

Dr. Donald English, CBE (1930-1998) and his Theology

Billy Foley

This article examines some of the theology of Dr Donald English. He was a prominent Methodist minister and leader, exerting a considerable influence during the 1970s and 1980s. I evaluate his position here, to serve as an example of how the landscape of evangelicalism has changed over the past few decades, and is still changing around us today.

What follows shows that Donald English was a Neo-evangelical, and almost a Liberal. To demonstrate this, I have used the following books by him for this critique: *An Evangelical Theology of Preaching* (1996); *Why Believe in Jesus, Evangelistic Reflections for Lent*; his commentary: *The Message of Mark* (1992), and the *Handbook of Christian Belief* (1982).

Achievements

Donald English was ordained in 1962 and was General Secretary of the Division of Home Mission for the Methodist Church, Chairman of the World Methodist Executive Committee, and Chairman of the Nationwide Initiative on Evangelism. He has been Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council and twice been President of the Methodist Conference. He was a well-known speaker and author. In his early years, he was an amateur footballer of some distinction, and was a travelling secretary of the Inter Varsity Fellowship. He received a number of honorary doctorates in America and in Britain, and was awarded the CBE in 1996. He died in 1998, in the fortieth year of his ministry.

His Writings

He has published many books and is clearly an academic. For example, *Christian Discipleship, "the hard way": studies in St Mark's Gospel* (1977); *From Wesley's Chair*, presidential addresses, (1979); Closing address, delivered at the NIE Assembly at Nottingham in September 1980; *Everything in Christ* (1988); *Windows on the Passion* (1988); *Christianity and politics* (1993); *Sharing in God's Mission* (1993); *Windows on Salvation* (1994); *Into the 21st Century* (1995).

Neo-Evangelical

English is best described as a Neo-evangelical in his theology. For example, George Hunter writes, "Most readers will not find Donald English's theology to be 'evangelical' in a narrow or dogmatic sense - although Christians stuck in Enlightenment relativism and unreconstructed liberalism, still believing that all religions are more or less 'the same,' will find the book disconfirming." He draws from the "evangelical faith, Catholic and Protestant," in the book.

Strength of Catholicism

English writes, "The strength of this position (the Catholic emphasis upon Creation, Incarnation and Sacrament plays down the difference between the culture and the church in which it is set), is that it affirms an essential continuity between nature and grace. It does not see them as two separate worlds that somehow have to be offered as alternatives. It does not seek to gather converts out of one into the other. It sees them as concentric circles, but having a lot of common area between them. As such, the demands upon the Christians about being different are much less burdensome than can be the case with Protestants." English is referring to the Roman Catholic Church, and sees Catholics as Christians. Protestants emphasise Creation, Incarnation and the two Sacraments, as well as Redemption, Atonement and the Word.

Weaknesses of Roman Catholicism

English believes, "The weaknesses are that it is difficult from such a position to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the Christian experience as such. This may be why in the Roman Catholic Church there is strong emphasis on what ought to be done in relation to the church; as in attending

Confession, coming to Mass, and on the place and authority of the priesthood and the clerical emphasis." I suggest that he should have said that the Roman Catholic Church is in error, because it encourages and makes its people depend on the Confessional, the Mass, and the Priesthood. *That is a fatal weakness.*

Jesuit Order

English states, "The spiritual person is also one who has increasingly deep inner reserves of God-given strength and calm. It is said that when the head of the Jesuit Order was asked what he would do if the Order were brought to an end, he replied, 'I would say my prayers for fifteen minutes and never think about it again.' Such deep wells are linked to the eternal life of God, having so taken leave of everything that they are not destroyed by the loss of anything." This statement would be excellent if it did not make reference to the Jesuit Order, which is a counter-reformation body within the Catholic Church. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) founded the Jesuits in 1534. He was the prime agency in the Society of Jesus. English is saying, in my view, that the head of the Jesuit Order's spirituality is acceptable to God, and that God answers his prayers. This is unacceptable to the orthodox evangelical. If the Jesuits are acceptable to God, why do not orthodox evangelicals amalgamate with them and forget doctrinal divisions? To suggest that they are a spiritual organisation betrays our evangelical protestant heritage, and biblical doctrine.

Roman Catholic Evangelists

English writes, "I spoke at a conference of Roman Catholic evangelists, something I never expected I would do. In the first place I didn't expect ever to find a conference of Roman Catholic evangelists!" He goes on to say some helpful things, by using an illustration that showed the "extravagant beauty of God." However, did English preach Justification by Faith Alone, or even preach the Gospel in this situation? Or did he preach nebulous, inoffensive, and unchallenging doctrine?

Theology of Evangelism

His theology of evangelism is shown in his willingness to accommodate all denominations. For example, "I preached at a *Roman Catholic Mass*...I went to a *charismatic Anglican Church*...I went to a *Presbyterian Church*. From there I went to an *ecumenical* gathering...I went to yet another *Anglican Church*...I would not begin to judge which of these groups of Christian people was worshipping God more appropriately than the other. It seemed to me that *each was worshipping God* according to the liturgical pattern that best suited them (italics mine)." Surely, he should have made an appropriate judgment as to which denomination was worshipping according to the Scriptures. For example, Jesus said, "God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth."

In my view, it is one thing for people from different denominations attending a mission to hear the Gospel of Christ. It is quite another issue to participate in Roman Catholic, or ecumenical worship.

Roman Catholics - Brothers and Sisters

Another statement of English is an eye-opener, for he writes: "During a visit to Rome my wife and I were invited to join the Community of St. Egidio. It is a Roman Catholic community...For two Protestants like my wife and myself, it was a most moving experience to see Roman Catholic sisters and brothers living out the practical implications of the gospel."

It is interesting that English sees himself as a Protestant, which means ("to bear witness"). I am a converted Roman Catholic, and I do believe that there are some who are saved in the Roman Catholic Church - many of the Reformers were former Catholics, but they left Rome, and always defended the truth of God's Word afterwards.

However, it is a different situation participating in Catholic worship, and treating them, like English does, as "brothers and sisters in Christ." This undermines all those missionaries who are working in

Roman Catholic countries, who are seeking to win Roman Catholics to Christ. English should have acknowledged that the Roman Church believes in "salvation by works and faith," and that they abominate "justification by faith alone." The Reformation was a recovery of this truth, among other things. If English maintained his position on "justification by faith alone," he would have been aware that the Council of Trent (1545) (Canons IX and XI) declares those who subscribe to that doctrine as "anathema." The Roman Catholic Church has not revoked its decrees of Trent, and when it does there may be grounds for discussion.

Pelagianism

English writes, "Cannot they even encourage what is called Pelagianism - the idea that we play a fundamental part in our own salvation." This statement verges on heresy. Of course, it depends what he means, but even putting the best construction on the term leads one to conclude there is dreadful error in his thinking here.

The Atonement

English, while accepting and defending a variety of theories of the atonement, proposes an alternative view, which is new and his own invention. This is too much to accept, and it means whatever view of the atonement we hold has validity in his eyes. He mentions a number of views. However, the **recapitulation theory**, advocated by Irenaeus (130-202); the **payment-to-Satan theory**, advocated by Origen (185-254); the **satisfaction theory**, advocated by Anselm (1033-1109); the **moral influence theory**, advocated by Abelard (1079-1142) are false views. The **substitutionary (and orthodox) theory** or the penal view of the atonement is the only biblical and correct one. As Dr John Walvoord writes: "Christ in his death fully satisfied the demands of a righteous God for judgment upon sinners and, as their infinite sacrifice, provided a ground not only for the believer's forgiveness, but for his justification and sanctification."

Scripture must have the last word on the subject of the atonement. The Apostle Peter writes, "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Again, the Apostle Paul writes, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Ecumenical Era

"In age to age one or other of the great Christian doctrines has been either greatly neglected or grossly overemphasised. Both the neglect and the overemphasis are heresy." The question is, to which doctrines is he referring? The statement leads one to speculate. He continues, "In the past we have often been hindered by limiting our perception of church tradition to that of our own denomination. There has always been plenty to get on with there! In the ecumenical era, the riches of all the churches are now available to us." All the churches, including the Roman Church, and liberals? This surely needs qualifying.

English quotes an author who has written,

"It is Christ's living presence that unites a diverse tradition, yet the single centre is experience in richly different ways. Christ's presence is experienced sacramentally by the **liturgical traditions**, ecstatically by the **charismatic tradition**, morally inspiring by the **liberal traditions**, as ground of social experiment by the **pietistic traditions**, as doctrinal teacher by the **scholastic traditions**, as sanctifying power of persons and society **by the Greek Orthodox tradition**, a grace perfecting nature by **the Roman Catholic tradition**, as word of scripture by **the evangelical tradition**. Each of the traditions and the periods of their hegemony have experienced the living and risen Christ in spectacularly varied ways. But nothing else than the living Christ forms the centre of this wide circumference."

This statement indicates that English is prepared to embrace all traditions in a wide circumference. His position leads one to conclude that he does not have any absolute position. "Let us all unite" seems to be his approach, which is the nature of modern ecumenism.

Creedal Statements

English states, "The trouble with Christian doctrine is that it comes to us in creedal statements." I wonder, does English include the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Chalcedon, and the Athanasius Creed in this statement, and if we broaden the definition of creeds to include confessions, as Philip Schaff does, what would he think of the Methodist Creeds?

In fact, John Wesley's Sermons and Notes on the New Testament "are legally binding only on the British Wesleyans..." However, the very rationale of the Church's creeds, or confessions, is to precisely define and formulate the character and uniqueness of its beliefs, based on correct understanding of Scripture. Without definitions, there is misunderstanding and lack of precision. Indeed, if Luther had not nailed his Ninety Five Theses on the Church door of Wittenburg in 1517, how would the Church of Rome have responded? Those propositions are clear and unambiguous. Church Creeds serve their purpose in distinguishing fundamentals, which are held by denominations or groups. They have played a vital part in the Church's contending for the faith.

It seems to be in English's psyche to please; yet, he loses the argument by toleration and compromise. It is total confusion to recognise the equal validity, for example, of the Roman Catholic tradition, and the evangelical tradition. We believe different things. Before God, we have a duty to follow the Bible, and that is why the Reformation happened.

Wesley's View

English wrote, "Here John (Wesley) realised the essential 'inwardness' of Christian experience, as he deepened his knowledge of early Christian, Roman Catholic and Church of England, mystical and neo-Platonist, Puritan and other writings." There can be no doubt that English had extensive knowledge of Wesley's writings. It is one thing to remark on John Wesley's emphasis on 'inwardness' in Christian experience, but it quite another to imply that John Wesley benefited from Roman Catholicism, etc. Furthermore, in my opinion, English would have served the cause of Christ better to have followed John Wesley's example, whom he greatly admired, and not compromised his Methodist heritage. Wesley wrote of the Bible:

"We believe the written word to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice; and herein we are fundamentally distinguished from those of the Romish Church."

English writes, "...the evangelist's task is to present the gospel as he understands it, to paint the basic picture with broad single strokes, to witness to the faith as he perceives and receives it, and to declare it as clearly and intelligibly as he can. In John Wesley's words, his task is to be able to say, 'I offered them Christ.'" I believe that this statement is much better.

Conclusion

In examining Donald English and his theological stance, we justified in drawing three conclusions.

1. Donald English has forgotten that the Reformation was a return to biblical and historic Christianity.
Its aim was to restore the church to its pristine purity. However, English has departed from and compromised the Gospel by having fellowship and worshipping with the corrupt Roman system. If English had adopted a biblical approach to evangelism and fellowship, he may well have been a great Methodist leader and a worthy follower of John Wesley.
2. Donald English represents yet another concession by a professing evangelical. He was typical of the modern evangelicalism that wants to be known for the Gospel it proclaims and yet for the variety of doctrinal positions it is prepared to approve. This is to have it both

ways. We are either evangelical (Bible people and Gospel people) or we are heretics. We cannot be both.

3. With Donald English, the bridge between Rome and "evangelicals" has been strengthened at the cost of historic evangelical identity. For the apostle Paul such a bridge was unthinkable: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8,9). The apostle Paul was no builder of bridges but rather of walls (Psalm 51:18), for the safety of the truth. We need to ensure that our churches are bastions of orthodoxy and impregnable places for the faith once delivered to the saints.