



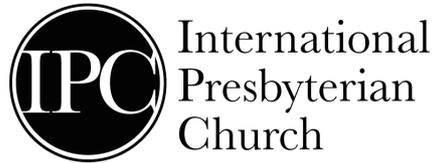
Reaction and Distraction: Conservative Evangelicalism Yesterday and Today

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When Marian Evans' novel, *Adam Bede*, came out in 1859, it made the name George Eliot justly famous. Her novels soon took their place among the finest in the English language. To discerning readers, however, Marian's scepticism indicated a growing problem about Christianity and the church. Both had been on trial for some time, but now British intellectuals were jumping ship. Marian herself had abandoned evangelicalism in 1841 and within five years had taken responsibility for the translation of Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu*. It was her way of publicly endorsing the idea that Jesus was not the divine, miracle-working Son of God she had previously worshipped. Another 1859 publication, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* pointed in the same direction: from the 'scientific' point of view divine creation, too, seemed dubious.

Meanwhile the great evangelical preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was nearing the height of his career. The year 1859 had witnessed his dramatic 'revival-year' sermons. A large Metropolitan Tabernacle to hold 6000 people was beginning to take shape. All seemed well. However, in less than a century British evangelicalism was a shadow of its earlier size and influence. Had Spurgeon been better informed about Marian's new ideas he might have realised what was afoot. But he was not, nor was the great American evangelist, DL Moody, who visited the country twenty years later. Despite their differences of style and content, both preachers reflected the underlying problem — pietist anti-intellectualism and cultural isolation. Originally, that is, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, pietism had been necessary and good, but the seeds of its demise were already there. By John Wesley's time (1703–1791), church preaching and evangelism, personal piety and private philanthropy were favoured over public academic and political engagement. It was a case of 'heart not head: private not public' — which, by 1859, was a lethal combination. Notable exceptions, especially Wilberforce and his Clapham associates in the first half of the nineteenth century, barely dented the prevailing ethos.

Not surprisingly, therefore, when the Enlightenment's anti-supernatural worldview hit around 1859, the church was almost totally unprepared. Many preachers like Bishop JC Ryle held the theological line, but few churchgoers, even clergy, were ready for the intellectual challenge. Most settled for an unthinking faith, some slipping sideways into early twentieth-century Pentecostalism, others bulking down defensively within Fundamentalism proper. A common denominator seemed to be the 'danger' of too much intellectual activity. Meanwhile, legalism ensured stability, but at the cost of an increasingly colourless and ineffective community.



Finally, the much-needed *reaction* arrived around the time of the Second World War, which championed ideas later enshrined in the famous Lausanne Covenant of 1974. Evangelism and mission were reaffirmed and pietistic interpretations quietly laid to rest. Evangelicals accepted responsibility for all departments of social experience, not just church. They realised that ‘being spiritual’ meant getting involved intellectually, politically and culturally — though obviously in different ways and at different levels, according to ability and calling. In short, the biblical principles that had reshaped Western civilization after the sixteenth-century Reformation were at last reinstated. It was heady stuff. To those blighted by the earlier restrictions, it seemed like a new dawn. Perhaps, after all, things might improve — with Martyn Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel and John Stott at All Souls giving clear expository preaching; with student work picking up; with Tyndale House in Cambridge making helpful contributions academically; with the first editions of the American magazine *Christianity Today* coming off the press, and with the authority and infallibility of the Bible not in doubt. The new initiatives were after all ‘evangelical’. It was a time of freshness and growth.

Starting things, however, is easier than keeping them going, even at the best of times — and this was in a sense ‘the worst of times’. The church had declined further, two World Wars had disrupted everything, a new existentialist philosophy was even then creeping destructively across the globe. Worse still, evangelicals entering the maelstrom of public ideas were, if anything, *less* prepared than their predecessors a century before. When, therefore, the battle of ideas started in earnest, it was not long before cracks appeared. Academic biblical criticism seemed cogent enough. Could compromises not be made? Similarly, evangelical scientists struggled to find proper limits to their ‘complementary’ descriptions of the real world (for science of necessity uses a different, mathematically-based language). But what if biblical and historical-scientific descriptions overlap and disagree, for example, with Eve’s creation from Adam? Could historical details in the Old Testament be mythologised, even if affirmed as real history in the New Testament? Similarly, could human death be separated from the Fall when the apostle Paul says ‘death came by one man’? Uncertainties about biblical infallibility and authority sprang up on all sides.

The real problem, however, lay further back, as suggested earlier. Anti-intellectualism and cultural disengagement had prevailed for almost two centuries. Evangelicals had, so to speak, ‘binged’ on a type of theology that virtually detached them from what was going on in the wider community, certainly in the world of ideas. Now it was ‘hangover’ time. As they entered the public arena, they were tested to the limit. The inadequate intellectual background from which they had come was quickly exposed. No doubt they were sincere and intelligent; no doubt they intended to keep their eye on the ball — but lack of experience did not help. So the ball was fumbled, and then dropped altogether! Church affiliation within the ‘broad’ Established Church was a case in point. Non-Conformists had long decided not to remain in the Church of England. But evangelical Anglicans felt they should stay and reform from within as



long as the formularies were in place. The Church of England was after all the ‘best boat to fish from’. But even insiders were unsure about ‘comprehensiveness’: Was it right to tolerate liberal and Anglo-catholic theology in the church? Sympathetic outsiders became increasingly alarmed. In due course, liberal Anglican bishops openly denied the resurrection and evangelicals failed to mount an appropriate challenge. It really did look as if recovery of the Established Church meant compromise. Then, as often happens when God’s people fail to take a stand on truth, secondary issues started to take over. Largely as a result of the growing influence of ‘moderate’ evangelicals in Synod, women were accepted for ordination and the issue of gay ordination followed. On the Anglican side, at least it was merely the first of a number of crippling *distractions*, secondary issues taking centre stage. Even by 1966, however, the level of compromise was considered serious enough to justify a major breach, Anglicans going one way, and Non-Conformists the other. It was a disaster.

Onlookers like Lloyd-Jones felt let down by their Anglican brethren. They understood what was happening and quite rightly sounded the alarm. Perhaps unintentionally, however, they overdid it and subtly began to distance themselves from the ‘new direction’ of the 1940s. Lloyd-Jones, for example, presided over a public exposure of Francis Schaeffer’s use of the term ‘pre-evangelism’. Later, he even seemed to imply that social engagement in an ‘apostate’ culture was a waste of time — not that his fears were unfounded. ‘Comprehensiveness’ within liberal churches was not the only sign of compromise. Some evangelicals did sound like old-fashioned liberals with a ‘social gospel’. But, while Lloyd-Jones’ reaction was understandable, it made those who followed him less able to communicate meaningfully with the culture. A ‘ghetto’ mentality developed which appeared to be saying that culture and church could be retrieved *only* through Puritan and Methodist style expository preaching. The echoes from the past were unmistakable!

As if all this was not complicated enough, by the early 1960s along came the charismatic renewal. The churches needed an injection of Holy Spirit power. They were too cerebral and old fashioned, which was probably true. What these evangelicals turned to, sadly, was the ‘baptism in the Spirit’. Many were profoundly changed by what they experienced and charismatic churches took a notable part in protesting public abuses like abortion. At best, however, the renewal tended to make secondary issues such as ‘gifts’ (*charismata*) too central; at worst, it represented a thinly veiled surrender to contemporary subjectivism. Either way, it was another costly distraction. By the 1960s the ‘Fountain Trust’ had become a major force especially in Anglican circles. Founded in 1964 by Michael Harper, one of John Stott’s colleagues — later received into the Greek Orthodox Church, interestingly — it aimed to renew the existing churches. Though disbanded in 1980, it had spawned offshoots within Non-Conformity and from these came organisations such as Spring Harvest, New Wine, New Frontiers and many others. They seemed vital and innovative, but they lacked a strong theological base and Bible exposition took a back seat. In time, the emphasis on ‘experiences’ led to excesses like the ‘Toronto Blessing’. A reaction to all this ‘nonsense’ was inevitable. Thankfully, from 1983 the Proclamation Trust gave a lead. Anglican



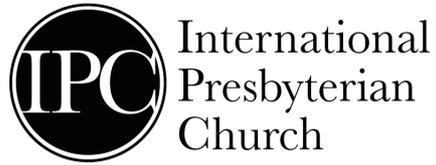
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and Non-Conformist conservatives assembled around the central importance of Scripture and expository preaching. But what had begun as a necessary correction to theological liberalism and charismatic indiscipline led quickly, as with Lloyd Jones, to over-reaction. Systematic theology and apologetics, for example, were often neglected, initially at least. And so preaching suffered.

Thankfully, the biblical standards of the 1940–1950 reform were never entirely neglected. Around 1990, a renewed commitment to the Lausanne vision gained ground. Many organisations entering the public arena for the first time fell by the wayside, but many did not and remained faithful. In the political arena, for example, CARE (which succeeded the ‘Nationwide Festival of Light’ movement in 1970), the Christian Institute, the Christian Medical Fellowship, the Lawyers Christian Fellowship and others started to fight valiantly for the sanctity of life. Groups involved in university outreach saw the need for apologetic evangelism. Nationwide debates began to attract capacity audiences. The Jubilee Centre initiated research into how best to apply Old Testament principles today. Various scientific organisations challenged philosophic naturalism in science. Many others, equally committed to the authority of the Bible, involved themselves in environmental concerns, education, debt-management and so on. After 2002, the European Leadership Forum provided wide-ranging support from its global networking base.

But these examples are all *para-church* organisations. Many *churches*, by contrast, still fail to help their congregations to participate in the larger discussions. They focus on what they call ‘Word-based ministry’ and ‘gospel ministry’ but interpret them so narrowly that they seldom relate to the thinking of the surrounding culture and sometimes even give the impression that only proclamation and evangelism are suitable activities. So the very thing that crippled evangelicalism a century and more ago remains a powerful influence in many conservative evangelical churches today. The irony in all this is that never before during the past century has there been such an opportunity for authoritative proclamation, vital community and evangelism. The ‘broken cisterns’ hewed out by nineteenth-century rationalists such as Marian Evans were unsatisfying already 50 years ago, but now they are completely empty. Western societies now resemble the proverbial emperor without any clothes — they are in fact morally bankrupt. Critics of the Christian worldview like Richard Dawkins talk a lot about ‘justice’ and ‘human rights’ but have little to base their humanistic values upon. But do Christians not need to have all this explained to them? Do they not need to be given confidence that the Bible really is true and that there are powerful counter-arguments? Should they not be actively trained to confront the surrounding lies and ‘to bring every thought captive to obey Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:5)?

Christians need to be inspired to give a lead through social and political action. The needs and opportunities for gospel living and gospel challenge are universal. Yet conservative evangelicals still struggle to communicate their message. In part, this is because the cycle of ‘reaction and distraction’ has yet properly to be broken. After generations of confusion and neglect, the chief responsibility now is to develop a truly



biblical mind. This should be a priority both for those who preach and also for church ministry as a whole — and hopefully the lessons of the past will help to clarify what this should and should not look like.