

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Ralph Brown

The Evangelical Succession? Evangelical History and Denominational Identity

Mr Brown is a research student at the Open University who is studying nineteenth-century evangelicalism with special reference to Thomas Rawson Birks. The history of the period prompts some reflections on the problems of denominational identity at the present time.

Some historians and modern Anglican Evangelical apologists assume Evangelicalism to have been historically characterized by an essential dogmatic uniformity and continuity. This has come to be interpreted as an Evangelical succession which, in opposition to the Anglo-Catholic view of an Apostolic succession, has had a defining and legitimating function in developing Evangelical identity. J. C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool from 1880 to 1900, for example, interpreted Evangelicalism in terms of what he regarded as 'the clear, distinct, sharply-cut doctrinal system of the martyred Fathers of the Church of England'.¹

This concept of an Evangelical tradition, going back well before Wesley and taking in the sixteenth century Reformers, has continued to be interpreted and presented as a 'succession . . . of truth of doctrine', helping to create a form of Evangelical self-image focused on the claim that the Evangelical 'brand of Christianity', in 'the form once delivered to the saints, has possessed an essentially changeless content so long as it had remained loyal to its source'.² The Evangelical position is thus held to be historically 'well defined and perfectly clear' and is assumed not to 'change with the "modern thought" of each age and generation'.³

This historical conception of Evangelical identity, contemporary

¹ J. C. Ryle, *The Lessons of English Church History* (London, 1871), 14.

² D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London, 1989), 271.

³ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, 'Foreword' to E. J. Poole-Conner, *Evangelicalism in England* (London, 1951).

Churchmen like David Samuel have argued, provides the only basis to unify the modern Church and bring about the moral recovery of the nation.⁴ In fact, as this article will suggest, Samuel's conception of the Evangelical tradition reflects a view of historic Evangelicalism that was largely developed and popularized in response to the particular religious and cultural climate of the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1830s and 1840s, moderate and broadly conceived perceptions of Evangelical identity were increasingly challenged by the rapid growth of a more strident and partisan form of Evangelicalism, which placed a much greater emphasis upon the role of a perceived historical continuity as the basis of more narrowly defined conceptions of Evangelical doctrinal orthodoxy.

This new sense of historical identity gave sharper definition to the Evangelical party within the Church of England. It also issued in a deeper and more clearly articulated Evangelical commitment to the Anglican establishment and encouraged the feeling that, while the spirituality of Dissent ought still to be acknowledged, Evangelical Churchmen were the pre-eminent representatives of the revival of 'true' Christianity in Britain.

The early Evangelical clergy had manifested a considerable range of belief and practice. Men like Henry Venn and Charles Simeon advocated a broad-based and non-systematic Evangelicalism reflecting the humanitarian Christianity of Wilberforce's *Practical View* (1797) and the *Christian Observer*. Simeon's generation did not have a strong sense of the Reformed heritage of Anglicanism and lacked a firm ideological commitment to the establishment principle. While they recognized the practical advantages of a state supported Church, they were unable to place their full confidence in the establishment.⁵ They felt particularly uncomfortable with some elements in the Prayer Book and with the worldliness of Church politics.

There was something of a revival of interest in the ecclesiastical legacy of the Reformation following the publication of Joseph Milner's *History of the Church of Christ* (1794–7). Yet Milner's history was essentially moderate in tone and significantly lacked a harshly polemical anti-Roman Catholic emphasis. Milner did not dismiss the middle ages as a dark era of superstition and even claimed to have demonstrated that a line of 'true' Christians could be

⁴ 'We need the vision of a church which is at unity in itself, where there is doctrinal coherence not doctrinal contradiction, liberty but not license, charity but not chaos', 'The challenge of the twentieth century' in D. N. Samuel (ed.), *The Evangelical Succession* (Cambridge, 1977), 100.

⁵ G. F. A. Best, 'Evangelicals and the Established Church in the early nineteenth century', *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 10, 1959, 68.

traced through the unreformed medieval Church. In his study of the Reformation Milner also neglected Calvin and his influence upon the English reformed tradition and promoted Luther as the hero of Protestantism.⁶

During the 1820s, a rising generation of educated Evangelicals were being drawn towards the adventism of Edward Irving. They were sympathetic to Irving's compelling Manichaeic outlook and welcomed his condemnation of the accommodating expediency of the Simeonite Evangelical establishment, which he had attacked for compromising its Protestant heritage in return for political gains. T. R. Birks, for example, who came originally from a Baptist family and joined the Church of England on entering Cambridge University, in 1830, claimed that his study of Irving's writings had been responsible for transforming his attitude towards the Anglican Church.⁷

While Milner's *History* had seen the work of the Holy Spirit in history simply in terms of the pious lives of individual Christians, this new generation of Evangelical adventists interpreted historical events as a series of direct divine interventions in human affairs, as predicted in Biblical prophecy. It was believed that the Book of Revelation foretold, in precise detail, the historical battle between God and Satan, the 'true' Church and the Anti-Christian apostasy. Birks declared, for instance, that the Apocalypse provided 'a connected and continuous record of events to occur during the long suspension of the visible theocracy'.⁸

Birks believed that the Reformation had been prefigured in prophecy by the description of the descent of an Angel with the rainbow of the covenant around his head.⁹ Birks and his contemporaries thus regarded the Reformation as the 'first stage of Britain's religious awakening'¹⁰ and popular adventist works, like E. B. Elliott's *Horae Apocalypticae* (1844), carried the strong conviction that the nation and Church were now once again facing a moment of apocalyptic crisis, with the battles of the Reformation being fought over again, in the final struggle for the Gospel.¹¹

Evangelicals like Elliott and Birks interpreted Protestant history in

⁶ J. D. Walsh, 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical Church History', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 10, 1959, 178.

⁷ 'In Memoriam: Thomas Rawson Birks', *Record*, July 27 1883.

⁸ T. R. Birks, 'Letters on Prophecy', *Churchman*, July 1843, 472.

⁹ T. R. Birks, 'On the general state and prospects of Christianity in Great Britain' in E. Steane (ed.), *The Religious Condition of Christendom* (London, 1852), 138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹ P. Toon, *Evangelical Theology, 1833-56: A Response to Tractarianism* (Basingstoke, 1979), 62.

terms of the role of Britain, and her empire, as God's chosen 'elect' nation. Divine favour was seen as having been bestowed on British Protestantism from the defeat of the Spanish Armada¹² to the expansion of the Victorian Church through missionary efforts. The 'recognition of God's mercies, in the past deliverances and actual privileges' of the nation¹³ inspired a more intense Evangelical loyalty to the established Church that became particularly strident in tone as the Oxford Movement became more prominent and the Church appeared to be 'like a camp divided against itself, where two parties, representing the Middle Ages and the Reformation, are in open and almost deadly hostility one to the other'.¹⁴

Evangelicals responded to Tractarian editions of the Church Fathers by supporting the publication of new editions of the works of the leading English Reformers.¹⁵ As the Reformers were increasingly cited as authorities, in opposition to Tractarianism, it came to be assumed that, on matters like sacramental theology and the importance of private judgement in interpreting Scripture, Evangelical theology and Reformation theology were essentially identical.¹⁶

This conviction that Evangelical theology rested on the secure grounds of the Reformation underpinned the polemical stance that Evangelicalism adopted to combat the growth of Ritualism in the later nineteenth century. The Church Association (1865) rigorously pursued legal actions against individual Ritualist clergymen during the 1870s, seeking to establish that the articles and formularies of the Church of England, properly construed, would bear nothing but an Evangelical interpretation. J. C. Ryle, Vice-President of the Association, declared that 'those doctrines which are now commonly called *evangelical*, were the universally received divinity of English Churchmen throughout the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James I'.¹⁷

Changing conceptions of the Evangelical tradition and Anglican identity also influenced the attitudes of Evangelical Churchmen towards the members of other churches and, in particular, towards Anglican participation in the Evangelical Alliance (1846). Only a handful of Anglican clergymen became identified with this organization, a fact which Donald Lewis has explained in terms of

¹² T. R. Birks, 'On the general state and prospects of Christianity in Great Britain', 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁵ The Parker Society (1840) published 53 volumes, for 7000 subscribers, between 1841 and 1853.

¹⁶ Toon, *Evangelical Theology*, 204–5.

¹⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Old Paths* (London, 1877) 518.

eschatological differences amongst Evangelical clerics.¹⁸ Yet Evangelicals who held a variety of views on the second advent stayed aloof from the Alliance and, whilst some prominent pre-millennialists, including Birks and Edward Bickersteth,¹⁹ supported it, the majority of their colleagues in the Prophetic Society refused to do so.

In fact, the opponents of the Alliance based their objections to it upon their overriding loyalty to the establishment. The Lancashire Evangelical leader Hugh McNeile declared that he could do 'nothing which merges, or seems to merge' the Anglican Church 'as one of many coequal sects in England'.²⁰ Similarly, the Manchester Clerical Society, at a meeting chaired by the fiery anti-Catholic polemicist Hugh Stowell, declined an invitation to attend a local preliminary meeting of Alliance supporters on the grounds of duty to the Church. The committee of the society refused to identify themselves 'with an association which appears to regard all the unhappy separations from our Church as comparatively unimportant, and to take it for granted that such separations must, and indeed ought to, continue'.²¹

Birks and Bickersteth shared the strong commitment of their fellow adventists to the established Church and recognized the tremendous practical difficulties faced by the Alliance. Yet they also felt that the Holy Spirit could be seen to be at work in efforts to promote Christian union and their support for the Alliance essentially rested upon such emotional enthusiasm.²² Bickersteth insisted that, by comparison with this feeling, separations from the established church and 'every thing else is comparatively unimportant'.²³

The dissension among Evangelical Churchmen concerning the formation of the Evangelical Alliance reflects the way in which historical models of Evangelicalism tended to exacerbate fundamental tensions within the Evangelical mentality. These tensions continued to surface during the history of the Alliance and severely inhibited wider pan-Evangelical co-operation. They revolved around the

¹⁸ D. M. Lewis, *Lighten Their Darkness: The Evangelical Mission to Working-class London, 1828-1860* (Westport, 1986), 102-3.

¹⁹ Edward Bickersteth (1786-1850), rector of Watton, Herts., was Birks's father-in-law. He served, from 1816 to 1830, as a secretary of the Church Missionary Society and was also a popular writer on prophetic subjects.

²⁰ H. McNeile, *The Manifested Oneness of the Church of Christ* (1846), 26.

²¹ *The Members of the Manchester Clerical Society . . . issued the following statement* (Manchester, 1846).

²² 'I never was at meetings where more of the spirit of Christ seemed given to us.' (E. Bickersteth, Letter to Editor, *Christian Observer*, Dec. 1845, 729.)

²³ *Proposed Evangelical Alliance, Report of the Speeches . . .* (Manchester, 1846), 7.

conflict between assumptions concerning the authority of historical orthodoxy and the freedom allowed to private judgement in matters of Scriptural interpretation.

The founding members of the Alliance had felt that the introduction of some form of confessional test was necessary in order to ensure that the warm fraternal atmosphere and emotional desire for unity, present at the preliminary meetings of the organization, could be given a firmer foundation.²⁴ The assumption behind the doctrinal Basis of the Alliance was that it embodied the universal and unchanging aspect of Christian 'truth', yet it was opposed by many English Evangelical Churchmen on the grounds that it was insufficiently exclusive, while many continental delegates had favoured a greater degree of doctrinal latitude.

Continental branches of the Alliance soon went their own ways, being only loosely affiliated to the centre, with the French branch, for instance, reducing the nine articles of the Alliance's original Basis to a single simple formula. The Swiss branch also devised its own doctrinal basis in 1854 and had only limited contact with the British Organization. Hence those churches with the strongest Reformed heritage actually promoted a more flexible doctrinal basis for co-operation than their English counterparts, a fact which reinforces the significance of the particular attitudes coming to prominence in Anglican Evangelicalism, involving strident anti-Catholic hostility, fuelled by adventist expectation and a patriotic Protestant constitutionalism.

Yet, alongside this doctrinal rigidity, English Evangelicals also maintained that the right of private judgement in Scriptural interpretation had been the defining principle of the Reformation. Their veneration of this ideal of individual freedom was central to their self-understanding as Protestants, by comparison with what they regarded as the authoritarian dogmatism of 'Popery'.²⁵ In this context the decision of the Evangelical Alliance to lay down nine points of Scriptural interpretation that were deemed essential to salvation was tantamount, according to one critic, to 'Protestant Popery' as it robbed believers of their 'Christian liberty to read and understand the Christian truth' for themselves.²⁶ Another writer

²⁴ J. R. Wolfe, 'The Evangelical Alliance in the 1840s: An attempt to institutionalise Christian unity', in Sheils, W. J. and Wood, D. (eds.), *Voluntary Religion, Studies in Church History* 23 (Oxford, 1986), 341-3.

²⁵ J. R. Wolfe, 'Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical identity in Britain and the United States, 1830-1860', in D. W. Bebbington, M. A. Noll and G. A. Rawlyk (eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative studies in popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and beyond, 1700-1990* (New York, 1994), 183-4.

²⁶ 'An unsectarian Christian', *The Evangelical Alliance. A letter to the Rev. Thomas Binney* (London, 1846), 19.

commented that 'when an association starts upon a fixed doctrinal basis, the effect is to fetter theological freedom, to uphold doctrines by authority rather than evidence, and to punish difference of opinion, or at least the open expression of it, by drawing invidious lines of separation in the theology of the universal Church'.²⁷

Hence the formulation of the doctrinal Basis of the Alliance raised the crucial issue of how much flexibility of individual interpretation could be tolerated without compromising essential Evangelical dogma. As the nineteenth century progressed, the increasingly wide range of Evangelical opinion made it all the more difficult to determine who were the 'real' Evangelicals. By the 1860s, a growing number of leading clergymen were being accused of abandoning the essential tenets of the Evangelical faith—sacrificial atonement, sin and hell. As 'liberal' ideas on hell and Scripture gained further ground in the later nineteenth century, Evangelicals found themselves being forced to articulate intellectual definitions and defences of beliefs and assumptions they had previously felt could be simply taken for granted. Increasing emphasis came to be placed upon concepts like Biblical literalism²⁸ and such notions were often described and presented as the historical beliefs of Evangelicalism.

The question of when unorthodox personal views become intolerable and heretical now occupied centre stage in Evangelical public debate and a particularly bitter campaign was waged against Birks's *Victory of Divine Goodness* (1867). Birks was, by this time, one of the most influential Evangelical dogmatic theologians and he had been a secretary of the Evangelical Alliance for nineteen years, which made his innovative eschatological stance all the more controversial.

Birks maintained that Christ's atonement was universal in its efficacy, although all men were not saved from divine punishment. Christ had died for all men in the sense that he had saved them from the death sentence imposed at the Fall, but not from the final act of divine judgement. While the unrepentant were not saved from suffering the loss of the inheritance of the saints, they were saved from committing future sin and from the hopeless misery and despair of spending an eternity in Satan's kingdom as God's ultimate victory over evil would be total and his final judgement was a work of his mercy as well as righteousness.²⁹

Birks's position was widely held to be incompatible with the

²⁷ Anon., *The Evangelical Alliance: what it is, and what it ought to be* (London, 1846), 17.

²⁸ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 13–14.

²⁹ T. R. Birks, *Victory of Divine Goodness* (London, 1867), 183.

Alliance's confessional stance on the eternal punishment of the wicked. An attempt to have him expelled, led by James Grant, the editor of the *Morning Advertiser*, eventually failed because the Council of the Alliance were ultimately unwilling to set themselves up as a theological tribunal, accepting a statement by Birks to the effect that unrepentant sinners would be punished by God.³⁰ A minority of Council members nonetheless felt compelled to resign over the Council's rejection of a resolution to condemn Birks's views as heretical.³¹

Birks's opponents believed that his views subverted what they had assumed to be the historical identity of Evangelicalism, going well beyond 'Reformation theology and philosophy',³² and thus felt that the implications of the controversy went far beyond the specific dogma concerning the fate of the wicked and touched on 'the whole circumference of Evangelical truth'.³³ In response, Birks claimed to 'be abiding firmly and reverently by the old landmarks'³⁴ and maintained that his critics were assuming that the scriptural doctrine of eternal punishment had always had one simple meaning in Evangelical theology—a literal hell where Satan reigned, forever torturing his lost subjects—a view which he held to be unhistorical. He argued that this doctrine, together with others in the Basis of the Alliance like the nature and extent of Christ's atonement, had always been open to different interpretations, not least among the mixture of Calvinists and Arminians who had formulated the original Basis a quarter of a century earlier.

The question of the role of historical orthodoxy in Christian union, central to the development of the Evangelical Alliance, has been a recurrent theme in Evangelical discussions of Church unity. Opinion has been divided over whether true Christian unity was to be found in doctrine or in spirit. Those Evangelicals advocating unity in truth have tended to set greater store by historically shaped models of orthodoxy as the basis for united action in worldly affairs. J. C. Ryle, for example, attributed the declining fortunes of the Evangelical party in the late nineteenth century to the fact that Evangelical teaching was not the 'sharply cut, clear, unmistakable declaration of doctrinal truth that it was in days gone by', which gave rise to a

³⁰ Evangelical Alliance, Executive Council Minutes, Jan. 12, 1870.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1870.

³² *Evangelical Christendom*, New Series, vol. 11, Mar. 1870, 66.

³³ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁴ T. R. Birks, *The Atonement and the Judgement: a reply to Dr. Candlish's Inaugural Lecture; with a brief statement of facts in connection with the Evangelical Alliance* (London, 1870), 43–4.

tendency to 'fence and guard doctrinal statements' rather than boldly affirming fundamental doctrines, and he called for 'a return to the distinct doctrinal standard of our Evangelical forefathers'.³⁵

Other Evangelicals have placed much less emphasis on doctrinal uniformity, have stressed unity of spirit and purpose, rather than unity in action, and looked to a broad range of Scriptural precedents, rather than recent history, for models of unity. This outlook was typified, for much of the nineteenth century, by the *Christian Observer* which affirmed that 'true Unity is inclusive of much diversity'. This proposition was 'established by the fact' that Old Testament patriarchs were clearly 'comprehended in the Oneness of the Church'.³⁶

Hugh McNeile had similarly declared that the body of Christ was characterized by a 'unity inclusive of much diversity; a unity by comprehension', a 'unity of holy sympathy'.³⁷ As different Protestant Churches defined their identities by exclusive principles, differences in worship, discipline, and national connection, more practical co-operation was simply 'an impossibility'.³⁸ Organizations like the Evangelical Alliance were, McNeile believed, essentially counter productive, only serving to bring differences over issues like church establishments to the fore. The best hope of maintaining spiritual unity lay 'in refraining from all attempts at such outward co-operation'.³⁹

These contrasting approaches to church unity have continued to divide Evangelicals into the twentieth century. Some Evangelicals have emphasized the core of unassailable 'truths', while others have paid more attention to the need for flexibility in interpreting those truths. Evangelicals like David Samuel have persisted in drawing upon a narrow and historically shaped model of Evangelical orthodoxy while others, following the 1967 Keele Congress, have sought accommodation with other Christian traditions based on doctrinal flexibility.⁴⁰

As in the mid-nineteenth century, moves towards greater ecumenical co-operation have underpinned the conflict of opinions within modern Anglicanism concerning the nature and importance of

³⁵ J. C. Ryle, 'Union among Churchmen holding the distinctive doctrines of the Reformation', *Christian Advocate and Review*, second series, vol. IV, Mar. 1878, 159-75.

³⁶ No. 358, Oct. 1867, 829.

³⁷ H. McNeile, *The Church and the Churches* (London, 1847), 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁰ E.g. the involvement of Rev. Colin Buchanan with the publication of *Growing into Union: Proposals for forming a united Church in England* (London, 1970).

legacy of the Reformation. Evangelicals have continued to question whether ecumenical activity justifies the sacrifice of principles held to be sacred and important. Those who have stressed historical orthodoxy as the only basis for true unity have, once again, argued that disunity and its consequences were the responsibility of those whose doctrine they regard as unsound. They have talked of a recent crisis of Evangelical identity that has resulted from Evangelicals becoming increasingly cut off from their history, leaving them particularly vulnerable to 'modern movements and deviations' like liberalism and ecumenism.⁴¹

The perceived crisis of identity in modern Evangelicalism, like the comparable crisis of the 1860s and 1870s, has revolved around the questions of who are the 'real' Evangelicals and what are the essential tenets of Evangelical doctrine. Conservative Evangelicals have, like their nineteenth century counterparts, tended to articulate their answers to these questions in terms of the concept of an Evangelical succession and an appeal to the principles believed to have been handed down from history.⁴²

The more partisan Evangelicals have consistently sought to define their understanding of orthodoxy by attempting to draw a distinction between the latitude allowed to private judgement and doctrinal flexibility in the subjective interpretation of gospel doctrines and objective developments in those doctrines themselves. If, as Birks's critics in the Evangelical Alliance had earlier claimed, his individual interpretation of Evangelicalism had actually developed into a new doctrine, distinct from the plain meaning of Scripture, it had to be condemned as heretical. Samuel has also recently declared that the synodical ordination of women priests has 'deliberately changed' the Church of England 'in a manner that contradicted the Word of God', causing him to decide to resign his ministry.⁴³

Evangelicals continue, therefore, to disagree as to how to define their orthodoxy and it has remained as difficult in the recent past, as it was for the founders of the Evangelical Alliance, to find a common doctrinal basis for unity in an essentially individualistic religious movement. Attempts to define and impose doctrinal unity by giving confessions binding intellectual or legal authority in the Evangelical

⁴¹ D. N. Samuel, 'Evangelicals and History', *The Churchman*, vol. 106, no. 3, 1992, 234.

⁴² 'Classic evangelicals always have been deeply committed to the Church of England, because of its doctrine and liturgy . . . evangelicalism is Anglicanism.' D. A. Scales, 'Illustrations of Compromise in Church History', *Churchman*, vol. 102, no. 3, 1988, 236.

⁴³ D. N. Samuel, 'No Good Clinging to the Wreckage', in *Bible League Quarterly*, May/June, 1994, 292.

movement have achieved little in the religious sphere. Defining the legitimate limits of Evangelical orthodoxy gave the Alliance an exclusivity which troubled the consciences of its founders, while efforts to enforce the original confession of faith, in the new intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century, further revealed the difficulties of basing Evangelical unity upon doctrinal conformity.

Abstract

This article analyses changing Evangelical conceptions of history and their role in the developing denominational identity of Evangelicalism. It is argued that the concept of an Evangelical Succession was a response to the particular religious and cultural climate of the mid-nineteenth century. It grew out of a new form of providentialist history and provided the theological justification for an Evangelical commitment to the preservation of a narrowly conceived form of national Protestantism. It is also argued that the historical legitimization of Evangelical Anglicanism was an essential element in Evangelical responses to the development of the Evangelical Alliance. The article then concludes with a discussion of the implications of different interpretations of denominational identity for the maintenance of Evangelical unity.