

# **POST EVANGELICALISM AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

by

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## Post Evangelicalism and Spiritual Direction

What is 'Post Evangelical'? Until recently I had never heard of the term. As part of a small leadership group in our church I was handed a book to read, the title of which was *The Post Evangelical*, by Dave Tomlinson. Along with others of this leadership group I found myself amazed at what I read. There were others out there who actually thought the way I/we did! And more amazingly someone had not only written about it but it had been published in the UK and here I was in North East Valley, Dunedin reading something that lit me up, excited me, but also challenged the very foundations on which my long Christian life had been grounded.

Having chipped away at those foundational beliefs over the years, albeit slowly and at times painfully I was amazed to read here something of my own journey. I felt like Topsy in Uncle Tom's Cabin: "how can I know what I mean until I hear what I say?" or in this case, read what I believe. For me, for us, *The Post Evangelical* is Topsy's experience as it begins to give voice to what we have experienced. It helps us to understand, refine and critique that experience, and offer the wisdom of that to the wider community.

This subject is both stimulating and scary and definitely on the growing edges of my own understanding and experience

So what is a 'post evangelical' or rather who is?

Tomlinson himself says:

"Most of those who contemplate the possibilities of being 'post'- evangelical do so because of a difficulty they find in reconciling what they see and experience in evangelism with their personal values, instinctive reactions and theological reflections."

Another interviewed said: "Evangelicalism helped me to begin with, but I feel I've outgrown it now."

Another writer has said that "the post-evangelical represents the kind of person who is not satisfied and sets out on a journey of discovery to see what else there is."

I did not set out on a journey as deliberately as that but nevertheless discovered that I have covered considerable distance, particularly in the last eight years. Let me list some of the characteristics which might describe a person so labelled.

*A Post Evangelical is likely to:*

- ***feel alienated by evangelicalism while still experiencing some resonance with aspects of evangelical tradition.***

Many begin with vague feelings of discomfort about various things in their evangelical church. To be post evangelical is not to abandon evangelical belief as such. Rather, it is to seek a way to move beyond its apparent limitations.

- ***affirm the reality of divine truth but presume there are no human certainties. That is, we relate to truth through our humanity, so it is inherently limited.***

For evangelicals truth is a very clear-cut issue. Something is either true in a fairly literal or historical way or it is not true at all. Post Evangelicals, on the other hand, feel uneasy with such a black and white approach and find themselves drawn to an understanding of truth which is more relative. It is largely a difference in perception of truth.

- ***be drawn to expression of truth through symbols, mystery and imagination.***

The Post Evangelical consciousness of truth is to be found less in propositional statements and more in symbols, ambiguities and situational judgements. When truth is presented as a fixed certainty, people tend to take it for granted rather than think the issues through for themselves. It is not what you know but the way that you know it.

- ***read the Bible as that which mediates God's word, rather than is the Word of God.***

The Word of God has, according to Karl Barth, a three-fold form. The primary form is the living Word expressed in Jesus Christ; the secondary form is the written word of Scripture, which testifies to the living Word; and the third form is the proclaimed word which is the church's proclamation of Christ the living Word.

- ***affirm that critical scholarship is important while also recognising its limitations.***

There is a huge gulf between, on the one hand, evangelical scholarship, which largely accepts the necessity of biblical criticism, and seeks to utilise its insights and methods, and on the other hand, evangelical churches where it is not uncommon to find an anti-critical attitude towards the Bible. Dave Tomlinson suggests that with the increase of scientific knowledge, the Bible has to be continually reinterpreted in order to maintain its credibility.

- ***critically affirm orthodox credal beliefs.***

They accept that the Christ event is based on historical realities, and they have no real difficulty with the supernatural nature of the gospel and the possibility of miracles.

The Bible plays a normative part in their understanding of doctrine and practical Christian living, and they readily affirm the Apostles' Creed.

- ***be eager to engage positively with contemporary culture.***  
Feelings of being fenced in by the rules of a culture which no longer seem relevant in this present age is often the trigger towards post evangelicalism. Whether we like it or not our culture is constantly changing under our feet and whether we like it or not our faith will be changed in any case. We have to come to terms with cultural change in order to find authentic expression of our faith, in order to find a better 'window' on reality. "When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure" (Rudolph Bahro, German ecologist). The fact is that our culture is shifting and we will either change with it or be changed by it.
- ***emphasise faith (conversion) as a journey.***  
An Emmaus rather than a Damascus Road experience. For much of Evangelicalism the gospel is presented as 'you're in - you're out', 'we've got it - you need it'. The post evangelical is much more likely to use the term journey which is inclusive and much more helpful. A recent survey of how people find faith showed that 69% of people cannot put a date on their conversion - it was a process - a journey.
- ***question absolutes in teaching.***  
Much of evangelical behaviour has been characterised by the things that are not done but in an emerging culture the goal posts are continually on the move necessitating constant re-evaluation in a world where we can no longer enforce our standards on others. "To question is a sign of maturity but to hold on to convictions in the midst of questioning is even more so" (*Nigel Wright*). The post evangelical no longer says "Here is the truth - believe it" but rather, "Try this for size."

And so I have been.....'trying this for size' .....in increasing doses, as I said, for the past eight years. Since what is written above now sits comfortably with me I have to conclude that if there is such a 'tribe' of believers as post evangelicals then I must be one. I concur with Maggi Dawn who believes that the label *Post Evangelical* will disappear as its message is absorbed. She suggests that its challenge is to more than just the evangelical wing of the church. When one begins to leave the security of the confines of one's own tradition and experience, and pushes back the boundaries which have confined, the breadth of Christian tradition becomes available - a veritable banquet with food and nourishment for all.

It was Carl Jung, writing on preparing people for retirement, who said,  
“We take this step with the false supposition that our truth and ideals will serve us henceforth. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning - for what was great in the morning will be little at evening...”

Evangelicalism served me well in my morning. It gave me great grounding in the Scriptures, instilled spiritual disciplines, gave me a great love for the church, inspired me with music, sacrament and worship and taught me to love and serve my God. Now in the afternoon of life I find that programme restrictive and in part somewhat irrelevant. That is, it could have been had I not been privileged to belong to a community of faith within my denomination which has embraced the need to be relevant and grapple with the difficult issues of faith and practice. With theology that challenges and encouragement to think it through, I have not needed to 'move out' because 'moving on' has been part of the ethos. For me as a leader this has not always been an easy journey as there are always those who resist change. Nevertheless a journey continually beckons me on and challenges me to grow in my relationship with and understanding of who God is and how I can know this God more intimately.

Maggi Dawn writes:

“For the heart of our faith is not what we believe but who we believe in..... Life in the Spirit is a risky business simply because it is engagement with the living God..... If we are not willing to take any risks at all, then we may avoid mistakes but we will also prevent grand adventures.”

Spiritual Direction is one of those grand adventures I have embarked on with God both as directee and director. Every aspect of faith on which I have commented in this paper has a direct and impelling impact on how my own journey with God progresses and on how I deal with those who come to me for companionship on their journey. To journey with God in such a relationship as spiritual direction is exciting and scary, uphill and down dale, darkness and light, joy and pain but since it is engagement with the living God it brings healing, wholeness and constant growth towards holiness. To accompany another in such a way requires me to be open to receiving all another brings without fear, favour, judgement or censure but in love, compassion and encouragement help them to pay attention to God's work in their lives.

To do so I have to hold belief and doctrine with an open hand, laying aside my own views in order to be available to the Holy Spirit. Having then left aside the restricting, judgmental and confining aspects of evangelicalism as experienced in the morning of my life, and having encountered the breadth of Christian tradition, I am better able to listen and guide others in their quest for a meaningful relationship with God from whatever denomination or tradition they come. I am better able to put my own views to one side and accept another's as valid. I am able too to connect the every day of life with the 'Sundays' of life and able to ground belief in relevant living in a constantly changing and challenging world.

I do not need to have all the answers but to be willing to step out into the unknown with another, trusting in God. A God of whom, the more I know, the less I know I know.

"Working out how we can remain faithful to the tradition and to each other, while genuinely open to the Spirit's working through the Church and Culture, takes a life time - and then some" (*Nick Mercer*).

"Post-evangelical people, I think, are people who belong to, or are influenced by this world, and whose Christian faith is increasingly being expressed in and through this frame of reference. .... One of the greatest challenges facing post evangelicals is the task of undertaking a critique of the world they inhabit, and deciding what is and what is not amenable to the Christian faith. .... For everyone who thinks they have arrived at their destination has actually hardly begun and they who continue searching are closer to their destination that they realise"(*Dave Tomlinson*).

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