Mark Hutchinson and John Wolffe


John Wolffe, expert on nineteenth-century Anglo-American evangelicals in the UK and Mark Hutchinson, an Australian specialist in twentieth-century evangelical and Pentecostal networks in the global south, cooperated in writing this substantial (despite the word ‘short’) history of a dynamic religious movement which took three centuries to become a global force. They argue that evangelicalism is a diffuse term that does not refer to an ideology or doctrine, but to the core (and orthodox) beliefs of the Bible, which preconditions an active sense of responsibility among individual believers for the salvation of others. This activism sets evangelicals apart from the much more passive Calvinists with whom they share many articles of faith. Specific political circumstances gave the evangelicals their wings to fly out in all directions. Individualism, concern for the marginal, and links to the developing Anglo-American empires made it a global force. This Anglo-American nature is not part of the authors’ definition, but did play a central part in the growth and development of this religious subculture.

The lack of formal hierarchy in evangelicalism empowered believers who longed for more individual space and a sense of belonging to something larger than their own limited situation, but this quality also threatened its internal coherence. The authors try to solve this paradox by including diversity as a key element in evangelicalism’s unity. Though that solution is conceptually far from satisfying, it helps to understand the many guises of evangelicalism and the recurrent debates about who is in or out.

The book seeks the origins of evangelicalism in the Reformation, especially in the Puritan and pietist strands. It follows its institutional growth in churches and societies and the break in its ranks by the confrontation with modern science. Evangelicals continued to invent new means in mass evangelism, foreign missions, and holiness teaching in the late nineteenth century. The rise of fundamentalism in the early twentieth and the global ministry of Billy Graham after World War II, the success in the global south, and the growing international network in the later part of the century, all contributed to its reputation as a global player. Its closing chapter addresses recent trends in evangelicals’ varied political engagements and mega churches.

Mobility of people and ideas connected various expressions of post-Reformation spirituality in different areas, which led to a remarkable explosion in the first Great Awakening. This intense and visible experience was especially broadcasted in the Anglo-world. The desire and efforts to make the revival a
repetitive experience catapulted the Anglo-American cooperation in the lead in evangelicalism and generated a point of friction with Calvinist ideas which evangelicals deemed too passive. The strong appeal of a personal identification of the believer with the person of Jesus Christ expressed in sermon and song, helped Baptists and Methodists to grow in numbers and encouraged evangelicals in the early nineteenth century to reform society and advance the Kingdom in all its aspects everywhere. The defeat of the intellectual by the practical side of faith entrenched evangelicalism in a middle class ideology of gradual moral and economic progress. This lofty goal proved to be an illusion and led to three debates: about the role of the visible church, the desired relationship to the world, and the present time on the divine calendar.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the German academic approach confronted Anglo-American activism head-on. Science and modernism divided evangelicals, naturalism penetrated the academia, and German liberal theology entered the mission fields and chipped away at the uniqueness of the Bible. Modernism became the battleground in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Within the deepening division between thinkers and doers it was the growing apocalyptic expectation that increased the tension. Evangelicals feared that the lack of progress on the mission field (due to modernism) prevented the return of Christ. Faith missions carried the day because they generated stories of faith, strong inner motivation, and clear results.

Between 1880 and 1900 evangelicalism became a significant global force. The authors explain on p. 144: “Its secret lay in its ability to motivate by providing a unified, experiential religious worldview built around a personal sense of calling to ultimate ends. That unity was the coming together of evangelical experience from India to Chicago, the end product of evangelical experimentalism, whereby a doctrinal core was freed from European origins by being associated with the mobile personal self, attached to a historical imaginary which gave the believer a sense of safety, wherever they might be.”

The wars of the twentieth century prodded evangelicals to reconsider what to adopt and what to reject from the modern world and how to relate to Western nationalism. The results were mixed. World War I resulted in two internationalist tracks among evangelicals, one wing chose social reform and peace, the other missions. In this second group the Pentecostals gained strength. In America the middle ground disappeared. Fragmentation and discouragement about the established churches threatened the continuity of evangelicalism. Evangelicals promoted practical Christianity concentrating on a change of heart as the only answer to the failure of corporate cooperation. American evangelicals began to rebuild their institutions in order to reclaim the public sphere and in the process realized that they needed British scholars to gain academic