began in 1910 with the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. The conference was Protestant and generally evangelical, manifesting a spirit of unity generated by the common aim of world-evangelisation. It provided the inspiration for 'the vision of a united church'.

It was this ideal which led to various Faith and Order Conferences attended by representatives of all denominations. Eventually, at Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches was formally inaugurated 'to promote the growth of ecumenical consciousness' in

the hope of 'corporate unity'.

The World Council of Churches was described as a 'fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour'. This basic formula of agreement was, of course, pathetically inadequate.

It failed to safeguard vital truth or to exclude the errors which deny the Gospel. As a result, unreformed and liberal churches felt able to join. Once this happened, things could only go from bad to worse. Recent developments show that the Council is now ready to embrace all faiths and religions.

At its sixth assembly at Vancouver in 1983, official invitations were extended to 'three Hindus, four Buddhists, two Jews, four Muslims, a Sikh and an adherent of native Canadian spirituality'. The assembly began with a pagan Canadian ceremony in which 'a sacred flame' was lit by Indian representatives who added dried fish and tobacco to the flame as a symbol of their participation. One worship service consisted of native Indian dancing, chanting and drum-beating.

A few years ago evangelicals were more or less united in their rejection of ecumenism. In 1964 Donald Gillies spoke for the majority when he said: 'The ecumenical movement is an affront to the Truth. It is a blatant repudiation of the faith of the Reformers and a shameless indictment of their action ... Let

evangelical Protestantism be faithful unto death rather than enter into an allegiance with the idolatry of Eastern Orthodoxy and Romanism, and the unbelief of liberalism.' (Unity in the Dark, published by the Banner of Truth Trust.)

After writing that Gillies completely changed his position. Tragically many others have too. In the World Council of Churches publication One World, Dr Emilio Castro writes: 'A substantial number of Christian brothers and sisters of evangelical persuasion are open to the ecumenical movement and willing to participate in it with their testimony... I see signs everywhere of a wider participation of evangelicals in the forum that is the World Council of Churches.'

Let us look at two specific examples of this participation. At the second National Evangelical Anglican Congress in 1977, John Stott spoke of the 2,000 evangelicals attending, and said. 'The visible unity of all professing Christians should be our goal ... and evangelicals should join others in the Church of England in working toward full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.'

Betrayed

John Stott has been highly respected in evangelical circles and it is profoundly disturbing to witness his betrayal of evangelical Protestantism. But he is not alone. In a letter to The Times, Dr George

Carey, Principal of Trinity (Anglican Evangelical) College, Bristol, openly admitted that 'evangelicals have changed'.

According to Dr Carey, the change is apparent in current attitudes to error as well as to Truth. In these days, he says, evangelicals are less likely to contend against the Roman doctrine that Christ is actually and literally present in the consecrated bread and wine, preferring to be 'agnostic as to the how-ness of that event'. He goes on to mention the other significant shift in belief: 'Our attitude to Scripture has changed significantly as well.'

And what is the result of all this? Dr Carey says that although some are - 'trapped in a time warp of the Reformation, still fighting old baffles and mouthing old shibboleths' - organic union with Rome is now a distinct possibility. 'The old barriers of suspicion topple as evangelicals recognise the Christian in the Catholic, and hopefully, vice versa.'

Here is the evidence that ecumenism has shaken the God-given and sure foundations of the evangelical faith.

2. The Charismatic Movement

The second movement responsible for shaking the foundations of the evangelical world is the charismatic movement. As a modern variant of Pentecostalism, this movement swept through Christendom in

the 1960s and 1970s under the ministries of men like David du Plessis, Michael Harper and David Watson. It resembles Pentecostalism in its emphasis on one post-conversion experience and the consequent reception of spiritual gifts, notably the gift of tongues. It differs, however, in its international character and open ecumenical associations.

A few years ago some were saying that the charismatic movement was dying, but, phoenix-like, it seems to have risen from its own ashes, first in the form of the house church movement, and more recently in the form of the restoration movement. While maintaining its basic charismatic features it has also developed a belief in the restoration of apostolic and prophetic ministries as being vital for the establishment of God's kingdom.

Within evangelicalism, attitudes towards the charismatic movement have changed. At first there was high-level criticism and even denunciation. In the 1960s, for example, Dr Stephen Short wrote against 'the doctrinal error into which many in recent times have fallen respecting the subject of baptism in the Spirit'.

Dr Merrill Unger publicly lamented 'the widespread confusion occasioned by the charismatic movement in our times,' adding his conviction that, 'When the Word of God is given pre-eminence and when sound Bible doctrine, especially in the sphere of the theology of the Holy

Spirit, is stressed and made the test of experience, the claims of charismatic Christianity will be rejected.'

However, by the early 1970s bewildered evangelicals were shifting positions. In September 1971, the editor of Crusade magazine wrote: 'In general, evangelicals have settled for a kind of open agnosticism about the movement, and in many ways this is a reasonable attitude.'

So the door was set ajar, and just six months later an article appeared in Christianity Today enthusiastically welcoming the movement. It declared: 'A new era of the Spirit has begun. The charismatic experience moves Christians far beyond glossolalia (tongues-speaking)... There is light on the horizon. An evangelical renaissance is becoming visible along the Christian highway, from the frontiers of the sects to the high places of the Roman Catholic communion. This appears to be one of the most strategic moments in the church's history.'

Today, the phenomenon of the charismatic movement threatens to engulf the evangelical cause. 'It is indisputable.' wrote Robert Horn in an issue of Evangelical Times, 'that a large part - some would say the greater part - of the evangelical world is in some measure influenced by the various branches of the charismatic scene.'

One looks with increasing dismay at this

section of 'evangelicalism', observing subordination of doctrine to experience, an obsession with signs and wonders, superficiality of belief and practice, constant claims to extra-biblical revelation, usurpation of apostleship, irreverence in public worship, carnal exhibitionism, entertainment-orientated services, orchestral music, dance, drama, and shameless antinomianism (the teaching which rejects the moral law) producing low and often appalling standards of behaviour.

This is no time for euphemisms. We must recognise the charismatic movement for what it is: a modern heresy, which is being used to break up the foundations of traditional evangelical Christianity.

3. The Neo-Evangelical Movement

The third movement which has fragmented doctrinal foundations is the neo-evangelical movement. It was in 1947 that the eminent Boston pastor, Dr Harold Ockenga, in a convocation address at Fuller Theological Seminary, first coined the phrase 'the new evangelicalism'. Ten years later he defined its features.

First of all he said, 'The new evangelicalism has changed its strategy from one of separation to one of infiltration.' In other words, its approach is inclusivist, for it became willing to work with Romanists and Modernists.

At the present time there is evidence of a general capitulation on the part of evangelicals to this viewpoint. For example, over the period 1977-84 evangelicals were involved with Roman Catholics in a dialogue about mission. A report recording their agreements was published (The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, edited by Basil Meeking and John Stott).

Reviewing this in the Church Times David Edwards wrote: 'It must be marvellous in our eyes that Roman Catholic and evangelical theologians and missiologists from many parts of the world managed to find a considerable amount of common ground.' Marvellous indeed!

Another gospel!

The report included the admission that - 'the word gospel has come to have different meanings in our two communities.' We may well wonder why these evangelicals became involved. They did so because of their commitment to the new approach. They are not separatists: they are convinced collaborationists.

Furthermore, all this is not merely a matter of dialogue, for these collaborationists were putting all this into practice. Mission England in 1984 was organised on a neo-evangelical basis. In that campaign of co-operative evangelism, evangelicals were willing to work with all

and sundry, including idolaters and enemies of the Gospel.

Writing of Dr Graham and his crusade in an article for The Times, Clifford Longley observed: 'He is not who he was. The back-up organisation will be different too, and this time the mainstream churches are thoroughly involved.'

The second feature of neo-evangelicalism is expressed by Dr Ockenga in these words: 'Instead of attack on error, the new evangelicals proclaim the great historic doctrines of Christianity.' In other words, false and dangerous teaching is not to be exposed. There must instead be concentration on preaching the Gospel.

This was the evangelicalism which manifested itself during the papal visit in 1982. At that time, very few were willing to oppose the visit and protest against Rome's idolatries and blasphemies. They preferred the compromised stance of men like John Stott, who said: 'It seemed entirely right that the united service in Canterbury Cathedral should include a recitation of the Apostles' Creed, and so a re-affirmation of our common baptismal faith.'

But just as pitifully weak, in our view, was the nonconformist reaction. A statement issued by the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches began with the admission: 'Evangelical Christians are not united in their attitudes towards this visit.' It then proceeded to outline the three

main approaches, and concluded by saying that the Pope's coming visit would create 'evangelistic opportunities' and we should therefore be careful 'not to alienate needlessly any section of our audience'.

Now, we believe with all our hearts in preaching the Gospel and, had we been given the opportunity, we would gladly have preached it to the Pope himself. But we believe that during his visit, as never before, Christian ministers should also have been unmasking the Roman antichrist, refuting his blasphemous claims and condemning his damnable errors. It did not happen because, under the spell of neo-evangelicalism, men decided to restrict themselves to evangelism.

Dr Ockenga's third claim for neo-evangelicalism is that it - 'believes that Christianity is intellectually defensible, but the Christian cannot be obscurantist in scientific questions pertaining to the creation, the age of man, the universality of the flood, and other moot biblical questions.'

Such a statement reveals that these evangelicals have changed their position on the inspiration of Scripture. They have become unwilling to believe that the Bible is infallible in everything of which it speaks. This new school of thought bows the knee to evolutionary science and makes vital concessions to it.

Contempt for creationism

The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland published an article in October 1985, by Professor Donald Macleod, in which he wrote: 'It is difficult to see any necessary connection between the view that God created the universe (surely the true meaning of creationism) and the idea that He did so only a few thousand years ago.'

With little short of contempt for the view that everything was created with an appearance of age the author deplored - 'the sheer ungodliness of rejecting the earth's testimony to its own antiquity'. Needless to say, some readers found these comments profoundly disturbing. As one correspondent subsequently observed, 'The real issue at stake is the intellectual authority of the Bible and our willingness to bow before its every datum.'

The Church of Christ should be standing firm and pressing the battle against unbelief, but increasingly evangelicals are opting for a position of neutralism and appeasement. No wonder the cause is weak. The devotees of neo-evangelicalism are winning the war for the enemy by failing to take a firm stand for the Truth. If it is left to them, the foundations of our testimony will soon be no more. If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do? Faithful believers can, should, and must do something; but what?

What believers must do

First, let us boldly re-affirm the great truths of the reformed faith as found in the historic Calvinistic Confessions, laying particular emphasis on the doctrines of grace; those teachings of Scripture concerning salvation usually enumerated as - total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints: Genesis 6:5; Mark 7:21-23; Romans 3:10-12. Matthew 22:14; Ephesians 1:4-6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Matthew 20:28; Acts 20:28; Revelation 5:9; Romans 9:16; Ephesians 2:1-10; Titus 3:5. John 10:28-29; Philippians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:5.

This system of theology, grounded in Scripture revelation, was taught by the great British and Continental Reformers. It was the faith of the Puritans, the Covenanters and the Pilgrim Fathers, and it stands enshrined in the Gallic, Helvetic, Belgic, Synod of Dort, and Westminster Confessions. In days when evangelicalism faces a massive crisis, both of identity and direction, we urgently need to re-discover our roots and the spiritual heritage which is ours in the Protestant, reformed religion.

For the sake of so-called 'evangelical unity' the tendency in recent years has been towards brief doctrinal statements. While these are useful for repentant believers seeking church membership,

they do not present a sufficiently full and systematic expression of Christian doctrine, nor do they provide an adequate safeguard against prevailing errors. (We read only recently that Mr Terry Virgo, the self-proclaimed 'apostle', has an FIEC Statement of Faith pinned to his church notice-board!)

We need a full and comprehensive declaration of historic Christianity as supplied by the Westminster and 1689 Baptist Confessions of Faith. The former was described by Dr Philip Schaff as - 'the clearest, strongest, most logical, and most careful symbolical statement of the Calvinistic scheme of Christian doctrine.' Prepared by the famous Westminster Assembly and published in 1647, it became the authoritative creed of English and Scottish Presbyterians, and it was enshrined in the Confessions of the Congregationalists in 1658, and the Baptists in 1689. It therefore served as a rallying point for the churches of the seventeenth century. I believe it could be that for the churches of our day.

This Confession has advantages over others. Not only does it define 'wholesome Protestant doctrine', but it identifies the papal system as 'antichrist' (chapter 25:6), and very firmly excludes charismatic error (chapter 1:1,6). On this latter point it states that although God was pleased to reveal Himself and His will - 'at sundry times, and in divers manners' - He has now committed His revelation -

'wholly unto writing ... those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.'

The Confession further declares that - 'the whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

May this standard once again be raised, and for the gathering of the churches of our Lord Jesus Christ!

A need for separation

Secondly, let us contend for the biblical doctrine of separation. One of the greatest weaknesses of evangelicalism in recent times has been the failure to take a separated stand from apostasy, yet the Word of God is absolutely clear on this. We are told to separate from all co-operation in religious activities with those who deny the cardinal truths of the Christian faith, and no consideration of expedience should ever incline us to do otherwise.

The apostle Paul tells us to - mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them (that is - have nothing to do with them) (Romans 16:17). There is to be

no fellowship at all with those in serious doctrinal error. We must - come out from among them, and be... separate (2 Corinthians 6:17).

We are not to receive them (2 John 10). We are to reject them (Titus 3:10). If any man... consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness... withdraw thyself (1 Timothy 6:3, 5).

Scripture therefore forbids us to be in any kind of association with those who are doctrinally unsound; and to disobey the Word of God in these matters is to be guilty of sin.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon saw the issue dearly in his day, and he wrote: 'One thing is clear to us: we cannot be expected to meet in any union which comprehends those whose teachings on fundamental points is the exact reverse of that which we hold dear. Cost what it may, to separate ourselves from those who separate themselves from the Truth of God is not alone our liberty but our duty.'

This duty raises another matter. What should our attitude be to those who are apparently evangelical believers, and yet who disregard all these commands, choosing to remain alongside unbelieving people in doctrinally mixed church associations? We should certainly try, by every possible means, to win them over to the scriptural position on separation. But if

they turn a deaf ear to God's Word, though we know them to be fellow-Christians, we shall be obliged to show our disapproval by restricting public and church fellowship with them. If any man obey not our word by this epistle, writes Paul, note that man, and have no company with him (literally: be not mixed up with him), that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15).

I am convinced that if, in these desperate days, we are to preserve doctrinal and ecclesiastical purity, we shall have to return to biblical principles and take a firm, uncompromising stand on the matter of separation.

Thirdly, let us resolve, in humble dependence upon God, to strive together for the reformation of the churches in doctrine, worship, discipline and government. So many abuses have crept in that we are bound to renew the old struggle for the divine and pure order of things.

Restoring true Christianity

Others may seek to modernise the churches, but our God-given task is to restore both primitive Christianity and New Testament church order. However opposed, reproached, or misunderstood we may be, we must unceasingly labour for a reformation which will bring back conformity to God's revealed will.

If our overruling concern is to admit nothing into church life except those things which are prescribed in Holy Scripture (the regulative principle), we may yet see God wonderfully delivering our churches from corruption and richly adorning them with the beauty of His holiness. The future is in His hands, and we do not know His secret plans, but we have strong grounds for hope because - Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God. (Psalm 87:3)

Latter day promises

The prophets have a great deal to say about the privileges and prosperity of the Church in the latter days: Isaiah 49:3-23; 51:1-3; 54:1-17; 62:1-7; 65:17-25; 66:10-14.

'This reminds us,' says Calvin, 'that we ought not to lose courage, even when we see nothing but ruin and wretchedness and desolation; but it is our duty to pray that the Lord will restore her, which He also promises that He will do.'

Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time, is come (Psalm 102:13).

Let us see to our duty, and may the God of Heaven do great and mighty things for the Church to the praise of His sovereign grace!

Let Zion, and her sons, rejoice:
Behold the promised hour;
Her God hath heard her mourning voice,
And comes to exalt His power.

Her dust and ruins that remain
Are precious in our eyes;
Those ruins shall be built again,
And all that dust shall rise.

The Lord will raise Jerusalem,
And stand in glory here;
Nations shall bow before His name,
And kings attend with fear.