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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MICHAEL GRIFFITHS?

by

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- A retrospective discussion about the commonly-held assumptions within evangelical Christianity in Australia over the past two decades

In the mid-1960's I became a confessing Christian and part of a discussion concerned with the relation of Christian faith to our life in the world. In the Inter-School Christian Fellowship (ISCF), Scripture Union (SU), Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF, now AFES), League of Youth (Youth organization of the Church Missionary Society) and elsewhere there was a lot of talk about applying faith to the various spheres of society. The question was not whether faith should be applied so much as how it was to be applied. The discussion assumed that faith should not be understood purely as a personal thing; belief in Jesus Christ was a motivation for service to God in all things. That discussion is still with us, and in certain respects has almost become an indicator of orthodoxy among evangelicals. But as a living discussion, I suspect, it has lost momentum, if not coherence. In this paper I wish to try and unravel some of the key factors which have shaped and changed this discussion.

One writer I read during this time was Michael Griffiths, one-time Director of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and now-a-days Principal of the London Bible College. His Consistent Christianity (IVP 1960) and Take My Life (IVP 1967) were critical how-to-do-it manuals for a whole-hearted applied Christianity. It may not have diverged too far from the then accepted evangelical mind-set and it may not have styled itself in terms of advocating a totally new approach. But Griffith's books pointed the way with great conviction and clarity. The empty sham of spiritual jargon and deadly tread-mills of pietistic legalism needed to be rooted out of our lives. We needed to be renewed by God Himself entering into our human creatureliness. That was the message I took from these books. The message may not have escaped the evangelical mind-set but it did challenge the readers to get out of the evangelical ruts. A pious, reverent spirituality was explained from the Scriptures.

Other writers then in vogue among such evangelicals were John Stott, David Shepherd, J. I. Packer, Michael Green and, of course, C. S. Lewis. Together they conveyed in very strong terms that Christian faith has as much to do with our deeds as with the statements we formulate to help us explain our faith. Evangelism, the responsibility of every Christian to pass the faith on, was unashamedly a wholistic matter. This, as I experienced it, was the "ground swell" among the first evangelicals I mixed with as a teenager in the mid-1960's.

Of course, there were other influences. The British IVP publishing house did not have it all their own way in the evangelical market. The mid-1960's was the period between the first and second Billy Graham crusades (1959 and 1969) and the star of Francis Schaeffer was then on the ascendent.

The Graham crusades in 1959 won the heart of Australia's evangelicals. Fresh from his mid-1950 success at Haringay, London, Billy Graham broke all

records with his American evangelical and ecumenical crusading. By 1969, however, his star had begun to wane. Not only was the Graham machine supportive of America's war effort in Vietnam, but this friend of Presidents was widely heard to say, during his Australian crusades, that evangelism has the priority over application of the faith, because the most that Christians can ever do in this world is to paper over the cracks of a civilization on the road to destruction.

As a reader of Griffiths et.al and a Christian student, at the time studying the Marxist criticism of religion, I felt that Billy Graham was playing into the hands of the disciples of Karl Marx - Lenin, Mao, Che Gueverra, Ho Chi Minh, Marshall Tito. As well, Christianity, as Billy Graham argued for it, could all too easily be interpreted as a spiritual salvation drug. "If I am dreaming, let me dream on, my sins are gone", he proclaimed. Moreover, to me, and many of my fellow Christian students at University, the Graham style of social involvement - World Vision child sponsorship - seemed ambiguously like a media attempt to have it "both ways".

But, whatever else Billy Graham achieved, he knocked the stuffings of nominalism out of Australia's "main-line" evangelical denominations. The IVP-inspired discussion that I mentioned above became powerful within circles stimulated by the Graham crusades. It was a Bible-centred faith rather than a Church-oriented Christianity which was being promoted. After Graham one joined a Church, or stayed in a Church, because one was a Christian. It became much harder to say you were a Christian because you attended Church.

It was into this situation that a reconsideration of reformed Christianity began to emerge among Christian University students. Initially, Francis Schaeffer, and his style of cultural apologetics, became the focus for carrying on the discussion that had been around for a decade or so. Yet the emphasis had shifted slightly, but significantly. Whereas the IVP line had been expository and seeking to develop Christian student awareness of their student vocation in terms of biblical exposition, Schaeffer tried to develop an apologetical framework to expose the inner logic in the modern history of philosophy. Schaeffer developed his attack on two fronts - an attempt to expose the underlying pre-suppositions of modern philosophy (with a major emphasis upon existentialism) and an appeal to evangelicals to dispense with dualistic world-views and to return to the Scriptural confession that Jesus is Lord in nature and in grace. Schaeffer's many disciples were attracted to his apologetics because they were provoked by the inner weaknesses they saw to be inherent within evangelicalism. Schaeffer had discerned an inexorable drift into liberalism in theology and "secular humanism" in public life and popular culture. Christians could begin to stem the tide, he asserted, when they returned to a reformation-inspired Biblical literalism.

For a while the influence of Schaeffer was very profound in the circles I have mentioned; his influence is still detectable in what remains of these groups today. But the scene is now somewhat different. Looking back, with the wisdom of hindsight, I now discern the eclipse of the wholistic discussion upon which I had been reared as a young Christian, during the 1960's and 1970's. The way in which British IVP perspectives were being received in this country was then undergoing a significant metamorphosis. Schaeffer's apologetics had a lot to do with this change of climate among evangelicals who had traditionally taken their lead from Britain. And in this way the locus of Christian discussion concerning how to live an evangelical life-style changed. Looking back now from a perspective of the late 1980's we can describe that change under four headings:

A. The Discussion Concerning the Relation Between Faith and Life has been, More and More, Americanized.

The British influence upon Australia's "main-line" evangelicals was not obliterated. But with the power of the American ecclesiastical and Christian publishing industries, the traditional IVP perspective was mediated in new forms. It was also relativized as discussions which emerged from within the realm of American public life gained more attention in these parts. The Graham crusades, and then the stimulus of Francis Schaeffer, were part of a wider phenomenon in which evangelical Churches began to take their lead from North America. Christians in Australia may have become more perceptive about American cultural and political imperialism during these decades; yet the agendas for debate among evangelicals were being set from within the American milieu, rather than the traditional Anglo-Scottish frame-of-reference.

How can this change be pinpointed in specific terms? It is hard to define in exact terms. Perhaps a sociological concept can be of help here. The difference in discussion-styles can be identified when we see the discussion as part of that great transformation which has seen the passing of mediaeval society and the emergence of modern industrial society.

In mediaeval society who you are, in terms of birth and baptism, determines what you do. In modern society, oriented to industrial achievement as the prime source of social status, what you do, in very large measure, determines who you are - at least in a social sense.

The British IVP perspective of the 1950's and 1960's saw the Christian task in the world in terms of who the Christian is. Griffiths, Stott et. al spent most of their pages in the exposition of biblical teaching, showing how the Gospel defines the follower of Christ. What a Christian does is determined by who a Christian is.

As I now perceive it, this perspective began to change with Billy Graham. Starting with him we see the emphasis shifted; the perspective is reversed. The public discussion concerning the relationship between faith and life shifted emphasis from a concern with defining the character of the Christian to a concern that the individual Christian would publicly define himself as a Christian by specific Christian acts. The search for the doctrinal definition of who a Christian is was replaced by an evangelistic emphasis upon what a person does to become a Christian. The answer to the question "Who is a Christian?" is less of a scholarly question and more of a public issue. Emphasis was placed upon the need for a person to "make a decision", come up the front, raise a hand, fill in a form ...

Francis Schaeffer continued this "Copernican Revolution" within the evangelical camp in an important, and perhaps surprising, way. The question "Who is a Christian?" can be answered by reference to a person's world-view - the publicly articulated raison d'etre of an individual - and their conduct in public life. And it also has everything to do with what they do with the Bible - how they handle the Scriptures.

In the earlier British-styled discussion the content of a Christian way-of-life is to be determined by the Biblical witness to what God has done for the individual Christian. Once the individual has realized this it is then a matter of "working that out" in a life of thankfulness. In the later American-styled discussion the judgment about a Christian's faith is very heavily oriented to public action. God expects the Christian to

"stand up and be counted" and in this frame-of-reference one's claim to be a Christian is in need of being publicly validated. Witnessing and evangelism are the major ways by which Christians act in the world, and show who they are.

In sociological terms we can say that the earlier style of evangelicalism assumed that what you do is determined by who you are. Hence the discussion about the relation of faith and life was very heavily centred upon who you are. In the latter approach who you are, and the kind of person you are becoming, is confirmed by what you think and do in general terms. Hence the discussion about faith and life becomes a matter of defining how you are to think and what you are to do to demonstrate the reality of the faith within you. The change may be subtle but it is profound.

I am very much aware that such an analysis can easily degenerate into a kind of "straw man" critique for the purpose of showing the superiority of the view that I would proffer. Suffice to say that the trends I have identified do not tell the entire story; the schematic framework I have sketched about the developments in the last twenty years is for the purpose of trying to understand the nature and character of an ongoing discussion which is still alive among evangelical Christian people.

The fact that the locus of evangelical opinion has "switched" so markedly from one style of discussion to another indicates in my view that we must be very wary of proffering formulaic answers to our current problems. Certainly a "return" to the 1960's is not being advocated. Nor do I want to uncritically baptize the libertarian, non-monarchic and republican style of American Christianity, for all its valuable insights. But without structural and historical insight into what has happened in our debates among ourselves over these years we will not get one whit closer to understanding our current Christian calling.

B. The Evangelical Churches of Australia have Become Subject to, and Have Subjected Themselves to, Para-Church Gurus.

The development of the discussion has not taken place in isolation. The "consciousness-raising" among evangelicals has co-incided with important developments in the Churches. The Anglican and Presbyterian Churches can no longer posture themselves as ecclesiastical bodies ministering to the political establishment. Post-war immigration from Europe has seen the consolidation and diversification of the Roman Catholic sector of the population; now clearly, it is the largest denomination.

The Graham crusades (1959 and 1969) focussed the national attention of evangelicals upon one man and his message. Subsequently, we have witnessed the emergence of a whole dazzling array of Christian public leaders, preachers and lecturers. They are not only "big names" from overseas but also local "home-grown" gurus; they do not simply "do the circuit", there are now a variety of networks and a variety of circuits. The overall message is manifold; they do not simply give "quick fix ecstasy", or lectures on the evils of these last days, or "how to do it" seminars; they also include those who are purveyors of spiritual insight which will enable you to avoid quick fixes and help you to be critical of technologism. It is therefore easy to appreciate that it is somewhat difficult to pick up the lines of continuity in Christian discussion over the years. There seems to be so many voices presenting so many alternative and conflicting "world and life views". And the unity which evangelicals may have found among themselves in the Graham crusades has all but dissipated.

Evangelicals for two decades at least have been looking elsewhere for a sense of solidarity. It has not emerged and shows no signs of emerging. The influence of gurus among evangelical Churches can be highlighted by another question: "Which evangelical Church near to where you live is known for its ministry of 'getting the Bible into the hands of the common folk?'" Some would say that they are majoring upon an "expository pulpit", and they are few and far between. Mass fellowship meetings by which women in our suburbs are schooled in systematic Bible-reading do have some influence across denominations. But where is the style of Church membership which derives from ministry in which the ordinary Australian urbanite is encouraged to live closely to the Scriptures?

The answer must be that there are very few Churches which see this as their mission in our suburbanized stupor. The lack of such Churches, especially in a situation where so many are weighed down with the hurts and oppressions of materialistic society, is a scandal; the situation is rather complex, and we should not over-estimate the ability of evangelical Churches to counter this state of affairs; but the question will never be addressed by running away from it. In this situation more Christian social activism or more evangelistic crusades will not help. The issue goes much deeper.

C. Evangelicals Began to Spend Much of Their Time Seeking a Consensus Among Sectarian, Fundamentalist, Ana-Baptist and Pentecostal Streams of Christianity.

Rather than turning their attention to the reformation of the preaching of the local Church, evangelicals for two decades have been seeking a reformation of Australian Christendom from within another venue. This venue is "the Australian Christian community". This community is as much an aspiration as a reality. The goal has been "communal Christian action"; much of Francis Schaeffer's leverage centred upon the growing and widespread suspicion among Christians and others that "secular humanism", the ruling ideology for public life in English-speaking countries, was not as neutral as it purported to be. Under Schaeffer's influence, but not only from that quarter, many evangelicals began to look again at the question of independent (non-state-controlled) Christian schooling. This social movement among a broad range of Protestant Christians has led to a widespread searching for a basis for co-operation among people whose Church affiliations do not always easily co-incide. It seems that the wider one spreads one's net to catch Christians of all stripes and opinions, all classes and backgrounds, the harder it will be to find a form of co-operation in which all can feel encouraged to participate. In my view it is this problematic which has made the so-called charismatic movement an important factor. This movement is not just a movement for the reformation of the liturgy of public worship.

Strange as it may seem, the charismatic movement constitutes an attempt to return to a pre-Graham form of Church-centred Christianity. In so far as evangelicals have promoted this movement they, too, have "returned" to what is, essentially a Church-centred Christianity rather than a Bible-centred faith. Though its impact cannot be limited to public liturgy, the charismatic movement is essentially a movement for liturgical renewal, based upon the search for a widespread manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, of which John Wimber's "Signs and Wonders" is the most recent expression. It is the revival of a charismatic liturgy which is proffered as the form of co-operation which evangelicals, sectarians, fundamentalists and pentecostals are all looking for. The movement is a movement promoting common faith-symbols for widening the network of communication

among all Christians. Liturgical demonstration of unity is the primary focus whether this is expressed in holding hands, embracing one another, sharing a cup, chanting a Biblical verse or singing the words of a "Scripture in Song" melody on an overhead projected "icon".

Pentecostalism, and now the "charismatic movement", has not been interested in the outworking of the Christian faith in the non-liturgical, non-symbolic aspects of the Christian life, because its concern has been to equate the Christian life with the liturgical and symbolic expression of it. It has not been involved with the discussion within which I found myself in the 1960's. Whether it could indeed develop some concern for other areas in their own right remains to be seen. The charismatic movement may claim to have an interest in education and politics; it may set up schools, Universities and political parties to show its bona fides. It may circle the opening of Parliament with prayer. But the question still needs to be asked: Can the pious and non-flamboyant reading of Holy Scripture be promoted among the ordinary people of this country when the superstitious quoting from, and the repetitive singing of, isolated texts is so much a part of this liturgical renewal? The phrase "Jesus is Lord" is now so over-used that one must seriously ask whether those who shout it out in public ejaculation, have a truly Biblical understanding of what they are saying. Is the common usage of this Biblical confession, and many other phrases besides, being safeguarded by a holy and righteous life?

And what difference does it make if Christians go into competition with the bald-headed Hare Krishna? Certainly let Christians compete spiritually; but will we ever get to the heart of the matter if we become absorbed by trying to out-chant the chanters, and out-rant the ranters?

The first step in uniting Christians is not some liturgical self-hypnosis in which the Bible is committed to memory for the purpose of quoting it at each and every moment. Our first step should be to encourage Christians, whoever they are, wherever they are found, to read, struggle with, mark, learn and inwardly digest the revelation of God in Holy Scripture for themselves. The aim is that in holy and thankful living God's Name is honoured truly and people come to faith in Jesus Christ. The overall consequences of this movement for the ongoing evangelical discussion about the relation of faith to life in the world cannot be easily pinned down. If I was to capture its consequences in a phrase it would be to say that evangelical Christianity, via the route of the charismatic movement, has found an avenue to liturgically express its lack of courage to face the momentous cultural challenges which lie on our doorstep.

The temptation to adopt the posture of the wimp, bending over backwards to please advocates of this renewal, is very real in the Churches which claim an evangelical heritage. It is a temptation pinpointed by Harry Blamires in The Christian Mind (SPCK 1963 pp.39-40) and commented upon by Griffiths in Take My Life (IVP 1967):

It is a most extraordinary distortion of the ideas of unselfishness to apply it to the idea that one does not speak about the truth because one happens to believe it for oneself (p.142).

This is Griffiths' 1967 commentary upon the insidious way that secular-humanism and its moralism can induce Christians to be silent when they should speak up. It is a form of moralistic blackmail. It is a view of life which I, in 1967, was confronting in the school-yard and classroom

of my high school by speaking about the Gospel. It was because I was known as a Christian that I was not appointed as Head Prefect; the school's best known atheist was given the post ahead of me because his religious beliefs did not threaten the school's religious neutrality. And looking back I can admit that it was just as well that I did not get the position even though many expected me to get the job. Griffiths' book was a great help to me in sorting myself out during those years.

Now I find it to be a great irony to re-confront this notion, not only with the humanistic successors of the 1960's moralism, but from within the charismatic sector of the Christian camp. It seems to me that evangelicals are in continual danger of capitulating before the charismatic movement out of a sheer lack of courage to speak out. Maybe evangelicals no longer know what to say but if that is the case perhaps they should go back and re-read Griffiths, Stott, Blamires and C. S. Lewis. At least those for starters.

D. University-trained Evangelicals Become Advocates of Left-of-Centre Rather than Traditionally-held Right-of-Centre Political Views

The fourth point is added here to underline the fact that the evangelical political and social conscience has developed as a response to deeply-held beliefs concerning the Biblical teaching of social justice plus a reaction to fundamentalism's American-inspired right-wing excesses and absurdities. It seems quite natural that, for the past two decades, University-trained evangelicals should have tended toward favouring left-of-centre political views.

In this sense Francis Schaeffer, but more particularly Hans Rookmaaker, the art-historian, prompted the beginning of an international and cosmopolitan perspective among those "main line" evangelicals who had traditionally gained their orientation from the United Kingdom and I.V.P. The background influence of the movement associated with Abraham Kuyper (Dutch Prime Minister and leader of the neo-Calvinistic renaissance at the turn of the century) must be mentioned in this context. It must be admitted, however, that this influence, although of great significance for the development of a gospel-inspired political science, has only been very marginal, if not sectarian, in Australia. It is, moreover, understandable that evangelicals favouring left-of-centre politics will tend to interpret Kuyper, Dooyeweerd and other Calvinistic political theorists as "right of centre", even if such labels reveal an ignorance of their actual political and scholarly contributions.

Conclusion

We can say that the evangelical discussion of the 1960's which sought to discover the relation between faith and life has now been widened to include political life. At the same time the actual discussion seems to be scattered, marginalized and lacking continuity. The way to overcome this fragmentation will not be by way of excluding political or any other matters from the agenda of the ongoing discussion. But the

problem of the moment would seem to be concerned with how to maintain, develop and sustain such discussions as are still going on within evangelical circles. This paper, not quite a "scholarly treatise", has simply been an attempted retrospective analysis of the past twenty years, written in the hope that it can contribute to a re-awakened concern for understanding the Bible as the God-breathed revelation of Jesus Christ, and how Christians are to live in God's creation in Australia at the end of the 20th century; and in the early years of the third millenium - if indeed He tarries that long.

Perhaps a re-consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of those mid-1960's British evangelical writers will shed some much needed light upon the current problems within and among evangelical and other Christians in this land.

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