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A Review Article

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Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000

Iain H. Murray
Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth (2000)
342 pages, cloth, $21.50

Reading this book for review has been a dispiriting experience. Working through some 300 pages by a well-known and skillful evangelical writer devoted to a relentless exposé of the inadequacies of many of the leading evangelicals of the past half-century is calculated to cast one into Bunyan's slough of despond. One must admire Iain Murray's tenacity in such an unpalatable cause. It must have been deeply distasteful, for an author whose natural habitat seems the three centuries of Reformation, Puritanism and Evangelical Revival, to digest and analyse so many books, articles and reports of recent decades which convey to him the depressing message of widespread evangelical betrayal of biblical Christianity at its core. For me it is sorely disconcerting that those most prominently in the firing-line are people from whom, as writers, speakers, and in many cases friends, I have profited enormously.

On any measure this is a weighty treatise. The range of Murray's reading is extensive and includes some manuscript sources. He marshals quotations deftly, to maximum effect. The central burden of the book—that major changes

have come over salient areas of transatlantic evangelicalism in the second half of the twentieth century—is, I judge, not open to challenge. Whether these changes have been very largely for the worse and where the blame should be laid are questions likely to provoke intense debate—at least until lapse of time has opened up greater distance from the events themselves and with it the opportunity for clearer objectivity in evaluating them.

Iain Murray's selected targets are first, a North American nexus encompassing the "new evangelicalism" of Fuller Theological Seminary, Billy Graham and all his works (well, most of them), especially the increasingly broad platform of ecclesiastical and theological support behind his crusades, and *Christianity Today* (on none of which will I venture to comment); second, the mounting denominationalism of evangelical Anglicans, which diverted them away from nurturing their primary unity with non-Anglican evangelicals toward finding their identity chiefly within the Church of England—and in the process progressively compromising their evangelicalism; third, the pursuit of academic professionalism by evangelical biblical and theological scholars, which has inexorably entailed a rationalist intellectualism, blighting not only evangelicals in universities but even church seminaries; and fourth, the fresh seriousness shown in rapprochement with Roman Catholicism by evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic, but again chiefly by Anglicans. False ecumenism involving doctrinal indifferentism is a prime preoccupation throughout.

On the British side of the ocean the focus falls almost entirely on England, to the exclusion of Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and within England almost entirely on the Church of England, with little or no attention to Methodists, Baptists, and other major groupings. Most surprisingly, the charismatic movement puts in only a few

fleeting appearances. I would reckon that the remarkably pervasive impact of the new charismatic dimension must be counted among the two or three most powerful forces shaping Anglican evangelicalism in the period under review. Murray's almost total disregard of it probably finds its explanation in his tracing the large-scale departure of Anglican evangelicals from historical biblical Christianity to the flawed leadership of men who mostly did not espouse the charismata. (And men they all were. The virgin Mary and Mother Teresa are the only women in the book, with feminism mentioned only as a malign influence.) The villains in Murray's piece are James Packer, John Stott, Colin Buchanan, Alister McGrath and other such luminaries in the Anglican evangelical firmament. There are precious few heroes—Gerald Bray almost alone among Anglicans, along with Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Given the general drift of Murray's argument, one might have expected a title such as "Evangelicalism Decadent." The choice of the less judgmental *Evangelicalism Divided* draws attention to a famous public disagreement between Lloyd-Jones and Stott at the National Assembly of Evangelicals at London in October 1966. Stott in the chair openly dissented at the end of Lloyd-Jones' address from what he had heard as the latter's summons to evangelicals to leave their mixed denominations (such as the Church of England) in favor of a new association of evangelical churches. Murray goes to great pains at two places in his book to exculpate Lloyd-Jones of any responsibility for disrupting existing inter-denominational evangelical unity by a clarion call "Evangelicals—Leave your Denominations," as *The Christian* weekly headlined its report. The furthest Murray will go is to blame "some on the Lloyd-Jones side" (279) for a confusing reference to a "United Evangelical Church," which contributed to the alleged misunderstanding shared, it seems, by virtually all who heard him (and

here unhappily blamed in part on a Billy Graham-financed religious press).

As the author of a massive two-volume biography of Lloyd-Jones and editor-publisher of many of his works, Murray should be a reliable interpreter of what he said at the 1966 Assembly. Unfortunately the evidence counts decisively against him. In the first place, the second volume of his biography (*David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. The Fight of Faith 1939 – 1981*, 522-31) makes unambiguously clear Lloyd-Jones' "conviction that there must be a new evangelical unity of *churches*" (531, italics original). Within a month of the Assembly he disbanded the Westminster Fellowship because "I cannot see the point of meeting with men who are adamant on staying in their denominations" (530). Second, had Lloyd-Jones believed he had been misrepresented, he had every opportunity to set the record straight, but no such statement is reported. Third, the "full, unedited text" of what he said, published in his collected addresses *Knowing the Times* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh and Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1989), 246-57, does not bear out Murray's account of the speaker's mind. This is a matter of some importance, and hence I judge it appropriate to quote at some length from Lloyd-Jones' text. He began crisply:

> My subject is church unity. . . . [This] is incomparably the most important question that Christian people can be considering and facing at this present time (246).
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> Unity is something that is to be visible, as well as spiritual (247).
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> I feel that our position is a pathetic one. Indeed to me it is a tragic one. . . . Can we deny the charge that we, as evangelical Christians, have been less interested in the question of church unity than anyone else? . . . [W]e, of all people, ought to be the first to preach the vital necessity of church unity (249).
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> The most pathetic thing of all, to me, is that our attitude towards the question of church union is always a negative one. . . . The impression is given that evangelicals are more concerned to maintain the integrity of their different denominations than anybody else in those denominations (249-50).
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> How often have we, as evangelicals, discussed the doctrine of the church? . . . So the charge that is brought against us by members of the ecumenical movement and by the liberals has always been: You evangelicals are not interested in the church, you are only interested in personal evangelism. I am here to say that I am afraid that there is far too much truth in that charge. And it is because we have faced our problems in terms of movements and societies instead of facing them on the church level (250).
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> I suggest that there are two major questions to which we must address our minds. The first is this: Are we content, as evangelicals, to go on being nothing but an evangelical wing of a church?
>
> The second is this: Where are we to start in this whole matter? (251) . . . These, then, are the questions that come before us: the doctrine of the church. What is the Christian church (252)?
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> The church, surely, is not a paper definition. . . . A church does not consist of the Thirty-nine Articles. A church does not consist of the Westminster Confession of Faith. . . . You can have a paper constitution with a majority in that church denying that very constitution. That is no longer a church as I see it. . . . A church consists of saints. [W]hat we need,

above everything else at the present time, is a number of such churches, all in fellowship together, working together for the same ends and objects (252-3).

[T]o leave a church which has become apostate is not schism. That is one's Christian duty and nothing else. . . . [Schism] is division among people who are agreed about the essentials and the centralities, but who separate over secondary and less important matters. . . . [T]he only people I know at the present time who are guilty of the sin of schism are evangelicals (253).

[W]e spend most of our time apart from one another, and joined to and united with people who deny and are opposed to these essential matters of salvation. . . . We have our visible unity with them. Now, I say, that is sinful.

Why are we evangelicals divided up among the main denominations? . . . I am arguing that . . . for us to be divided from one another in the main tenor of our lives and for the bulk of our time, is nothing but to be guilty of the sin of schism.

Let me therefore make an appeal to you evangelical people here present this evening. What reasons have we for not coming together (254)? What cogent reason have we for staying as we are when we have this new, and as I regard it, heaven-sent opportunity for doing something new? . . . Do we not feel the call to come together, not occasionally, but always? It is a grief to me that I spend so little of my time with some of my brethren. I want to spend the whole of my time with them. I am believer in ecumenicity, evangelical ecumenicity (255). There are great and grievous difficulties. . . . I know that there are men, ministers and clergy, in this congregation at the moment, who, if they did what I am exhorting them to do, would have a tremendous problem before them, even a financial, an economic and a family problem. . . . But has the day come when we, as evangelicals, are afraid of problems? (256).

[W]ho knows but that the ecumenical movement may be something for which, in years to come, we should thank God because it has made us face our problems on the church level instead of on the level of movements, and really brought us together as a fellowship, or an association, of evangelical churches. May God speed the day (257).

With that he ended. It is passing strange how Murray can comment that, for Lloyd-Jones at this time, "The big issue . . . was not about church unity at all" (48). The address from first words to last was an urgent appeal for visible evangelical church unity or union—the only way in which evangelicals in the mixed denominations could escape their present sin of schism—an offense which, whatever Murray might say (95), was tantamount to guilt by association in Lloyd-Jones' view.

I cannot understand how the author can assert that in this address Lloyd-Jones "said no such thing" as to appeal to evangelicals to leave their denominations (47-48). To be sure, he sketched no blueprint of a new evangelical church; nothing was proposed as to church polity. But given that the burden of the address fell on the visible church union of evangelicals, listeners then and readers now may be forgiven—nay, they were and are justified!—in hearing a summons not only out of their mixed denominations (this much is incontestably clear) but also into, not some ecclesial limbo, but a new evangelical church communion. "[T]he heart of the case" which Lloyd-Jones presented went beyond what Murray identifies here—that evangelicals "should give higher priority to the unity which [their] doctrine entailed than to denominational relationships which required no such allegiance to Scripture" (45). The good

Doctor prescribed breaking with the latter and going beyond what the former had hitherto been held to entail, into a new church body. He called on his hearers to depart from the "Rome" of liberalism like the sixteenth-century Reformers—but Murray is right: He did not say whether they should become Lutherans or Anabaptists or Reformed /Presbyterians or (whoops!) Anglicans.

This book would be a more humanly sympathetic exercise if only it betrayed some slight recognition that Lloyd-Jones, too, had feet of clay. If only it acknowledged that, for example, like the consummate orator he was, in the classic mold of great preachers from Chrysostom and Augustine onward, he was given to overstatement. To claim, as he did in this address, that evangelicals in the UK were confronted by "one of the great turning-points of history" (256—and placarded by Murray from another source at the beginning of the book) must strike the rest of the world as more than a trifle myopic. But those of us who worshiped regularly at Westminster Chapel (in my case, in the university vacations) most Sundays heard something different described as "without doubt the most important issue of the present day," or "incontrovertibly the most pressing challenge that we face at this time." Hyperbole and superlatives were part of his stock-in-trade! He was the only contemporary preacher known to me who had frequented the visitors' gallery of the House of Commons to learn by observation from the most powerful Parliamentary speakers. North American readers ought also to be aware of some unease, not least among senior evangelical brethren in Scotland, that Lloyd-Jones pursued some unwise causes in his latter years, to the detriment of his core ministry.

The idolizing of our leaders has been one of the unhealthier marks of modern evangelicalism. I remember in a local Christian bookshop overhearing the manager speaking in reverential tones about "the Doctor"—only to

be brought up short on realizing that Ian Paisley of Ulster was the revered Doctor in question. I suspect that behind such inflated deference lurks a defective pneumatology—one that works with an Old Testament prophet-model to the despite of that democratizing of the Spirit which, according to Acts 2:16-18, characterizes the heart of the new covenant.

"There was only one senior evangelical voice raised in Britain on the danger facing evangelicals. It was that of Martyn Lloyd-Jones" (44; cf. 81 for the "lone voice"). Whether he was alone, and whether "Britain" here should really be "England," I leave on one side. Iain Murray is surely the world's expert on Lloyd-Jones. When, therefore, he so patently misreads one of his crucial addresses, one's confidence in the rest of the book is severely challenged. It would, however, be highly regrettable if on this account we declined to listen to Murray's indictment of evangelical dereliction. The issues at stake are too serious to allow us responsibly to evade them on the grounds of his partisanship. We must face up to the case he presents not least because it is in essence not new. A similar concern informs, for example, the more modest coverage of a slightly longer span in *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935 – 1995. A Personal Sketch* (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1997) by Oliver Barclay, who, as a leading light in the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (later, the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) for almost half a century, has been one of the sharpest participant observers of the British evangelical scene. Readers may wish to compare the two accounts.

The evangelical constituency in the UK has grown immensely during the last fifty years, and with the growth has come greater diversity and also disunity, but also greater confidence, for example, in engaging with the political process and government. Even the fledgling Scottish Parliament, with limited devolved powers, has attracted

two evangelical lobbyists, one representing the Evangelical Alliance, whose massive growth over the half century reminds us of increased unity alongside divisions. It has become far and away the largest body of evangelicals (from which the circles represented by this book have largely remained aloof). With diversity has emerged almost by definition broader doctrinal fluidity. Factors contributing to this growing heterogeneity have included evangelicals' more committed participation in the corporate life of their denominations, their increasing representation in the ranks of academic theology, the impact of non-Western currents of evangelical testimony as evangelicalism has "gone global," the growth of women's ministries in most traditions, the recovery of the Anabaptist or Mennonite vision, the vitality of magazines and journals, societies and conferences, assemblies and festivals, Bible colleges, study centers and pressure groups—many of them voices for different brands or flavors of evangelicalism—and to my mind the most significant novelty by far, the rise of the charismatic movement. In England this must probably now be regarded as embracing the most populous sectors of evangelicalism.

It has also proved a divisive development, among the most divisive of all, in my judgement. The inability of much of mainstream evangelicalism, especially of a Reformed persuasion, to come to terms with charismatic renewal, indeed the hostility often displayed toward it, has been for several decades a major polarizing factor amongst evangelicals. The strongly Reformed must bear not a little responsibility for this. Let me make it clear, to preclude misconceptions, that I am in no obvious sense charismatic and in some obvious senses Reformed. I witnessed the UCCF [Ed. UCCF is the British equivalent of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in the United States.] in the 1980s for a few years quite disoriented by some dissonance between a firmly Reformed leadership

and increasingly charismatic grass roots.

As an evangelical academic (and for long active in the leadership of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research, which unites evangelicals teaching in colleges and universities), I accept the validity of Murray's criticism that lust for academic respectability has diluted the strength of some evangelicals' convictions. I say this despite the fact that Iain Murray is a difficult writer from whom to receive such criticism. And here I come to my deepest unease with the book as a whole. To put it in a nutshell, this is the wrong kind of book—and dare I say it, the wrong author—to address the issue of evangelical divisions at the present time—if, that is, it seeks a hearing beyond fairly restricted, perhaps decreasing, circles in British evangelicalism. Let me say why.

The reader gets little sense from these pages of the toughest challenge facing the churches today: Can they again become missionary churches communicating the gospel (for evangelicals are nothing if not gospel-people) to our contemporaries in twenty-first-century Britain? This is a very complex society (and religiously perhaps increasingly different from the USA), on the one hand predominantly populist in its culture, on the other ever more sophisticated and electronically expert, at one pole radically secularised, or paganized, at the other trailing folk-Christian consciousness, nostalgia and even guilt. Of course (to anticipate this book's rejoinder) it must be the biblical gospel we hold forth—but *no less essentially* must it be shared in terms and forms appropriate to our culture, which covers everything from the best scholarship and the soundest science to contemporary media, accessible vocabulary and music and socially and culturally sensitive imagery. Too many doctrinally pure (by this book's criteria) churches in the UK are nonentities as far as the gospel goes, justifying themselves by a kind of *ex opere operato* view of

preaching. The biggest threat to British evangelicalism is cultural isolation—churches left high and dry in secure ghettos almost impenetrable to outsiders.

Behind Murray's criticisms I rarely glimpsed a passion for the gospel except in terms of purity of doctrine and church. I doubt if those for whom this twofold purity is the overriding consideration will make much progress with the gospel in our morally chaotic and credally disordered world. If such purity is the supreme criterion, it is no wonder that some evangelicals seek fresh alliances in unusual directions, "Toward a Common Mission," as "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" is subtitled. Such an agreed statement can be fairly evaluated only from its setting in the late twentieth century, when a very great deal had changed since the Reformation splits. *Semper eadem* is true neither of the Roman nor of the evangelical church, although Murray would like it to be true of both. The book illustrates the tenacity of traditionalism in some British evangelicalism.

Murray allows himself perhaps only one approving quotation of a Roman Catholic, Pascal's definition of "true conversion" (301). It is so fearsomely grim that I cannot think it a felicitous departure from his normal forbearance.

For Lloyd-Jones the remnant is "one of the most glorious doctrines in the whole Bible [superlatives again!]. We are not interested in numbers" (293). Was not the pursuit of numbers one of the deadly snares that Billy Graham fell for? Here let me confess a longstanding unease with the axiom that faithfulness, not success or numerical growth, is what God seeks of his people. If we believe, as Iain Murray undoubtedly does, that true belief must display its fruits in the individual's life, how can this fail to be true also at the corporate level? The body of Christ is meant to grow, in size as well as in maturity (Ephesians 4:15). Not to be interested in numbers seems to me a profoundly unevangelical sentiment.

The question to which Murray returns more than once as the cause of confusion and division among evangelicals is "What is a Christian?" It skews his summary of Lloyd-Jones' 1966 address, which as we have seen, was focused intently on *church* unity, not on "the biblical definition of a Christian" (46). In these precise terms (as put in much recent evangelicalism), it has always struck me as somewhat strange, given that the word "Christian" occurs only three times in the New Testament and never in a context admitting of a "definition." In its marked individualism, it is also a peculiarly modern question, which is never found in the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions. It is therefore not surprising if evangelicals today answer it with differing emphases. The New Testament writings mostly address churches, not individuals.

Yet it is undeniable that the Scriptures afford us little straightforward counsel in coping with our modern evangelical confusions and divisions—anymore than they did in the sixteenth century. In broad terms I find neither Old Testament nor New Testament support for a separatist tendency to break away into conscience-driven disengaged communities. These are, of course, large issues, which it would be impertinent to all the evangelical principals who are featured in this book to venture to resolve at a stroke. I can but record my overall impression—that in neither Testament is it easy to discern communions which have separated off for the sake of sound doctrine. Paul and other apostolic leaders went on living with and fighting with grave distortions and abuses, which might have justified many a holy schism in later centuries. Nor, (if I may speak as a church historian) does the track record of separatism—overall, on balance, in the round—encourage one to back it as a lasting winner. It is a paradox likely to be lost on Iain Murray that then most creedally orthodox churches in the world are Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. There is

much more to be said about each of them, but there is more than one story to be told about the glorious Reformation. We evangelicals are all, not least in our divisions, children of the Reformation, for weal and for woe.

I share Murray's lament over the weakness and incoherence of much evangelical ecclesiology. It remains an urgent item on the theological agenda. I am myself convinced, however, that we will make little advance in our doctrine of the church while our doctrine of baptism is so minimalist. On baptism most evangelicals, even of a Baptist persuasion, seem unable to endorse the strongly realist language of New Testament references. I have heard evangelical sermons on Acts 2:38, "Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,'" but never one that focused on baptism. Few subjects distance us so obviously from the sixteenth-century Reformers, and even from influential seventeenth-century divines. The Westminster Assembly certainly held that baptism was, even for infants, God's normal means of *conferring* the grace of regeneration, forgiveness and ingrafting into Christ by the Holy Spirit (*Confession* 28:6. See my paper "Baptism at the Westminster Assembly" in *Calvin Studies VII*, edited by John H. Leith, Davidson College, North Carolina, 1996, pp. 76-90). This is a far cry from the common evangelical notion that nothing is done by God in baptism, which is another modern emphasis reflected in this book. (In my years worshiping at Westminster Chapel I heard and saw nothing to tell me that the church practised baptism at all.)

This book will provoke much debate but do little, I fear, to heal our divisions, although it strikes a more conciliatory note in the final chapter. There its conclusions recognize the difficulty of remedying the faults of one position without falling into dangers at an opposite extreme, and the

painful fact that there can be serious differences of belief and consequent controversies among true Christians. By then, the damage has already been done, with too many half-truths and overstatements to carry the day. In some editorial respects, also, it could do with some tightening.

Our recent Scottish experience adds its own *caveat lector*. In the last years two more divisions have split our smaller Presbyterian churches, Reformed and orthodox to a man (*sic*), producing yet tinier remnants in pursuit of purity, and with some net loss to worshiping church life altogether. These have been years to make evangelicals actively concerned with the impact of the gospel on Scotland weep in desolation. One senior brother commented to me that some had given up the mission of the gospel in favor of the reform of the church. It must be a false choice, but I sense that it is almost a fresh divide opening up among us.

Another way of putting the matter might be to distinguish between ancient and modern, or between traditional and contemporary. To deal with the acutely sensitive subject matter of this book, with many of the *dramatis personae* still alive, in a manner that is hopefully reconstructive and fruitfully encouraging for the Christian mission in an ever more taxing environment, calls for a mind that instinctively moves from the present forward, not backward to the past. It needs a sharper appreciation of historical development and with it of the relativising of all historical eras. (Earlier centuries were by no means so golden as we often suppose.) Priorities should rightly be open to revision, the dividing-line between first and second-order issues is bound to shift, new alignments must be on the agenda. Yet while Christendom has dissolved almost before our eyes within little more than a generation, too much conservative church activity and controversy has carried on scarcely unchanged for two or three centuries. I increasingly feel that some of our disputes are like long-cherished indul-

gences—which in a post-Christendom situation of primary mission we must no longer afford.

The task this book essays surely requires some appreciation also of that enormously significant shift in the center of gravity of world Christianity—and so of global evangelicalism too—from the North (Europe and North America) to the South and the East, of which Andrew Walls has been the interpreter-in-chief, and John Stott a far-seeing strategist in resourcing its new leadership.

Such redeeming perspectives are largely absent from this book. This means that many evangelicals, stretched to the limit by the demands of ministering in a marginalized church, will hear even its salutary warnings not as spurs to imaginative renewal but as oppressive summons from a past they know is well and truly beyond recall. It is the kind of book that, even when it wins the arguments, ends up losing the case.

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