

Reconstructing Evangelicalism

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The French historian, Elie Halévy, wrote:¹

... during the nineteenth century Evangelical religion was the moral cement of English society. It was the influence of the Evangelicals which invested the British aristocracy with an almost stoic [austere] dignity, restrained the plutocrats who had newly risen from the masses from vulgar ostentation and debauchery, and placed over the proletariat a select body of workmen enamoured of virtue and capable of self-restraint.

Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century was evidently a force in the land. It is not so in the West today.

One reason for this is that the beliefs and practices of Evangelicals today vary widely. One only has to go into different Evangelical churches to see this. A charismatic Evangelical church is very different from a reformed one. A liberal Evangelical church is different again. Moreover, the differences go deep enough for there to be very little fellowship between the different kinds. This greatly weakens Evangelicalism and its witness to the world.

In this essay, I compare the main kinds of Evangelical Christianity with the teaching of the Bible, with the aim of helping Evangelicals to come closer together, in the manner for which Jesus prayed (John 17). I consider first the beliefs of the main kinds of Evangelicalism – simple-gospel (Chap. 2), charismatic (Chap. 3), reformed (Chap. 4), and liberal (Chap. 5). I then consider the specific issues of worship, creation, baptism, and eschatology (Chap. 6). I pay particular attention throughout to the teaching of Jesus himself. It is by keeping close to his teaching that we keep close to him.

I write as someone who does not belong to any particular Evangelical grouping. I have, however, attended churches of each kind, and tried my best to present their beliefs and practices as sympathetically as I can.

I am grateful to friends who have been praying for me while I have been writing this essay, to Rob Bradshaw for posting an earlier version of it on his 'Theology on the Web', and to AJBT for publishing it.

¹ Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People*, Vol. 3, 1830–1841, tr. E.I. Watkin (London: Fisher Owen, 1927), p. 166.

CHAPTER 2

Simple-gospel Evangelicalism

Simple-gospel Evangelicalism emphasizes the doctrine of justification by faith.² It stresses that everyone has sinned (Rom. 3:23), that God in his love sent his Son into the world to save sinners (John 3:16, 1 Tim 1:15), that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins (1 Pet. 2:24, 3:18), and that individuals are saved, not by their own efforts, but by putting their faith in him (Acts 16:31, Eph. 2:8–9).

Merits

This presentation of the gospel has many merits. In the first place, it is simple. Jesus came into the world for ordinary people, not just intellectuals (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–31).

Secondly, it makes clear that human beings have a problem, and that this problem is sin.

Thirdly, it stresses that we cannot save ourselves. In New Testament times, the Pharisees thought that they could, by keeping the law of the Old Testament (Rom. 9:30–32). Jesus had to disabuse them of this (Luke 18:9–14, John 3:1–21). Some of the early Christians thought that they could procure salvation in this way (justification by works). The apostles ruled this out at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–35), and Paul argued against it in his letters (e.g. Gal.).³

Fourthly, the simple gospel focuses on Jesus, and presents him as the only one who can save us. He himself said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6).

Weaknesses

The main problem with the simple gospel is what it omits. We have to remember that Evangelicalism came out of the Reformation. The Reformers belonged to a culture in which Christianity was generally accepted. Preachers of the gospel could take for granted that their hearers knew things about Christianity that preachers cannot assume today.

Moreover, the prevailing heresy at the time of the Reformation was justification by works. Preachers had therefore to stress justification by faith, just as Jesus and Paul did. Our culture is, however, very different. While some children grow up in a church, synagogue, or mosque thinking that they have to earn their salvation, most people have little idea that they need salvation, and are used to getting things without having to work for them. Preachers today have therefore to stress, not only justification by faith, but other important truths in the New Testament.

² ‘Justification’ in the sense of being deemed righteous.

³ See my book, *Biblical Light on Contemporary Issues* (Hayesville: American Journal of Biblical Theology, 2018), Chap. 2.

Change of conduct

As well as stressing justification by faith, the New Testament insists that, for a person to be saved, he or she must stop doing wrong things, and do right ones.

Thus, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples, ‘unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Mat. 5:17–48). He also warned them, ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (7:21–23). He went on to explain that the latter involves putting his teaching into practice (7:24–27).

When a lawyer asked him what he had to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to live out the commandments ‘You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself’ (Luke 10:25–37). When the rich young ruler asked him the same question, Jesus said to him, ‘keep the commandments’, and ‘sell your possessions and give to the poor’ (Mat. 19:16–22). He later taught his disciples that, when he comes in his glory, he will judge people according to the way in which they respond to the needs of others (Mat. 25:31–46).

Similarly, Paul warned that people who do wrong things ‘will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (1 Cor. 6:9–10, Gal. 5:19–21). The writer to the Hebrews urged his readers to strive for holiness, ‘without which no one will see the Lord’ (Heb. 12:14). James emphasized that ‘faith without works is dead’ (Jas. 2:14–26). John wrote, ‘whoever does not practise righteousness is not [born] of God, and whoever does not love his brother’ (1 John 3:10).

Jesus accordingly called on people to repent (Mat. 4:17), as did Peter (Acts 2:38) and Paul (Acts 26:19–20). Jesus told some inquirers, ‘unless you repent, you will ... perish’ (Luke 13:1–5). At Athens, Paul declared that ‘God ... commands all people everywhere to repent’ (Acts 17:30). Repentance (*metanoia*) literally means a change of mind, but it implies a change of conduct (Luke 3:7–14, Acts 26:20), or at least, a willingness to change (cf. the words of the dying thief, Luke 23:42).

Repentance involves changing from living in the way that we have been living to living in the way that God wants us to live. Jesus set out how God wants us to live in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5–7) and other pronouncements. Jesus based his teaching on the Old Testament (Mat. 5:17–20), but took it further (vv. 21–48).⁴ After his resurrection, he commissioned his disciples, ‘Go then and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Mat. 28:18–20). There is a *morality* to being a Christian. ‘Religion that is pure and undefiled before our God and Father is this,’ wrote James, ‘to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world’ (Jas. 1:27).

Paul’s reference in 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 to a man being saved in spite of his work (‘as through fire’) must be understood in its context. He is referring to *teachers* (vv. 1–10) whose teaching

⁴ See *Biblical Light*, Chaps. 4–7.

does not promote lasting Christian qualities (cf. 13:8–13). He does not say the same of teachers whose teaching is destructive (vv. 16–17).

Failing to stress the need for a change of conduct is liable to give people in today's society a distorted impression of the gospel. It can produce converts that do not live good Christian lives, and who have the idea that being a Christian is more about God blessing us than us obeying him.

Holy Spirit

The need for a change of conduct leads to the question, 'How can this be achieved?' The answer to this brings in another important element of the gospel – the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament emphasizes that an individual cannot be a Christian without receiving the Holy Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that 'unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' (John 3:5–8). Paul stressed that 'if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that one is not his' (Rom. 8:9). In Acts special steps were taken if believers did not receive the Holy Spirit when they were converted (Acts 8:4–17, 19:1–7).

In all of these contexts, the main function of the Holy Spirit is to enable believers to do what God wants them to do. In speaking about being born 'of water and the Spirit' to Nicodemus, Jesus was alluding to Ezekiel 36:25–27, as he expected Nicodemus to know (John 3:9–10); here God tells his people, 'I will put my Spirit in you and cause you to walk in my statutes'.⁵ Similarly, in Romans 8 Paul explains that the Spirit enables us to fulfil 'the righteous requirements⁶ of the law' (v. 4; cf. Gal. 5:13–26).

In Acts, Luke describes what happened when believers received the Holy Spirit on three occasions (2:1–4, 10:44–46, 19:6). On each, they spoke in tongues and magnified God or prophesied. The tongues were intelligible to others (2:5–11).⁷ What happened to the apostles (Acts 2:1–4) is reminiscent of what happened to Isaiah (Isa. 6:1–8). Just as Isaiah's 'unclean lips' were cleansed by a hot coal from the altar so that God could use him to speak for him by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21), so the apostles' tongues were cleansed by fire so that God could speak through them (Acts 2:1–11, 14–36).

John the Baptist described reception of the Holy Spirit as 'baptism' in the Holy Spirit (Mat. 3:11). Jesus used the same term (Acts 1:5), as did Paul (1 Cor. 12:13). John had in view the purging action of the Spirit – he coupled baptism in the Spirit with purification by fire, and contrasted it with merely washing in water (Mat. 3:11–12; cf. Zech. 13:7–9, Mal. 3:1–5).

Jesus also described the Holy Spirit as 'the Spirit of truth', who would be to his disciples 'another *Paraclētos*' (John 14:15–17), teaching them more about him (14:25–26, 16:12–15),

⁵ Compare Jeremiah's prophecy, 'I will put my law inside them, and write it on their hearts' (Jer. 31:31–34).

⁶ Gk. *dikaiōma*, taken as collective (cf. 13:9).

⁷ I discuss this further in Chap. 3.

reminding them of his teaching (14:26), and helping them to bear witness to him (15:26–27, 16:7–11; Acts 1:8).

Jesus made reception of the Holy Spirit dependent on faith (John 7:37–39) and obedience (14:15–24). The apostles did the same (Acts 5:32, Gal. 3:14).

A fuller gospel

At first sight, the three emphases in the New Testament – justification by faith, the need for a change of conduct, and the need to receive the Spirit – are inconsistent with each other. The need for a change of conduct would seem to conflict with justification by faith. However, we must not allow this impression to lead us into altering any of these doctrines. Scripture teaches each one plainly and holds them together. Thus, on the day of Pentecost, when the crowd asked Peter what they had to do, he told them, ‘Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38). Baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins is an act that acknowledges complete dependence on him for forgiveness, an act of faith alone. Peter thus brings all three emphases together. Other passages in the New Testament also hold the three emphases together.⁸

What, then, is the relationship between them? Both Paul and James discuss this question in their letters, but they do so from different standpoints. Paul is concerned about those who, like the Pharisees, taught justification by works; James is concerned about those who taught justification without works (Jas. 2:14–26). The emphasis in their answers accordingly differs. Paul speaks about being saved by faith ‘for’ (*epi*) good works (Eph. 2:8–10), James of being justified by faith and works ‘working together’ (Jas. 2:22).⁹

These answers reflect the different problems Paul and James were addressing, and should not be set against each other. Paul’s emphasis is appropriate for one problem (legalism), James’s for the other (antinomianism).

Paul’s and James’ answers can be united by saying that, for a person to be saved from sin, he or she must combine two attitudes – an utter dependence on Jesus for forgiveness, and an earnest desire to live a better life with the help of the Holy Spirit. In other words, he or she must both be ‘poor in spirit’ and ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’ as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes (Mat. 5:1–12). Poverty of spirit precludes any thought of salvation by means of works, hungering and thirsting for righteousness any thought of salvation without them.

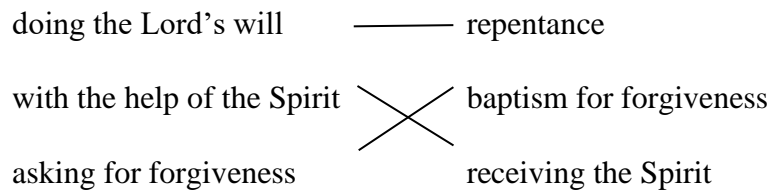
What, then, is the gospel? It is that message which enables seekers to understand and to respond to Peter’s call at Pentecost – to repent, to be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and so to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the good news – to those who are

⁸ Mat. 28:18–20; Luke 24:45–49; Acts 3:19–21, 5:29–32; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; Tit. 3:1–8; 1 Pet. 1:1–2; 1 John *passim*.

⁹ For a full discussion, see *Biblical Light*, Chap. 3.

concerned about their sins and want to be righteous (2 Cor. 2:14–16) – that God calls us to come to him through Jesus Christ, whom he has made Lord, Saviour, and Giver of the Spirit, without division (Acts 2:22–36).

Note that, when the gospel is presented in this way, becoming a Christian leads smoothly into being a Christian. According to the New Testament, being a Christian essentially involves seeking to do the Lord’s will, with the help of the Spirit, and asking him for forgiveness when we fail (1 John 1:5–2:6 etc.). The three elements of this correspond closely to the three components of Peter’s call at Pentecost:



Other omissions

A further problem with simple-gospel Evangelicalism is that it does not prepare believers very well for what lies ahead of them. Jesus spoke of his ‘brothers and sisters’ experiencing hardship, sickness, and imprisonment (Mat. 25:34–40). He warned his disciples that they would be rejected by the world (John 15:18–21) and in the world have tribulation (John 16:33). The early Christians experienced severe persecution (Acts 8:1), famine (Acts 11:27–30), poverty (Gal. 2:10), sickness (Gal. 4:13–14, Phil. 2:25–27, 1 Tim. 5:23, 2 Tim. 4:20), and other hardships (2 Cor. 11:23–28). The apostles taught believers to expect suffering, and to regard it as a refining influence in their lives (Rom. 5:1–5, 8:17–39, etc.). Paul even made the anguished cry, ‘Abba, Father’, proof of having the Spirit (Rom. 8:15–17).

Jesus accordingly ensured that those who were contemplating becoming disciples counted the cost before doing so (Luke 14:25–35).

The compensation for believers is Jesus’ promise to be with us in our troubles (Mat. 28:20, John 14:18) and what lies further ahead. This is a place in heaven (John 14:1–3), and then, after Jesus comes again (Mat. 24:29–31), on a new earth (Rev. 21:1–22:5). While Christians differ over the details of this, they very much need the hope that it gives (Rom. 8:18–25).¹⁰

Conclusion

Simple-gospel Evangelicalism faithfully preserves an important element of the gospel (justification by faith), but needs to add other elements to be fully Biblical.

¹⁰ See further Chap. 6.

CHAPTER 3

Charismatic Evangelicalism

Charismatic Evangelicals – including Pentecostals – emphasize the Holy Spirit.¹¹ They take ‘baptism in the Spirit’ to be an experience subsequent to conversion, marked typically by speaking in tongues. Like the tongues Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12–14, these are unintelligible (14:2), but capable of being interpreted by those who are able to do this (12:28–30, 14:27–28). Charismatics also espouse the other spiritual abilities mentioned by Paul in this passage, whence their description of them as ‘gifts’ (12:4, Gk. *charismata*). These include healing (12:9). Some Charismatics also espouse spiritual happenings like involuntary swooning, shaking, and laughing.

Merits

Charismatic Evangelicalism has the merit of drawing attention to an element of the gospel – the gift of the Holy Spirit – that simple-gospel Evangelicalism omits (Chap. 2).

It also has the merit of encouraging Christians to use their various abilities in the worship and work of a church, and not have one man doing everything. This is the pattern of church life Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

Weaknesses

Dividing the gospel

A major problem with charismatic Evangelicalism is that it separates ‘baptism in the Spirit’ from the other elements of the gospel. It is true that there are two occasions in Acts when reception of the Spirit came some time after conversion (Acts 8:4–17, 19:1–7), but these were irregular. As we saw in the last chapter, Peter brought the elements together when he proclaimed on the day of Pentecost, ‘Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38). They are also brought together in other passages.¹²

Separating ‘baptism in the Spirit’ from repentance has the effect of obscuring the main function of the Spirit – to help us to fulfil ‘the righteous requirements of the law’ (Ezek. 36:27, Rom. 8:4), and to be the people God wants us to be. The result is that charismatic Evangelicalism has the same moral weaknesses as simple-gospel Evangelicalism.

Misunderstanding spiritual phenomena

A second major problem with charismatic Evangelicalism is that it misunderstands the nature of spiritual phenomena, and Biblical teaching on them. The characteristic feature of these

¹¹ See, e.g., Eddie L. Hyatt, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity* (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2002).

¹² See note 8.

phenomena is that they take place when those involved relinquish conscious control over what is happening. They are therefore caused by something other than the conscious efforts of those involved. Charismatics take this to be the Holy Spirit, but this is not the only possibility. In the case of speaking in unintelligible tongues, involuntary swooning, and the like, the cause may be an activity in the subconscious minds of those involved. It may even be another spirit. Such phenomena are accordingly not in themselves a sign of having the Holy Spirit. They are, in fact, known outside Christianity.¹³ Hence the Biblical injunction, ‘test the spirits’ (1 John 4:1).

Paul’s understanding of speaking in unintelligible tongues comes out in 1 Corinthians 12–14.¹⁴ The Christians at Corinth were very impressed by tongues, taking them to be a sign of having the Holy Spirit. In his response to this, he says in Chapter 14, ‘if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful’ (v. 14). He thus sees speaking in tongues as described above – i.e. as an activity in which worshippers give expression to their inner thoughts and feelings (‘my spirit prays’) by using their organs of speech without engaging their conscious minds to put what they are feeling into words (‘my mind is unfruitful’). Paul accepts that speaking in this way has some value to the individual (v. 4a), but tells the Corinthians that it is better to use one’s mind (v. 15) and develop one’s thinking (v. 20).

Paul goes on to correct the Corinthians’ assessment of speaking in tongues. He says, ‘In the law it is written, “With other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people, and in this way they will indeed not listen to me,” says the Lord. So then tongues act as a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers, and prophecy, not for unbelievers but for believers’ (vv. 21–22).

Here he begins with a quotation from Isaiah 28:9–10. The context of this passage is the rejection of Isaiah’s teaching by Judah’s religious leaders on the grounds that his language was baby-like. So God warns them that he will speak to the nation in a language that will really sound baby-like, i.e. the language of a foreign invader (vv. 11–13; Paul’s quotation is a summary of this).

The point Paul takes from this is that God does not use unintelligible speech to speak to the obedient but to the disobedient, to drive them further away from him. ‘So then,’ he reasons, ‘tongues act as a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers’ (v. 22a). By this he means that tongues *strengthen the unbelief* of unbelievers, who take them as a sign that their unbelief is right (v. 23). On the other hand, prophecy (speaking for God intelligibly) acts as a sign ‘not for unbelievers but for believers’ (v. 22b). This is because the former’s unbelief is weakened when they hear prophecy being spoken (vv. 24–25).

Paul’s conclusion that tongues are not a sign for believers means that they do not prove that someone has the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues can be practised by anyone who disengages conscious control over his or her speech organs, and lets them operate freely.

¹³ See, e.g., E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 75–80; David Christie-Murray, *Voices from the Gods* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), Chap. 1.

¹⁴ For a full exposition of this passage, see *Biblical Light*, Chap. 12.

Speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians is therefore different from speaking in tongues in Acts. In Acts 2:1–41, Luke describes how, on the day of Pentecost, the apostles were ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ and ‘began to speak in other tongues’ (vv. 1–4). He goes on to recount how pilgrims who had gathered in Jerusalem from different countries each heard the apostles speaking ‘in his own language’ (vv. 5–11). This gave Peter an opportunity to preach the gospel to them (vv. 14–41). The apostles were thus made to speak *more* intelligibly, not less.

Something similar seems to have happened in Acts 10:1–11:18, where Luke describes how the Holy Spirit fell on a company of God-fearing Gentiles while Peter was speaking to them (10:44–46). Peter later described the incident as being similar to what happened at Pentecost (11:15), and the reaction of the Jewish Christians who witnessed it (10:45) or who subsequently heard about it (11:1–18) is consistent with this. Some Jewish Christians had severe doubts about the inclusion of Gentiles in the Church, and would hardly have been reassured if the Gentiles to whom Peter preached had spoken in the same way that some pagan prophets did (cf. 1 Cor. 14:23).¹⁵ A similar consideration applies to the other reference to tongues in Acts (19:1–7): in this case those involved were followers of John the Baptist who needed to know that the one of whom John prophesied had indeed come.

Speaking in tongues in Acts *were* a sign for believers – a sign of the kind Jesus told the eleven would accompany them as they took the gospel into the world (Mark 16:15–18).

Speaking in unintelligible tongues, involuntary swooning, and the like, do not, therefore, have the significance Charismatics attach to them. They are *not* a sign of having the Holy Spirit. The pursuit of these is therefore a distraction from doing what Jesus calls us to do – ‘seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness’ (Mat. 6:33).

Misunderstanding spiritual healing

Jesus did not promise that his followers would always be healed. Rather, he promised them ‘tribulation’ (John 16:33). This is a broad term (Gk. *thlipsis*), and almost certainly includes illness. There are several examples in the New Testament of Christians being ill: Paul (Gal. 4:13–14), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25–27), Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23), and Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20). In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus commended *visiting* the sick, not healing them (Mat. 25:31–46). God *does* promise healing for his people, but in the world to come (Rev. 22:2).

This does not mean that Christians are never healed, other than by surgery or medicine. It does, however, mean that the ministry of healing has to be conducted with great care. James provides some guidance on this in his instructions to ill Christians (Jas. 5:13–18).¹⁶ He considers three kinds of illness:

¹⁵ Greek mantic prophecy was obscure or unintelligible, and required interpretation (Christie-Murray, pp. 2–3).

¹⁶ *Biblical Light*, Chap. 13.

Ordinary illness. This comes under verse 13a, ‘Is anyone among you suffering (*kakopatheō*)?’ *Kakopatheō* is another broad term, and again almost certainly includes illness. His advice to such is, ‘Let him or her pray.’ Since healing is not promised, this prayer has to be qualified as he describes in 4:13–15 – by ‘if the Lord wills’. This is how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42).

Prayer for healing does not preclude seeking medical help. Paul commends Luke as a physician (Col. 4:14), and gives Timothy medical advice for his stomach problems (1 Tim. 5:23).

If we are not healed, we have to remember that, when Jesus warned his disciples that they would have tribulation (John 16:33), he also told them that he would be *with* them in their tribulation (14:18), and that he would one day take them *out* of tribulation (14:1–3). We have to remember too that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, or his ways our ways (Isa. 55:8–9). His purposes are sometimes advanced, not by healing us, but by allowing our illness to continue, and sustaining us in it. Thus he told Paul that his ‘thorn in the flesh’ would make him a more humble and dependent Christian (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

Very serious illness. James moves on in verses 14–15 to address someone who is ‘weak’ (*astheneō*) and ‘labouring’ (*kamnō*), and so ill that he or she is unable to leave the house. He writes, ‘Is anyone among you weak? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the one who is labouring, and the Lord shall raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he shall be forgiven.’

James’ language here carries a double meaning. He does not say that the Lord will ‘heal’ the ill person, but that he will ‘save’ him or her and ‘raise’ him or her up. Both words can be taken in a physical sense or a spiritual one.¹⁷ James thus anticipates two possible outcomes: either that the person is healed physically and raised from his or her bed, or that he or she is saved spiritually and raised up into heaven. James wants the elders’ prayer to cover both possibilities, and the ill person to have peace either way.

Illness due to personal sin. Finally, James addresses those whose illness is a direct result of their sin (v. 16a). James’ advice to such is, ‘Confess then your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.’

Illness can sometimes be due to personal sin (1 Cor. 11:27–30), but often it is not. This is the message of the book of Job.¹⁸ Most illness is due to the sin of humankind as a whole, going back to Adam and Eve, and resulting in the Curse (see Gen. 3:17–19, Luke 13:1–5, John 9:1–3, Rev. 22:2–3).

Paul’s brief reference to (lit.) ‘gifts of healings’ (1 Cor. 12:9) has to be understood in this light.

¹⁷ ‘Save’ (*sōzō*) is sometimes used of physical healing (e.g. Mat. 9:20–22).

¹⁸ See my article, ‘Preaching on Job,’ https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/nelson/job_nelson.pdf

Conclusion

Charismatics need to retain their stress on the Holy Spirit and varieties of gifts, but draw back on their pursuit of spiritual phenomena, and focus on living a godly life.

CHAPTER 4

Reformed Evangelicalism

Some Evangelicals follow closely the teaching of the Reformers, especially John Calvin. They emphasize God's sovereignty and grace, and argue that:¹⁹

1. Human beings are incapable in themselves of responding to the gospel (the doctrine of 'total depravity').
2. God chooses whom to save without reference to their worthiness ('unconditional election').
3. Jesus died specifically for those God has chosen ('limited atonement').
4. God so works in those he has chosen as to bring them to faith ('irresistible grace').
5. He also works to keep them in this faith ('perseverance of the saints').

Calvinists also, like simple-gospel Evangelicals, emphasize justification by faith, only for them, faith is not a response wrought solely by the individual, but also in the individual by God (point 4).

Merits

A great merit of Calvinism is that it elevates God. As we noted in Chapter 2, simple-gospel Evangelicalism is liable to lead converts into thinking that being a Christian is more about God blessing us than us obeying him. This brings God down. Calvinism raises him up. A constant theme in the Bible is that God is *holy*. When Moses met God at the burning bush, he was told to take off his shoes and he hid his face (Exod. 3:1–6). When Isaiah saw God in the temple, he said, 'Woe to me' (Isa. 6:1–5). When John saw Jesus in his glory, he fell at his feet (Rev. 1:9–18). Peter told Christians, 'if you call on as Father the one who judges impartially according to each individual's work, spend your time in the world *in fear*, knowing that you were ransomed

¹⁹ See, e.g., David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 2nd edn. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004).

... with [no less than] the precious blood of Christ' (1 Pet. 1:17–19). 'Our God,' the writer to the Hebrews reminded his readers, 'is a consuming fire' (Heb. 12:29).

Christians also need to know that, in times of trouble, God is in control of events. They need to be able to believe that he 'works all things together for good' for those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

Weaknesses

Complex

A major problem with Calvinism is that it introduces a complex issue (the precise relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility) into their theology, and aggravates the long-standing division among Evangelicals over this question. Calvinists are right to be concerned when evangelists diminish the deity of God, but this can be corrected by calling upon them to proclaim the apostolic gospel, 'God commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30–31).

It is not as if Scripture teaches Calvinism plainly. While some passages, taken at face value, support the five points, other passages, taken at face value, do not. For example, John's statement that Jesus is 'the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for [those of] all the world' (1 John 2:2) seems to go against point 3. Calvinists accordingly have to explain how passages like this can be understood in a way that is consistent with the five points (e.g. by taking the meaning of this verse to be, 'not for our Jewish sins only, but also for those of the Gentile world').

Calvinism is also difficult to understand philosophically. It implies that God has complete control over human beings while still holding them responsible for their actions. This is not easy to grasp.

Questionable

Following on from this, it is doubtful whether Calvinism is the best way of understanding Scripture. Some passages are very difficult to understand Calvinistically. For example, Jesus' lament, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you did not want this' (Mat. 23:37) seems very clearly to imply that people are free to accept or reject the gospel. A similar example is the vinedresser's plea in the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree, 'Sir, leave it this year also, until I dig round it, and spread manure, and if it bears fruit, good; but if not, you can cut it down' (Luke 13:6–9).

Further, there are alternative explanations of passages that, on face value, support Calvinism, and these are more convincing than Calvinist explanations of passages that, on face value, do not. For example:²⁰

John 6:44–45. On one occasion, Jesus told his Jewish critics, ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’ (v. 44). This supports Calvinism’s points 1 and 4. But how does the Father draw people to Jesus? The answer comes in the next verse, where Jesus explains: ‘It is written in the Prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard from the Father and has learned comes to me’ (v. 45). This describes a resistible, non-coercive process: God teaches ‘all’ (‘they shall all be taught by God’), some ‘learn’ and ‘come’ (‘everyone who has learned comes to me’), others do not. God taught the Jews through the Old Testament (Luke 16:31).

Romans 8:28–30. In this passage, to which I referred earlier, Paul states that ‘we know that [God] works all things together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose: that²¹ whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the first-born among many siblings; and whom he predestined, these he also called; and whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified.’ Calvinists (along with others) take this to refer to Christians, whom God chooses, calls, justifies, and one day glorifies. However, ‘glorified’ is in the aorist tense. Paul is writing about people who have already died and been glorified. These are the people the writer to the Hebrews describes as ‘righteous persons made perfect’ (Heb. 12:23) – those in the Old Testament who, ‘having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having planned something better for us, that without us they should not be made perfect’ (Heb. 11:39–40). These can be described as ‘foreknown by God’ (i.e. known before Christ came), ‘predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son’, ‘called according to his purpose’, and (through faith) ‘justified’. Then, when Christ died and rose again, they were ‘perfected’ and ‘glorified’ (cf. John 5:25–29).

Romans 9:6–29. In this passage, Paul begins to deal with a contentious implication of the gospel: that Jews who do not believe in Jesus Christ are lost, even though the Jews are God’s chosen people. He argues that God’s rejection of Jews does not mean that his promises to the Jews have failed, because God had previously been selective in Jewish history, choosing only one son of Abraham and one son of Isaac (vv. 6–13). Paul further argues that God is not being unrighteous when he chooses in this way because he is acting out of mercy (vv. 14–16). He can have mercy on whom he wants and harden whom he wants (vv. 17–18). In answer to the question, ‘Why does he still find fault?’, Paul replies, ‘Will what is moulded say to the one who moulded it, “Why have you make me like this?” Or has not the potter authority over the clay to make from the same lump one vessel for honour and another for dishonour?’ (vv. 19–21). He then comes to the point he has been leading up to: ‘What if God, wanting to demonstrate his wrath and to make known his ability, bore with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fit for destruction, and did this in order that he might make known the riches of his glory

²⁰ For other examples and a fuller discussion, see *Biblical Light*, Chap. 9.

²¹ Gk. *hoti*, as in v. 28.

on vessels of mercy, which he prepared for glory, whom also he called – us, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles?’ (vv. 22–24). He then cites scriptures to support the inclusion of Gentiles in the second group and of Jews in the first (vv. 25–29).

On the face of it, this passage strongly supports Calvinism. Paul describes God acting coercively to secure his will. However, when he states that ‘God bore with much long-suffering vessels of wrath in order that he might make known the riches of his glory on vessels of mercy’, he means that God wanted to make known to the former his blessings on the latter in order to provoke them to jealousy (11:11–14) and lead them to repentance (2:4). The two groups, ‘vessels of wrath’ and ‘vessels of mercy’ are not therefore rigid, as Paul makes clear in 11:22–23.

God does not therefore *force* people to be ‘vessels of wrath’ or ‘vessels of mercy’. So why does Paul describe God acting coercively in the previous verses? The answer is to establish God’s *right* to act as described in verses 22–24. Paul’s argument is that if, as the Jews’ own scriptures teach, God has the right to act like a potter, blessing Isaac and Jacob and hardening Pharaoh (vv. 7–21), then he certainly has the right to act as he does through the gospel, dividing Jews and saving Gentiles (vv. 6, 22–29).

Ephesians 1:3–14. Here Paul states that God ‘blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, according as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, ... having predestined us to adoption through Jesus Christ to himself ...; in whom also we were allotted, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to what he decides he wants ...’ (vv. 3–5, 11).

Calvinists take ‘chose us in him before the foundation of the world’ to mean that God chose us to be united with Christ. However, the passage could mean that God chose *Christ* ‘before the foundation of the world’ (cf. Luke 9:35, John 17:24, 1 Pet. 1:20, etc.), and that we partake of his chosenness through being united with him. The second interpretation is favoured by 2:6 (‘God raised us with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus’). We do not sit in the heavenlies in ourselves: we sit in them by being united with Jesus who sits in them.

Understanding Scripture in this way helps philosophically. If human beings have free will, their being responsible for their actions is beyond question.

It is important to note that, if human beings have free will, God’s sovereignty is not diminished. If they have free will, this is something God has chosen to give them. Moreover, the mechanism of the universe is complex enough for God to be able to allow human beings freedom and still control the history of the world.²² For example, if he sees a man who is thinking of doing something that would obstruct his purposes, he can judiciously intervene to close off this option, or present him with a more attractive one. Alternatively, he can allow him to act, and

²² See my book, *God’s Control over the Universe*, 2nd edn. (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 2000), Chap. 5.

intervene afterwards to recover his purposes. He can, as the first Christians said that he did, predetermine that something will happen and bring it about through human beings (Acts 2:23, 4:27–28).

Conclusion

Calvinists, even if they remain convinced by the five points, should not press them. What they should press, alongside the elements of the gospel set out in Chapter 2, is the holiness of God, and the need to approach him reverently.

CHAPTER 5

Liberal Evangelicalism

Liberal Evangelicals hold the view that Biblical authors wrote against the background of the culture they were living in, and that this needs to be allowed for in applying their teaching today. For example, liberals understand Paul's restrictions on the ministry of women (1 Cor. 14:34, 1 Tim. 2:12) as arising from the subordination of women in the first century,²³ and argue that these restrictions should be lifted now that society treats men and women equally.

Liberal Evangelicals typically stress the importance of love and of helping the needy. They are not alone in this, but it is a feature of their ministry.

Merits

Liberal Evangelicals' stress on love is surely right. When Jesus was asked, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?', he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the great and first commandment. The second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets' (Mat. 22:34–40). He later commanded his disciples: 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34–35). The apostle Paul wrote about the supreme importance of love (1 Cor. 13).

Liberal Evangelicals' stress on helping the needy is also surely right. On one occasion, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Fear not, little flock, because your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide for yourselves moneybags that do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Luke 12:32–34). He later told them that he would judge (lit.) 'all the nations' according to whether or not they

²³ Some scholars [e.g. Andrew Perriman, *Speaking of Women* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998)] have suggested more sophisticated cultural reasons, but this is the usual one.

helped ‘the least of these my siblings’ (Mat. 25:31–46).²⁴ When James, Peter, and John agreed that Paul and Barnabas should go to the Gentiles, the only thing they asked of them was to ‘remember the poor’ (Gal. 2:1–10).

The merit of liberal Evangelicals’ approach to Scripture is that it makes us study texts against their cultural background, and to ask whether there are cultural influences we should take into account. An obvious example is the apostles’ injunction, ‘Greet one other with a holy kiss’ (1 Cor. 16:20 etc.). Some Christians today take this at face value, and greet each other with an intimate kiss. In its cultural setting, however, it almost certainly refers to a greeting of the kind practised in the Middle East today – a formal, non-touching kiss on both cheeks. The injunction therefore needs to be adapted to our own culture, replacing ‘a holy kiss’ with our own form of courteous greeting.

Another example is Paul’s instruction to women to cover their heads in church (1 Cor. 11:2–16). To apply this today, we need to know the significance of women covering their heads in the first century. What this was is debated, but a possible answer lies in the way women dressed at the time.²⁵ Women of the period wore loose-fitting clothing that covered them almost completely. Accordingly, a woman’s hair became the focus of her femininity. Women who wanted to make themselves look attractive plaited their hair and decorated it with brightly coloured ribbons and expensive jewellery (cf. 1 Tim. 2:9, 1 Pet. 3:3). Modest women, on the other hand, kept their hair covered up. Paul’s ruling thus forms part of the general New Testament instruction that women should dress modestly (1 Tim. 2:9–10, 1 Pet. 3:1–6). Therefore to keep his ruling today women must do more than simply wear a hat – their whole attire must be modest.

Weaknesses

The big problem with liberal Evangelicalism is that it can easily lead to the replacement of Scriptural norms that should not be replaced. Modern culture is post-Christian. In relation to it, Christianity is counter-cultural. It sets out a better way of living. Jesus told his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth [preserving society]. But if salt has lost its potency, with what shall it be made salty? It is no longer good for anything, except to be cast out and trodden down by people. You are the light of the world [showing people how to live]. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a tub, but on a lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your father in heaven” (Mat. 5:13–16). ‘Your calling,’ in other words, ‘is to show people the right way to live and prevent society from going rotten.’ Paul accordingly told the Romans, ‘do not be fashioned in accordance with this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you might approve what God wants’ (Rom. 12:1–2). Likewise, Peter told his readers, ‘Maintain good conduct among the people of the world, so that, while they speak against you as evil-doers, they may, by observing your good

²⁴ If this is the test by which he will judge ‘all the nations’, then it will be the one by which he will judge professions of faith (Mat. 7:21–23, Jas. 2:14–26).

²⁵ See *Biblical Light*, Chap. 8.

deeds, give glory to God on the day of his visitation' (1 Pet. 2:11–12). We therefore need to take great care to allow Scripture to speak to us, and not allow society's values to subvert our reading of it. As Jesus said, 'if salt has lost its potency, with what shall it be made salty? It is no longer good for anything, except to be cast out and trodden down by people.'

Ministry of women

As noted earlier, liberal Evangelicals understand Paul's restrictions on the ministry of women (1 Cor. 14:34, 1 Tim. 2:12) as arising from the subordination of women in the first century, and argue that these restrictions should be lifted now that society treats men and women equally. There are two big problems with this.²⁶

The first is that Paul addressed his restrictions to Christians living in Greek culture (at Corinth and, through Timothy, Ephesus). In Greek culture, aristocratic women played a part in leading civil and religious life.²⁷ At Ephesus, there was a huge temple (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) dedicated to the worship of the goddess the Greeks called Artemis and the Romans Diana (cf. Acts 19:23–41). This was served by priestesses as well as by priests.²⁸ A first-century inscription indicates that the high priestess played a prominent part in the life of the city and commanded considerable respect.²⁹

The tribe of the Tethades to Flavia Ammon, daughter of Moschus, who is called Aristion, high priestess of the temple of Asia in Ephesus, president, twice crown-wearer, also priestess of Massilia [Marseilles], president of the games, wife of Flavius Hermocrates, for her excellence and decorous life and her devotion.

Paul's restrictions thus went *against* contemporary culture. This is presumably why he goes on to give his reasons for them (see below).

Paul was, of course, a Jew, and in contemporary Jewish culture, women were not allowed to take a leading part in religious life. According to the contemporary Jewish historian, Josephus, they were not permitted to worship with men in the temple.³⁰ He also expressed the opinion, 'the woman is inferior to the man in every way'.³¹ Paul had, however, made a radical break with his Jewish background (Phil. 3:1–11), and strongly resisted the Judaizing of Gentile churches, including the down-grading of women in them (Gal. 3:28). His stand on this could scarcely have been firmer (Gal. 2).

²⁶ For a full discussion, see *Biblical Light*, Chap. 8.

²⁷ See, e.g., Elaine Fantham, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H.A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁸ Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.23.

²⁹ Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (London: Duckworth, 1982), Translation 258 (slightly modified).

³⁰ *Jewish Antiquities* 15.419; *Jewish War* 5.199, 227.

³¹ *Against Apion* 2.201.

The second problem with the liberal Evangelical view is that the reasons Paul gives for his restrictions are very fundamental. In his letter to the Corinthians, he says, ‘The women should be silent in the church-gatherings. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, *as indeed the Law says.*’ (1 Cor. 14:34). This refers back to 11:8–9 where he cites Gen. 2:4–24: ‘man is not from woman, but woman from man; for indeed a man was not created for the woman, but a woman for the man.’ Genesis 2:4–24 describes how God first created Adam, and then made Eve out of one of Adam’s ribs, to be (lit.) ‘a helper as opposite him’. Paul thus goes back to the creation itself. Likewise, in his letter to Timothy, he says, ‘Let a woman learn in quietness, in all subjection. But I do not permit a woman to teach, or to take authority over a man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, came into transgression’ (1 Tim. 2:11–14). Paul again cites Genesis 2:4–24. He also cites Genesis 3:1–7, which describes how the Snake induced Eve into disobeying God, and Eve then led Adam to do the same.

In both passages, Paul goes on to insist that women are not inferior to men; it is just that they have a different role. Thus, he tells the Corinthians, ‘Nevertheless, in the Lord, there is neither woman apart from man nor man apart from woman; for just as [in origin] the woman comes from the man, so also [now] the man comes through the woman, and all things are from God.’ (1 Cor. 11:11–12). Likewise, he tells Timothy, ‘But she [woman] will be saved in her role of bearing children, if they [women] remain in faith and love and holiness, with self-control’ (1 Tim. 2:15).³² Paul thus sees the role of women (amplified in 1 Tim. 5:9–10 and Tit. 2:3–5) to be just as important as the role of men, but complementary to it.

Paul’s aim, therefore, in prohibiting women from teaching and leading congregations was not simply to preserve a role for men. It was also to ensure that women are not taken away from *their* role. As he said in relation to spiritual gifts, a body cannot operate if all the parts do the same thing. ‘If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing?’ (1 Cor. 12:17). In particular, a body cannot operate if all the parts do the showy things, and none the vital ones (vv. 21–26).

Paul’s concerns are borne out by the problems that arise when women do everything that men do, as in society today. Children and the elderly receive less attention, many men find the loss of role difficult to cope with and react badly to it, and many women feel themselves under pressure. Contrariwise, serious problems arise when men fail to respect women, and to treat them as their equals.³³ Paul’s analogy of the body requires men and women to see themselves as being vital to each other (1 Cor. 12:21–26).

There is a need today for churches to establish ministries for women corresponding to those of deaconess and widow in the New Testament and early Church.³⁴ Phoebe was a deaconess of

³² I have taken *dia* to mean ‘in the attendant circumstances of’ and *tēs teknogonias* ‘the activity of bearing children’.

³³ Cf., e.g., Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

³⁴ See, e.g., *Apostolic Constitutions*.

the church in Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1), and Paul set out the qualities required of women deacons (1 Tim. 3:11)³⁵ and ‘enrolled’ widows (1 Tim. 5:9–10).

Other practices

Liberal Evangelicals adopt society’s values on a number of other issues. These include:

- lending money on interest (contrary to Exod. 22:25, Lev. 25:35–38, Deut. 23:19–20, Luke 6:32–36);
- couples living together before marriage (despite Exod. 22:16–17);
- Christian couples divorcing (despite Mat. 5:31–32, 19:3–12p);
- homosexual unions (despite Lev. 18:22, Rom. 1:26–27, 1 Cor. 6:9–11, 1 Tim. 1:8–11, Jude 7);
- not using corporal punishment at all (despite Prov. 13:24, 23:13–14, 29:15).

These are all problematic. Can we really make a case for adopting these practices when the Bible teaches otherwise? Or are we moving away from the authority of Scripture, as non-Evangelicals do?

Remember that James wrote, ‘Religion that is pure and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, *and to keep oneself unstained from the world*’ (Jas. 1:27). Liberal Evangelicals rightly emphasize the first, but need to remember the second.

Love

Liberal Evangelicals’ emphasis on love runs into problems over the meaning of ‘love’. The word in the passages cited earlier (*agapē*) has a narrower meaning than the English word ‘love’. It does not describe affectionate love (*philia*), still less sexual love (*erōs*). It describes rather the kind of love shown by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and by Jesus on the cross (John 15:13–14, 1 John 3:16–18). It is the kind of love that seeks the good of another, even an enemy (Mat. 5:43–48).

Jesus says that this kind of love *sums up* ‘all the Law and the Prophets’ (Mat. 22:40). Paul affirmed this: ‘the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery”, “You shall not murder”, “You shall not steal”, “You shall not covet”, and whatever other commandment there is, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”’ (Rom. 13:9). Love does not therefore *replace* the commandments. These still apply (Mat. 5:17–20), albeit in elevated form (vv. 21–48).³⁶ ‘Love’ is therefore only Christian love if it keeps to the commandments.

³⁵ From the context (vv. 1–13), *gunaikes* must refer to women *diakonoi* – there is no reference to *gunaikes* under *episkopoi*.

³⁶ See *Biblical Light*, Chaps. 4–7.

Jesus said to his disciples, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15), and John wrote, 'In this we know that we love the children of God: whenever we love God and do his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments' (1 John 5:2–3).

Conclusion

Liberal Evangelicals need to look again at their approach to the Bible. While it can sometimes be helpful, taken too far it can undermine the Bible. But their stress on helping the needy is good, and an example to all of us.

CHAPTER 6

Specific issues

Worship

Worship among Evangelicals today varies widely. In some churches, modern choruses are sung repeatedly to music played by a music group with the congregation holding their hands in the air. In other churches, traditional hymns are sung to an organ in an undemonstrative manner. Other churches have choirs that sing pieces for the congregation to listen to. The range is so wide that, while worshippers may feel at home in one kind of church, they can feel very uncomfortable in another kind. This creates divisions between churches that militate against Evangelical unity.

Jesus and the apostles did not lay down detailed instructions about how worship should be conducted, but the Bible does give some general principles.

Aim

The aim of worship has to be to please God.

In the Old Testament, God repeatedly told his people, through the prophets, that their worship did not please him. In many cases, this was because they were not keeping his commandments (Isa. 1:11–17, 58:1–14; Jer. 6:16–20; Mic. 6:1–8). Keeping his commandments as Jesus taught them (Chap. 2) is a necessary prerequisite for our worship to be pleasing to him (cf. Rom. 12:1–2, Jas. 1:27).

Another is to ensure that we really do want to please God. Remember that, after the exile, he challenged his people, 'When you fasted and mourned ... did you really fast for *me*? And when you ate and when you drank, was it not for you, the ones eating, and for you, the ones drinking?'

(Zech. 7:4–6).³⁷ One often hears worshippers today saying after a service, ‘I enjoyed the service’. God doubtless wants us to enjoy worshipping him, but when this becomes the reason why we do it, he is not pleased. Most people enjoy singing, so particular care has to be taken to ensure that singing in church is really for God and not just for us.

We have to remember too the third commandment, ‘You shall not use the name of the LORD your God emptily’ (Exod. 20:7). We can break this, not only by using God’s name as an expletive, or by taking an oath in his name that we do not keep, but also by saying or singing words in church that we do not really mean. Many songs and hymns have words in them that are very difficult to sing.

Jesus endorsed the concerns of the prophets in his rejoinder to the Pharisees, ‘Hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying, “This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is very far from me. But they worship me in vain, teaching as teachings the commandments of men”’ (Mat. 15:1–9//Mark 7:1–8, citing Isa. 29:13).

Quality

Jesus took ‘the great and first commandment’ to be Deuteronomy 6:5, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ (Mat. 22:34–40). This means that our worship should be the very best that we can muster (cf. Exod. 23:19a, Lev. 22:17–25, Mal. 1:6–14).

‘In spirit and truth’

Jesus told the woman of Samaria, ‘God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth’ (John 4:24).

Here ‘in spirit’ could mean ‘in the Spirit’ (Phil. 3:3), but probably means ‘in one’s inner self’. This suits the context (vv. 19–24). Jesus is contrasting true worship with worship in the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim and in the temple in Jerusalem. This will have been ritualistic.

‘In truth’ could mean ‘in the truth that is in Jesus’ (John 1:14, 14:6) or it could mean ‘in sincerity’ (cf. John 8:44). On another occasion, Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Mat. 5:8). In the Bible, the heart is the centre of the will: to be pure in heart is to have pure motives. This takes us back to our earlier discussion of the aim of worship.

‘Discerning the body’

Paul told the Romans, ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep’ (Rom. 12:15). This reminds us that, in any true church (i.e. congregation of all the Christians from an area), there will be a mixture of people. Some will be young, some old. Some will be happy,

³⁷ Lit. ‘fasting did you fast [to] me, [to] me?’ I have taken the repetitions as being for emphasis. Verse 6 presumably refers to eating and drinking at festivals.

some sad. Some will like modern music, some traditional music. If the church's worship is to include everyone, therefore, it too has to be a mixture. As Paul told the Philippians, everyone needs to think, not only of what they would like, but also of what everyone else would like (Phil. 2:4).³⁸

This was not happening at the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:17–34). When they met to celebrate the Lord's Supper, some ate before others, leaving the others hungry (v. 21). Paul tells them bluntly, 'the one who eats and drinks not discerning the body [the church] eats and drinks judgment to himself' (v. 29). This is a sobering thought.

'First of all'

Paul urged Timothy that, '*first of all*, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made on behalf of all people ...' (1 Tim. 2:1–2). A key part of any service is the prayers.

Creation

There are deep divisions among Evangelicals today over Creation. Some ('evolutionists') fully accept the scientific account of origins (big bang and evolution), and interpret the Bible according to this.³⁹ Some ('six-day creationists') take the Biblical account literally, and interpret scientific data according to this.⁴⁰ Some ('progressive creationists') take the appearance of 'intelligent design' in organisms to indicate that God specially created these at the points at which they appear in earth history.⁴¹ All three positions have their problems. For example, evolutionists have to take 'death' in Genesis 2–3 to be only spiritual; six-day creationists have to argue that the ages of rocks given by radiometric methods are all completely wrong;⁴² and progressive creationists have to explain why God should specially create animals that kill and eat other animals.

Here I briefly present two ways of reconciling Genesis and modern science that do not have these difficulties, and bring them together.⁴³

³⁸ One motive for churches using modern music is to appeal to the young. This is not, however, the Bible's way of bringing generations together. Rather, it is by teaching the *moral* demands of God (Mal. 4:4–6; Luke 1:17, 3:7–18).

³⁹ See, e.g., Denis R. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have To Choose?* (Oxford/Grand Rapids: Monarch, 2008).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Paul A. Garner, *The New Creationism* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2009).

⁴¹ See, e.g., William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press), 1999.

⁴² The suggestion that radiometric dates are invalidated by a burst of radioactive decay a few thousand years ago (Garner, pp. 97–104) is unlikely because of the large amounts of heat and radiation this would have produced.

⁴³ For further details, see my book *Big Bang, Small Voice* (Latheronwheel, Caithness: Whittles, 1999, reprinted 2003; 2nd edn., Hull: Botanic Christian Books, 2014, ISBN 978-0-9928256-0-7).

Preliminaries

I shall assume that the scientific account, subject to the assumptions on which it is based, is correct. I am not saying that it *is* correct. The evidence for this is patchy. That for the origin of life from chemical precursors is particularly weak.

I shall take Genesis 1–3 to be authoritative (Mat. 19:4–6), with Chapter 1 describing the creation of the universe, Chapter 2 the creation of the first man and woman (amplifying 1:26–27), and Chapter 3 their disobedience and punishment.

I shall further take these chapters to constitute a *theodicy*, i.e. an explanation of how there can be evil in a world created by God. Chapter 1 affirms that there was no evil in the world when God created it – it was ‘very good’ (v. 31). Chapters 2 and 3 explain how evil came into it – through creatures (Adam, Eve, and the Snake) abusing the freedom God had given them. He punished them for this, and changed the natural order to make their lives less pleasant for them. In particular, he cursed the ground, and brought physical death on human beings (cf. Rom. 5:12–21, 8:18–23).

Genesis does not say whether animals died before the Fall. I shall suppose that the higher ones did not, but my treatment can be adapted if they did.

First method

I first take Genesis 1–3 figuratively (I take it literally in the second method).⁴⁴ I do this on the basis of the Biblical principle that God calls us to live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). He accordingly reveals himself sufficiently clearly for faith to be possible, but not so clearly as to make faith easy. This principle is evident, for example, in Jesus’ use of parables (‘that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand’, Luke 8:9–10). If God created the universe in the way scientists describe, and revealed this in Genesis, then scientists would be able to verify this account, and remove the need for faith. Making Genesis figurative ensures that it would always be a matter of faith that ‘the worlds were formed by the word of God’ (Heb. 11:3).

If, then, the scientific account of the origin of the universe is correct, Genesis 1–3 teaches, firstly, that *God* (the God of the Hebrews) created it. He designed it and brought it into being. In particular, he chose the laws according to which it operates, the configuration of the components in the big bang, and the sequencing of what are to us random events (cf. Prov. 16:33). In other words, he determined how the universe evolved.⁴⁵

Genesis 1–3 teaches, secondly, that, before God brought the universe into being, he changed its design. On his first design, everything was ‘very good’. However, he foresaw that human beings would disobey him, just as he foresaw that he would have to send his Son to rescue

⁴⁴ *Big Bang, Small Voice*, Part II.

⁴⁵ The same applies on alternative scientific theories of the universe (*Big Bang, Small Voice*, Chap. 6).

them (Eph. 1:4). He accordingly changed the design to make the world less pleasant for them, and brought the universe into being in this form.

According to this design, death is part of nature. God's reaction to the disobedience of human beings is seen everywhere. Such is the seriousness of sin.

God created the first man and woman, either by pre-programmed mutations in a subhuman species, or by special creation, with a constitution that fits in with the natural order. Genesis 2 teaches how he wants men and women to relate to each other (Mat. 19:4–6, 1 Tim. 2:11–15).

Second method

In my second method of reconciling Genesis and modern science, I relax two of the basic assumptions of the latter.⁴⁶ These are (1) that there is continuous correspondence between theory and reality, and (2) that the natural order is fixed. Relaxing these assumptions allows Genesis 1–3 to be taken literally without pre-empting faith.

Genesis 1 then describes the creation of the universe in six days. At the end of the sixth day, it was a going concern – next morning, the sun rose, plants grew, animals fed. It was, in other words, in a mature state. It accordingly appeared to have a history that it did not in reality have – trees had rings, pebbles were smooth, stars shone at night (despite the length of time it takes for starlight to reach the earth), and so on.

While the concept of a mature creation breaks assumption (1), it does not conflict with science. Any system that runs in an orderly way inevitably appears to have a history when it is set in motion, unless it is from a special state. A pendulum, for example, when set swinging, looks as if it has always been swinging. Not even God can create a mature universe without the appearance of age.

Genesis 3 describes the disobedience of Adam and Eve, as a result of which [contrary to assumption (2)] God modified the design of the universe to make the world less pleasant for them. If he carried this through consistently, so that all parts of the universe conformed to the new design, then the universe would again have been in a mature state, and would again have appeared to have a history it did not in reality have. This history would necessarily have been different from the one it appeared to have before the Fall.

To see what this means for fossils, let us suppose that, on the original design of the universe, only simple organisms and plants died. The original creation, being in a mature state, would therefore have contained fossils of these. Otherwise, it would not have conformed fully to its original design.

On the same supposition, when God redesigned the natural order after the Fall, he brought into it the death of animals, along with predation and disease. To be consistent with this new design, he accordingly refashioned the rocks, and incorporated fossils of animals, including predators

⁴⁶ *Big Bang, Small Voice*, Part III.

and sick specimens. He had to do this to make the cursed earth conform fully to the new design. Otherwise, the biosphere would have conformed to one design and the lithosphere to another. God will make similar radical changes when Jesus comes again (1 Cor. 15:51–52).

Examining the rocks, scientists conclude that animal species evolved over a long period of time. If their analysis is correct, this relates to the cursed design of the universe, and accurately reflects this. It does not, however, relate to the original design, and only represents the actual history of the earth back to the Fall.

Most scientists are unaware of assumptions (1) and (2). Their account of the origin of the universe does, however, depend on them.

According to Genesis 2, God created Adam from dust from the ground and Eve from one of his ribs. After the Fall, they became mortal. In this condition, they correspond to the first fully modern humans in the scientific picture. The evolutionary origin of human beings is a work in progress. Scientists currently believe that modern humans evolved about 200,000–150,000 years ago, in Africa, from a small population of archaic humans.⁴⁷ They base this on two lines of evidence. One depends on the identification and dating of fossils. The other entails the reconstruction of the historical origins of genetic variations among humans and gauging mutation rates. Both approaches involve considerable uncertainties. Mutation rates, for example, may vary with time and place. Scientists do not envisage the original population to be a couple, but the uncertainties in their methodology do not rule this out.

If the genealogies in Genesis are complete, the Hebrew version of the text dates creation to around 4000 BC. This is difficult to fit into archaeological history, and suggests that the genealogies are incomplete. Genealogies that gave a verifiable date for the first humans would, in any case, pre-empt faith. There are examples of incomplete genealogies in the Bible, though not with ages at the birth of sons.

Discussion

That Genesis and modern science can be reconciled in the ways I have described eases the tension between them. There is no need to try to alter one to make it fit the other. We do not have to contend, for example, that ‘death’ in Genesis 2–3 is only spiritual, or that the ages of rocks given by radiometric methods are all completely wrong. Rather, we can appraise evolutionary and anti-evolutionary ideas on their merits, and ask non-Christians to do the same.

That there is more than one method of reconciliation means that we do not know precisely how God created the universe – whether in a programmed big bang or a mature state. This is not as unsatisfactory as it may seem. If, as we study nature and the Bible, we find ourselves groping, this is no bad thing. There is no greater need in the modern world than for men and women to

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Chris Stringer and Peter Andrews, *The Complete World of Human Evolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005); Antoine Suarez, ‘Can We Give Up the Origin of Humanity from a Primal Couple without Giving Up the Teaching of Original Sin and Atonement?’ *Science & Christian Belief* 27 (2015), 59–83.

humble themselves before God. ‘The fear of the LORD,’ says Proverbs, ‘is the beginning of wisdom’ (9:10).

As Christians, we should not feel ourselves to be under pressure to have answers to *all* the questions people ask. Our message to the world is that God has spoken, not that he has told us everything. Moses referred to God’s ‘secret things’ (Deut. 29:29), and Paul to our seeing ‘through a glass, darkly’ (1 Cor. 13:12 AV). We need not be ashamed of what we do not know. Our humble ‘not knowing’ glorifies God as much as our thankful ‘knowing’.

What we do know is that it is the God of the Bible who created the universe; that, but for human disobedience, the world would be ‘very good’; that, because of human disobedience, God has made the natural order such that human beings suffer and die; that Jesus came into the world to save men and women from it; and that, one day, he will come again as Lord of a new order, in which there is no more suffering and death (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

Baptism

Baptism has long been a divisive issue for Evangelicals. Credobaptists believe that baptism should only be administered to those who repent and believe in Jesus. This necessarily excludes those who are too young to do this. Paedobaptists believe that baptism can be administered to the infants of believing parents, and that this results in some or all of them being born again. In the words of the *Book of Common Prayer*, they are ‘regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church’.

Some churches get round this problem by practising credobaptism and paedobaptism side by side according to the wishes of parents. This is a helpful way of preventing it becoming a divisive issue in a congregation.

An alternative approach is to combine elements of credobaptism and paedobaptism. This is by baptizing infants, but with infant baptism understood, not as resulting in new birth, but in a sharing in the Christian life of the parents until the children are old enough to repent and believe themselves. The household baptisms in the New Testament (Acts 16:14–15 etc.) would provide a precedent for this if any included children.

Infants baptized in this way would be baptized again when, as adults, they repented and believed. This would not be because their first baptism was faulty, but because it marked something that ceased to apply when they grew up. The scheme is therefore best described as ‘duobaptist’. I offer it as a possible way of uniting Evangelicals on this issue.

Eschatology

This is another subject over which Evangelicals are deeply divided. Some take the book of Revelation to describe events that took place in the Roman world of the 1st century AD (the ‘preterist’ view). Some take it to describe the whole of history from the 1st century to the second coming of Jesus (the ‘historist’ view). Some take it from Chapter 4 onwards to deal

exclusively with the last days (the ‘futurist’ view). Some take it to be entirely symbolic, and designed to help Christians suffering persecution to endure to the end (the ‘idealist’ view).

Again, some Evangelicals understand the millennium in Chapter 20 to be a period following Jesus’s second coming when he will reign with his people for a thousand years (‘pre-millennialism’). Some understand it as a period that follows the conversion of everyone in the world to Christianity, after which Jesus will come again (‘post-millennialism’). Some understand it to refer to the present reign of Jesus in heaven with those who have died in the faith (‘amillennialism’).

There was a time when Evangelicals fell out over the different views. This happens much less now, but it still occurs. We must try to remember what Paul said to Titus. Having told him to exhort the Christians in Crete to be careful to maintain good works, he continues, ‘but avoid foolish disputes, and genealogies,⁴⁸ and strife, and conflicts over the law; for they are unprofitable and pointless ...’ (Titus 3:9–11).

That Scripture is not completely clear about the future should not surprise us. The reason is the same as we discussed under Creation. God wants Christians to live by faith and not by sight. He accordingly reveals himself sufficiently clearly for faith to be possible, but not so clearly as to pre-empt faith. This would happen if the history of the world unfolded literally as he said.

Despite the difficulties in settling the teaching of Scripture about the future, we need to include essential elements of it in our presentation of the gospel, as noted in Chapter 2. God’s salvation does not just consist of taking the souls of the faithful through death and into heaven (cf. Luke 23:42–43, Heb. 12:22–24). It also consists of events culminating in the creation of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Rev. 21:1). These events include:

- Jesus’ coming again at ‘the completion of the age’ (Mat. 25:31);⁴⁹
- resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15, 1 Thes. 4:13–18);
- judgment of the living and the dead (Mat. 25:31–46, Rev. 20:11–15);
- condemnation of the wicked and elimination of evil from the earth (cf. Rev. 19:11–20:15);
- population of the new earth by the faithful (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

Here I have sought to be as uncontroversial as possible. I am sorry that full preterists will not be able to accept that all these events lie in the future, but partial preterists should be able to do so.

⁴⁸ Evidently contentious in NT times.

⁴⁹ See my article, ‘What Jesus said about coming again,’ *Journal of Biblical Theology* 2(1) (2019) 153–72.

CHAPTER 7

Epilogue

In this essay, I have tried to find ways of drawing Evangelicalism together, and recovering its effectiveness. Readers will not agree with every point, but I hope they will agree enough to respond positively to its message. Jesus prayed for unity (John 17). He wanted his disciples to be ‘the salt of the earth’, preventing society from going rotten, and ‘the light of the world’, showing people the right way to live (Mat. 5:13–16). Evangelicals fulfilled his wish in the past. I pray that we may do so again.

A key step preachers can take is to focus more on the teaching of Jesus himself. This accords with what the voice from the cloud said at his Transfiguration, ‘This is my Son, [my] chosen; listen to *him*’ (Luke 9:28–36). It also accords with what he himself said to his disciples after his resurrection, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [and] *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*’ (Mat. 28:18–20). As Jesus said at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, everyone who hears his words and does them ‘shall be likened to a prudent man who built his house on the rock ...’ (Mat. 7:24–27).