

A BOOK FOR OUR TIME

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An extended review, with comment, of *Reinventing English Evangelicalism 1966-2001*, A Theological and Sociological Study. Dr. Rob Warner. Paternoster (2007), paperback, 284 pages. £19.95.

Those of us who remember the 1960s cannot help deeply lamenting that era. Over those forty years drastic changes have swept over us, none more momentous than in the realm of morality and religion. On the moral side, radicals in the arts and entertainment media were foisting an alternative set of values upon us. This coincided on the religious side with a growing liberalism in the Established church that offered little resistance to the New Morality.¹ The upheavals of the 60's were the ominous shape of things to come.

Wistfulness

Yet, as Christians, we find ourselves almost looking back to that era with wistfulness. Because there seemed a consensus and stability among us. This was before the Charismatic Movement, and before its new worship songs had challenged reverent worship. And before the divisive glut of modern Bibles, for the seminal New International Version (1978) had not yet appeared. Furthermore, evangelicalism appeared robust in its core doctrines and rejection of ecumenical compromise. Influential Christian leaders, and influential bodies, inspired believers to cleave to the Lord and to His truth.² Godliness seemed more prevalent, and worldliness less developed.

Question

What happened in those more than forty years to change our landscape almost beyond recognition? It is important to answer this question because we must have "understanding of the times" if we are to "know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chronicles 12:32). Undoubtedly, the moral revolution mentioned above played its part. But that is not the main cause. That lies much more within evangelicalism itself.

Research that provides us with reliable information for this purpose is welcome. The book under review and comment here is this, and much more. It chronicles the developments over that time with impressive thoroughness, using statistics, charts and diagrams. Dr. Warner chooses the focal period 1966 to 2001 to best show the course of these epoch-making changes within the evangelical scene.

¹ An insider's assessment of this appears in Michael Seward's autobiography *A Faint Streak of Humility*, Paternoster Press, 1999, pages 257-294. Seward, an Evangelical Anglican, was Radio and Television Officer at Church House, Westminster from 1967-1972. See also, *Whatever Happened to Sex?* Mary Whitehouse,

² Even as recently as 1977 three papers under the auspices of the then British Evangelical Council were published in a paperback entitled *The Bible Under Attack*. These were "The Inerrancy of Scripture" by Hywel Jones, "Creation and Evolution" by Edgar Andrews, and "Our Times and their Lessons" by Iain Murray. One wonders if powerful addresses like these would now come forth from BEC's lame successor, Affinity.

Author

The author is Lecturer in Sociology of Religion and Practical Theology at the University of Wales, Lampeter. He writes both as an academic and as a one-time insider, including charismatic sympathies, leadership in Spring Harvest and minister of a Baptist church in Wimbledon. It is clear that Dr. Warner's views are not those of the Bible League. The inerrancy of Scripture, penal substitution, and eternal, conscious punishment in hell are not truths he would uphold.³ Moreover, there is a hint of sympathy with New Perspective views.⁴ Warner's own position seems summed up in the borrowed phrase "generous orthodoxy:"⁵ an evolving evangelicalism, not tied to doctrinal formulations but affected by cultural changes⁶.

Why, then, review this book? Not to necessarily recommend it to our readers, but because it provides an authoritative unique insight into a formative period leading up to our time. We can learn from the author's investigations more than from his conclusions. We will have conclusions of our own to draw from the territory mapped out for us here. With this in mind, let us come to the main areas of interest.

1. What happened between 1966 and 2001

The year 1966 was an historic parting of the ways. Before then, evangelicalism was largely a unity, comprising nonconformist and Anglican Christians enjoying "pan-evangelical co-operation."⁷ However, the meeting that year of the National Assembly of Evangelicals proved a catalyst. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached powerfully "for an exclusively evangelical unity, arguing that schism could only take place between true believers, whereas separating from heretics and unbelievers was a Christian obligation."⁸ The Anglican chairman, John Stott intervened at the end and sought to rebut Lloyd-Jones' call to leave mixed denominations in favour of true church unity. This dramatic display of disagreement fractured relations and future co-operation.⁹ Things were never to be the same again.

Post 1966 saw two different constituencies emerging. Warner describes "a unitary movement that gradually polarised" and "two contrasting tendencies soon began to gather force" ... (i.e.) the rise of "entrepreneurial activists" (charismatics and broader evangelicals) on one hand, and the "more theologically minded, largely Calvinist" on the other.¹⁰ We need to be clear about these now separate "trajectories," as Warner also calls them.

By the second, Warner means conservative Christians who rejected liberalism and ecumenism, judging these a departure from the faith once delivered. They heeded Lloyd-Jones' courageous leadership, and many rejoiced to discover their doctrinal heritage in Banner of Truth and other reformed publications. Warner suggests they represent (in his uncomplimentary words) "the extremism of the Right, who have

³ *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001*, pages 196ff, 213 and 13, 133

⁴ *Ibid*, 201.

⁵ *Ibid*, 243.

⁶ *Ibid*, 13, 14.

⁷ *Ibid*, 39.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ See BLQ issue July-Sept 2006 *Forty Years on...*

¹⁰ *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001*, Foreword, page xv.

become Evangelicalism's Militant Tendency ... Calvinistic-exclusivism."¹¹ Bible League supporters will not be ashamed to be found among these.

It is the first group, however, who receive most attention in this book, because its members have influenced the Christian scene more over the last forty years.

Evangelical Alliance

Representing this was the Evangelical Alliance (EA). Under the dynamic leadership of Clive Calver, its membership grew from just 900 in 1981 to over 50,000 by 1996 (from less than 1,000 churches to 3,000) and claimed to represent a million evangelicals.¹² Calver had served as Programme Director for Billy Graham's Mission England campaigns in the early 80s, had close links with the evangelist Luis Palau, and was a long-standing friend of Graham Kendrick "the leading modern song writer of his generation."¹³

Calver described himself as "Reformed and Charismatic,"¹⁴ and doubtful as the former was, the latter claim ensured that charismatics were welcomed as equal partners in EA. Warner maintains "the growth of the (Evangelical) Alliance ... paralleled the growth of the charismatic renewal."¹⁵ This is sufficient to show that the driving force in evangelicalism post 1966 was an alliance that was wide in its theological sympathies and broad in its associations.¹⁶ At its height in the early 90s, EA claimed to represent the UK evangelical constituency, spoke on their behalf to the media, had the ear of governments, and were set to change the nation.¹⁷

Spring Harvest

A parallel growth was that of Spring Harvest (SH). The idea for this "germinated after Peter Meadows visited a Methodist event at Prestatyn to sell *Buzz*, his youth magazine. Meadows raised the idea with Calver, who developed the concept of a week, networked a team of initiators and recruited Graham Kendrick, the guitarist with whom he had previously toured as an itinerant evangelist."¹⁸ The growth of SA, like EA, was phenomenal. In 1979 2,800 attended this holiday week "to learn, laugh and worship,"¹⁹ and by the 1990s it reached 80,000. Between EA and SH there was a "synergy,"²⁰ SH being a fruitful recruiting ground for EA.

Alpha Course

An additional force representing the first group is the growth of the Alpha Course movement. This initiative began in 1998, and by 2001 Nicky Gumbel, the Course's author, cited *The Guardian's* estimate that 250,000 had been converted through it; it was further claimed that over 3.6 million people either have done Alpha or know

¹¹ Ibid, Acknowledgements, xviii.

¹² *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001*, page 3.

¹³ Ibid, page 56.

¹⁴ Ibid, page 57.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 61. So much so that some conservative Christians at the time dubbed it "the Charismatic Alliance," Ibid.

¹⁶ In an interview in 1996, Calver was asked, "Do you have any Catholic members?" He replied, "Some individual Roman Catholics, yes, and some Anglo-Catholic churches" (<http://trushare.com/20JAN97/JA97LOWI.htm>)

¹⁷ Ibid, pages 55ff.

¹⁸ Ibid, 68.

¹⁹ http://www.springharvest.org/main-event-sh/category_index.php?id=6

²⁰ Ibid, 43.

someone who has.²¹ Warner describes Alpha as “Bash camp rationalistic conservatism combined with Wimberist charismatic expressivism operating within the milieu of late twentieth century marketing.”²²

This well sums up Alpha, because it is a product of Holy Trinity, Brompton, the charismatic citadel and promoter of the Toronto heresy since 1994. Warner says that it is “an evangelical and charismatic course in origins.”²³ However, its faithfulness to the biblical gospel is minimal. One author quotes Chris Hand’s critique, “The God of *Alpha* is not the God of the Bible, the plight of man in *Alpha* is not as serious as in the Bible, and the Jesus Christ of *Alpha* is not the Jesus Christ of the Bible.”²⁴ Not surprisingly, there is a *Catholic Alpha* version, enjoying support from “charismatic Catholics,”²⁵ and therefore Alpha is an engine for ecumenism. The spread of the Alpha “gospel” has been at the expense of the biblical gospel.

Other trends

The book charts other trends as well. For instance, failed ecumenical evangelistic initiatives,²⁶ revisions of key Bases of Faith of, e.g. Evangelical Alliance, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, etc.,²⁷ Conservative Evangelical statements on Inerrancy and Penal Substitution,²⁸ the three National Evangelical Anglican Congresses of 1967, 1974 and 1977,²⁹ and what Warner calls “The Post-Conservative Emergence, 1996-2000.”³⁰ All these are revealingly informative and repay careful study. However, what we have enlarged upon so far is what falls within our range of interest.

2. What we can learn from this formative history

Surveying the years 1966-2001, this book is replete with lessons and warnings for us.

1] Large organisations do not necessarily mean spiritual blessing.

EA, SH and Alpha have grown phenomenally and have dominated the evangelical scene for decades. EA and SH envisaged a transformation of British society along the lines of past revivals. Warner shows clearly, however, that “their self-confidence was exaggerated and misplaced,”³¹ because they suffered from “vision-inflation.”³² It proved to be a false dawn.³³ The 1990s saw both these organisations plateau and decline in the face of an increasingly secular UK society.

The outward “success” of EA, SH and Alpha did not have a transforming effect upon the nation. Things are worse now than ever, and EA, SH and Alpha have made little

²¹ Ibid, 115.

²² Ibid, 122.

²³ Ibid, 119.

²⁴ Ibid, 121, quoting *Falling Short? The Alpha Course Examined*. Day One Publications, 1998.

²⁵ Ibid, 119

²⁶ Ibid, 99-111.

²⁷ Ibid, 158-171.

²⁸ Ibid, 192-200.

²⁹ Ibid, 174-188.

³⁰ Ibid, 207-223.

³¹ Ibid, 208

³² Ibid, 65, 85.

³³ Ibid, 48.

difference. As it is, EA is now only helping make matters worse. Joel Edwards succeeded Clive Calver as General Secretary in 1997. This year he retired and has been undertaking a tour of the churches in the UK, taking up the theme "An Agenda for Change." A book of the same name has been published. This shows just how far EA has drifted from its professed evangelical convictions. A report in a recent Banner of Truth Magazine³⁴ says this,

"I attended one of these public meetings ... the theme of the meetings was billed as 'Join the conversation; be the transformation.' The frequent use of the word 'conversation' especially drew my concern because of its widespread use by advocates of the Emerging Church. It is far more acceptable in those circles to speak of 'conversation' between Christians and unbelievers than it is to speak in terms of 'proclamation' or 'declaration;' for that reason there is a desperate need for churches to be continually modernising and ensuring that they are perceived by outsiders to be culturally relevant ... Inevitably, this loss of authority goes hand-in-hand with a weakening of the gospel message ... The conclusion I drew on the basis of my observations at this meeting is that 'mainstream evangelicalism' is not resting on a secure biblical foundation."

In the kingdom of God, size and numbers matter very little. It is "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). It is true that genuine revivals result in massive numbers and enlarged churches, but divine blessing is not dependent upon these, nor necessarily comes through them. If EA, SH and Alpha had been resolutely biblical, faithfully separatist, and truly spiritual, they would have been very much smaller – but they may have accomplished some genuine and lasting good.

2] Hyperactivity can mean spiritual downturn and backsliding.

With all EA's talk of growth and impact, other statistics were telling a different story. For instance, the reading of edifying Christian magazines was in sharp decline, with a decrease of 61.4% between the early 1980s and 1990.³⁵ Most worrying was the Quiet Time, "the traditional cornerstone of twentieth century evangelical spirituality."³⁶ Warner notes "the demise of this practice," contributing to the "growing biblical illiteracy among evangelicals." He even says that it "is being abandoned, presumably as no longer helpful, compelling or relevant."³⁷ This is not just the loss of an historic practice: it must signal the loss of personal godliness and heart religion (Genesis 24:63; Psalm 31:20; Mark 1:35; James 4:8). It suggests that, in the constituency we are considering, a religion of heady activism was replacing a religion of spiritual growth and knowing the Lord.

Moreover, later in the book he further shows this decline (in language betraying his own views): "This was an era in which pan-evangelicals were jettisoning their former cultural capital and no longer holding to the details of their former restrictive and absolutist lifestyle ... no longer wedded to the ossifying formality in worship and preaching; adhering in rapidly diminishing numbers to the traditional

³⁴ August-September 2008, page 17.

³⁵ Ibid, 87

³⁶ Ibid, 94.

³⁷ Ibid, 97.

evangelical spirituality..."³⁸ The solemn fact seems to be that backsliding and worldliness have marked this generation of new evangelicals (Revelation 2:4,5).

3] The baneful influences of these organisations upon the church.

In the temporary "success" story of EA and SH, what is not often told is the damage they did to many local churches during the 1980s onwards. Warner confirms this in commenting upon the thousands who attended SH each year, "These ... influence(d) whole churches in the light of their SH experience, taking home practical ideas, distinctive emphases, and, perhaps most frequently, new songs."³⁹ And again,

"Churches were exposed at SH to contemporary worship, thus increasing the pressure for traditional worship to give ground in the historic denominations. Many guests came from smaller churches, and for them in particular, worship with several thousand was an inspiring experience ... in the idiom of Radio 2 stadium rock ... The contribution of Graham Kendrick in the first decade of SH was immense ... Kendrick's songs facilitated the shift from the traditional hymn sandwich in many churches."⁴⁰

Many Pastors, seeking to maintain biblical and reverent worship in their churches, suffered the annual headache of exuberant SH returnees expecting changes to worship and evangelism. This caused no end of divisions and trouble, in some cases destroying churches and breaking many hearts. SH may have enjoyed years of prestigious success in giving Christians a great time, but the misery it foisted upon numbers of churches and pastors is a wretched legacy the belies the "blessing" that was claimed. Not only so, but other aspects of this legacy include charismatic renewal, an emphasis upon social action, and women speakers.⁴¹ The potent combination of EA/SH has been the devil's instrument to undermine and wear down faithful churches that could not – and would not – offer the same fare to its members.

4] It is the local church where the real work is done.

The role of para-church organisations feature so largely in this book that one almost forgets the church. Although EA and SA purport to be servants to church denominations, in reality the member-churches must often have felt under pressure to serve *them*. Clive Calver was an ambitious leader who "tirelessly travel(l)ed the country, preaching at churches, and meeting strategic leaders ... (exhibiting) exceptional and sustained drivenness, determination and ambition as he wooed, cajoled and inspired the re-gathering of evangelicals under the banner of EA."⁴² Reading the story of those decades, it must have seemed as though the agenda of EA was one thing, and the churches were seen as simply the means to drive this on to realisation. Commenting on the "EA-Spring Harvest interface," Warner says that "Spring Harvest expressed a trans-denominational (*or even post-denominational*) ethos that expressed and strengthened Calver's vision for the EA" (*italics mine*).⁴³ The statement is revealing – it is almost as if EA has superseded the church. However, was EA's vision and methodology the same as the Great

³⁸ Ibid, 235.

³⁹ Ibid, 68.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 70.

⁴¹ Ibid, 74.

⁴² Ibid, 52.

⁴³ Ibid, 54.

Commission, or the apostolic directives in the New Testament epistles? Or what our forefathers preached and laboured for throughout the best eras of church history?

EA, SH (and eventually Alpha) peaked, plateaued and declined – not only because they are unsound – but because they are not the real work of the kingdom. Neither is any organisation that except the local church. When organisations dominate churches rather than be handmaids to them, then they have outgrown their legitimacy. Para-church organisations have a place, but always in subservience to the cause of God and truth in His church. In the kingdom of grace, the church is the palace where the king is worshipped and served, and from where His will is done in earth as it is in heaven. Whether the church seems large or small, it is “the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15), whose success is not to be judged by outward size, numbers or influence – but by faithfulness to Him who bought her with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

5] Without God’s blessing our labours are fruitless.

“Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it” (Psalm 127:1). There is no denying the dedication, zeal and commitment of Clive Calver and his “Calverism” as Warner puts it.⁴⁴ His vision and energy drove up EA’s membership and made SH such a force. Alpha, too, rode upon this resurgence. Yet what has it all come to? What has it really achieved? According to Warner, very little – as a former insider, he seems disillusioned by it now,

“... the massive levels of indifference to organised religion among young adults suggests that evangelicals may have enjoyed a brief flurry of prominence in the residual remains of the churches in England before the entire edifice of organised and institutional Christianity sinks into accelerating or even terminal decline.”⁴⁵

Another reviewer describes Warner’s book as, “a pretty searing indictment of many aspects of the evangelical renaissance that took place in the latter half of the twentieth century in England, written by someone who was at the very heart of what was going on.”⁴⁶

We are not surprised by this. Only if we do God’s work in God’s way can we hope for His increase. Warner has no time for the constituency that we represent. It is as if we do not figure in this history. But then, he has never been part of our scene, nor does he probably understand the convictions we have. Stephen Charnock said, “A man may be theologically knowing and spiritually ignorant.” Our author seems to have retreated into academic life as the only alternative to what he now rejects.

The real cause of God and truth cannot be surveyed in a book like this, for it cannot be ultimately reduced to figures and statistics. “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation,” margin: “with outward show” (Luke 17:20). The record of our labours is in another place (Job 16:19). The Lord knows, He reigns, and He calls us to be faithful and leave the results to Him. We hope in God, for the battle is not ours but His. The future is as bright as the promises of God, for to our King is given the

⁴⁴ Ibid, 41ff.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁶ http://seanthebaptist.typepad.com/sean_the_baptist/2007/12/rob-warner-on-m.html

heathen for His inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession (Psalm 2:8). May we be enabled to be like those of old, who "prevailed, because they relied upon the LORD God of their fathers" (2 Chronicles 13:18).