

The  
Theological Challenge  
To Evangelicalism Today

J. I. Packer

The Harrison Trust

2022

*A paper read to the Spring Meeting of the  
Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen  
on March 20<sup>th</sup>., 1961*

Published by the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen: 1961

*The Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen  
was incorporated into the  
Protestant Reformation Society  
in April 1980.*

Reprinted by the Society, with new introduction: 2022

Published by The Harrison Trust,  
15 Grange Court, Cambridge, CB3 9BD

Printed by PLAN-IT Reprographics,  
Atlas House, Cambridge Place, Hills Road, CB2 1NS

ISBN 0 907223 37 0

## *Introduction*

Dr. Packer gave this outstanding lecture in 1961 at the Spring Conference of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen,<sup>1</sup> and it was first published by the Fellowship in that year. In the address Dr. Packer, who was about to take up his responsibilities as Librarian of Latimer House, Oxford, taught with his classic lucidity and incisiveness on a timeless issue, one which is today just as much, if not more, of a challenge.

Since 1961 confusion has increased: the Keele Conference of 1967 and its successors set a path of inclusivism rather than confessionalism. Evangelicalism lost its doctrinal integrity; indeed, 'evangelicalism' has become a word of such uncertain significance as to be increasingly meaningless.

Rejection of liberalism and fear of liberalism has led to an unholy co-belligerence, which places evangelicalism, Anglo-catholicism (even Roman Catholicism), and charismaticism together on the one side, and liberalism on the other; but the true and only great division is between those who accept the supreme and sole final authority of Scripture, which is evangelicalism in its right mind, on the one hand, and the other -isms, which reject or subvert that final authority, on the other hand. A unity that makes much of being based on the Nicene Creeds but ignores the fundamental Biblical doctrines given explicit recognition at the Reformation is no unity, but a sham.

*We hear much of confessing Anglicans and faithful Anglicans, but the only faithful Anglicans are those who confess the faith stated in the Articles. Mere traditionalism is nothing. We have heard much in the past of an Anglicanism that rests on a supposed synthesis of the authority*

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<sup>1</sup> As the successor of the Fellowship, the Society (under its publishing name, The Harrison Trust) is pleased to reprint the text. It was also reprinted in J.I. Packer, *Honouring the People of God [Collected Shorter Writings of J.I. Packer, Volume 4]* (1999), 329 - 338.

of Scripture, tradition, and reason, but this is a chimerical Anglicanism: Dr. Packer dealt with these three possible sources of authority in his *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (1957). The Church of England's Articles know only the final authority of Scripture.

It may be argued that Dr. Packer himself did not keep in step with the position he set out in this paper: he was one of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine that unanimously recommended in *Subscription and Assent to the 39 Articles* (1968) a formula that required neither subscription nor assent to the Articles; he was one of the four authors of *Growing into Union* (1970), which produced a synthesis of evangelical and Anglo-catholic teaching; he was a signatory to *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (1995), which sought to unite evangelicals and believing Roman Catholics in proclaiming an undefined and undefinable gospel; and he was Theological Editor of *On Being a Christian* (2014 / 2020) - the catechism of the Anglican Church in North America - which sought to satisfy evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics, and charismatics. None of this, however, negates the cogency and accuracy of Dr. Packer's analysis and arguments in 1961.

The Church of England is disintegrating as its leaders seek to conform to the beliefs and practices of the world; only a recovery of true, scriptural religion, the doctrine of the Articles, will restore the Church of England to being a useful instrument in God's gracious purposes.

February 2022

## *The Theological Challenge to Evangelicalism Today*

Let me begin by commenting on the title that I have chosen. My title speaks of a *challenge*. This is an over-worked word; perhaps I should apologise for using it. My only defence is that I am using it in its strict and full meaning, and for this there seems no alternative word available.

What is a challenge? It is a demand, and a demand of a particular kind. It is a demand that measures a man. It is a demand that one is in honour bound to meet. It is discreditable to fail to respond to a challenge. I am going to suggest that our present situation issues a challenge to us – that is, it makes a demand upon us which we are in duty bound to meet; and that it will be to our discredit as evangelical churchmen if we fail to meet it.

My title speaks of a challenge to *evangelicalism*. This is a cheapened word; many use it to mean nothing more than low churchmanship, or some general interest in evangelism. But I am using it here in a sense corresponding to that which ‘evangelical’ bears in the title of this Fellowship. In other words, I am thinking of evangelicalism within the Church of England, and I mean by evangelicalism in the first instance adherence to a definite doctrinal position, on which one’s churchmanship, evangelism, and pastoral practice are based. The rest of the Church call this position ‘conservative’ evangelicalism, and we may for the moment accept the title.

My title speaks of a *theological* challenge to evangelicalism. Now some would tell me straight away that it is a waste of time talking to evangelicals about theology. Evangelicals, they would tell me, are not interested in theology; they never have been; theological interest is not part of the evangelical ethos; evangelicals are practical people, and therefore (!) impatient of theology. Give them an evangelistic or pastoral challenge, and they will rise to it; but talk to them about a theological challenge, and you are asking for the cold shoulder. ‘Theology is not our business’, they will say, ‘we leave all that to

others.’ So I should be told by certain people; but frankly I do not believe a word of it.

## **Outstanding Theologians**

To start with, it is not true as a statement of past history that evangelicals have never been interested in theology. Not to speak of the Reformers of the sixteenth century, and the Puritans of the seventeenth, let us just think of the century between 1840 and 1940 - a century which from many standpoints was a time of evangelical decline. Consider these names: Dean Goode; E.A. Litton; R.B. Girdlestone; T.P. Boulton; Nathaniel Dimock; Bishops Ryle, Moule, and Knox; T.C. Hammond.

*Were these not evangelicals? And were they not theologians? In all seriousness, I ask: did any other section of the Church produce nine theologians of equal calibre during that century? I do not think so.*

Nor do I believe it to be true as a statement of present fact that evangelicals are not interested in theology. For what is theology? Theology is just the systematic, scientific study of Holy Scripture regarded as a written revelation of truth from God. Theology is just seeking to know the whole mind of God on every subject of which He has spoken.

And what is theology for? Theology is for the purpose of deepening our faith and increasing our knowledge of God, and preserving us from errors of belief and behaviour, so that we may save both our own souls and the souls of others.

And why is theology necessary? Because being men, we must think; and, being Christians, we must think about God; and if our thoughts about God are not true - good theology - then they will be false - bad theology. The only alternative to good theology is bad theology; and the only cure for bad theology is better theology. I do not believe that evangelicals are unaware of these things, or unconcerned about them, and therefore when I am told that evangelicals are not

interested in theology, I refuse to believe it. I do not believe, therefore, that it will be impossible to interest you in my present subject!

## Two Questions

What, then, is the theological challenge that faces us today? May I introduce it in a general way, by putting two questions.

First: *What is evangelicalism?*

In a word, evangelicalism is Bible Christianity, gospel Christianity, apostolic Christianity. It is an understanding of the Christian revelation based upon two principles: the final authority of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and life, and the centrality of justification by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second: *When is evangelicalism challenged theologically?*

A theological challenge is issued to evangelicalism whenever the Church loses, or threatens to lose, its grip on the gospel, or whenever Christians cease to walk according to the truth of the gospel.

Consider these two types of situation separately.

(a) The Church loses its grip on the gospel whenever it falls under the sway of an outlook that would swallow up the gospel by assimilating it into a larger, non-evangelical whole. The New Testament provides illustrations of this. For instance: Paul wrote to the Galatians because there the gospel was in effect being swallowed up by *legalism*. Certain people were teaching that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ was certainly a good start for Gentiles, but that obedience to the Jewish law must be added to it if Christian Gentiles were to be counted among the seed of Abraham in an unqualified way and receive the full promised blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.

Or again: Paul wrote to the Colossians because there the gospel was in effect being swallowed up by *polytheism*. Certain people were

teaching that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ was certainly an excellent thing, but that the worship of angels must be added to it if Christians were to enjoy the fulness of salvation.

The most fundamental fault of both heresies was that they sought to add to the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ, thus treating it as no more than a part of a larger and more comprehensive whole. Paul answered both in the same way, by asserting the sufficiency of Christ as Saviour and the completeness of the salvation that believers have in him.

(b) Christians cease to walk according to the truth of the gospel either when they let their lives be governed by doctrinal error (as when the Galatians kept ‘days, and months, and seasons, and years’<sup>2</sup> according to the Jewish ceremonial law, and the Colossians worshipped angels<sup>3</sup> as their mentors taught them to do), or when they compromise the truth in practice under pressure from an influential body of non-evangelical opinion (as when Peter withdrew from table-fellowship with Gentile Christians at Antioch under pressure from the Jerusalem party<sup>4</sup>). Paul withstood such errors of practice no less vigorously than he opposed deviations from evangelical doctrine.

Now what I want to suggest to you is that evangelicals today face a situation in which all these tendencies appear in modern dress, and that this situation issues to us a theological challenge.

## **Ecumenical Outlook**

The dominant factor in the present Church situation is undoubtedly the ecumenical outlook. This has popularly given rise to the idea that Christian truth has been ‘fragmented’, by reason of the divisions of Christendom, into a series of isolated and partial ‘insights’, at present scattered abroad through the various theological traditions within the Christian Church; and that what is needed is to gather them all together and construct from them a grand synthesis in which all will find a place -

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 4: 10 RV

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 2: 18

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 2: 12



a sort of theological rissole, or Irish stew. The common ecumenical estimate of evangelicalism is that it is one among these many traditions, due in time to be assimilated into the larger whole.

The first consequence of this estimate is pleasing and encouraging. It is to create a new respect for some of the things that evangelicals say. On the subjects of personal religion and evangelism, many non-evangelicals now freely admit that evangelicals have much to teach that they, and the churches generally, need to learn.

*This is a happy contrast with the situation forty years ago, when evangelicalism was widely regarded as a fossilized relic, having nothing to contribute to the contemporary situation, and doomed soon to peter out and become extinct.*

But the second consequence of this estimate is neither pleasing nor encouraging. It is to create the feeling that evangelicals ought to take as well as to give. Evangelicals are addressed (as for, instance, by the Anglo-Catholic, Gabriel Hebert, in *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*<sup>5</sup>) in terms that amount to something like these:

The exchange has got to be a two-way business. We have been willing and glad to learn from you the things that you have to teach us; now you must be ready to learn from us the things that we have to teach you - about the priesthood, for instance, and the sacraments, and the eucharistic sacrifice, and other things in which the 'catholic' tradition has specialised. It would be very proud and stand-offish on your part if you refused to let us enrich your tradition from our tradition. It would be like the stand-offishness of the Corinthian schismatics; it would be sinful, and wrong. And it would hinder our common advance towards the richer ecumenical theology that is to come, which is going to be catholic and evangelical and everything else too.

Now we see the nature of the theological challenge which faces evangelicalism today. It is to discern what reply we should make to these rather patronising ecumenically-minded overtures. We are asked

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<sup>5</sup> London, SCM, 1957

to enter into conversation about these things - very well, we must not refuse to talk when others are anxious to talk with us, but we must be clear as to what we ought to say, and what points need to be made for the safeguarding of the gospel in our present situation.

The suggestion is that evangelicalism should be regarded, and should learn to regard itself, as one tradition among many, both in Christendom and in Anglicanism, and that the way ahead is for evangelicalism to be assimilated into a larger whole in which all traditions unite. Should we accept this estimate, as a basis for discussion with non-evangelicals?

### **Evangelicalism is Christianity**

We should not. On the contrary, in all such conversations and exchanges we should seek to maintain and vindicate the following two principles.

(1) The first principle is that *evangelicalism is Christianity*.

This is a big thing to say, but nothing less than this is big enough to counter the ecumenical estimate of evangelicalism. As against the view that evangelical theology is a fragment of truth, needing to be filled out from other sources, we must maintain that, in principle at any rate, evangelical theology is the whole truth, and that, to the extent that you deviate from the evangelical position, you deviate from Christianity itself. And we have a solid argument in our hands to prove that. The argument is drawn from the nature of evangelical theology itself.

What is the nature of evangelical theology? It crystallizes in the little word 'only'. Its axioms are the principles of justification by faith *only*, apart from human works; and of acceptance through Christ *only*, without human merit and indeed in defiance of human demerit; and of salvation by grace *only*, not by human endeavour; and of glory to God *only* for our salvation, without man having anything of which to boast; and of saving knowledge by Scripture *only*, without human tradition or speculation coming in to supplement it.

Now the argument is this: that you cannot add to evangelical theology without subtracting from it. By augmenting it, you cannot enrich it; you can only impoverish it. Thus, for example, if you add to it a doctrine of human priestly mediation, you take away the truth of the perfect adequacy of our Lord's priestly mediation. If you add to it a doctrine of human merit, in whatever form, you take away the truth of the perfect adequacy of the merits of Christ. If you add the idea that the essence of sacramental worship (and especially at the Lord's Supper) is the symbolic sacrifice of ourselves to God, you take away the truth that the essence of sacramental worship (and especially at the Lord's Supper) is receiving Christ and His benefits by faith in the 'visible word' of the sacramental sign. And so we might go on. The principle applies at point after point. What is more than evangelical is less than evangelical. Evangelical theology, by its very nature, cannot be supplemented; it can only be denied. And all attempts to supplement it are in effect denials of it at one point or another.

The way ahead, therefore, is the way, not of synthesis, but of reformation. Our ecumenical programme, as evangelicals, must take the form of a summons to all traditions in Christendom that have lost touch with evangelical faith and theology to do as we have sought to do, and submit to being reformed - corrected and re-shaped - by Holy Scripture. This is a large demand, admittedly, but theologically it is the only demand that we can make with a good conscience. To be cowed into asking non-evangelical Christendom for anything less would be to compromise the truth. We should not be meeting the challenge of our situation if as evangelicals we asked merely to be tolerated and left in peace. This is a time for thinking big, and talking on an ecumenical scale. And what we have to say when we talk on this scale is that Christianity, in its own nature, is just evangelicalism, and evangelicalism, in its own nature, is just Christianity: neither more, nor less.

## **Evangelicalism is Anglicanism**

(2) The second principle for which we have to stand is that *evangelicalism is Anglicanism*.

Numerically, it is of course true that evangelicals make only a minority of the Anglican Communion, and some are inclined to speak of them as having only at best squatter's rights there. By right of history and theology, however, evangelicals have a title to the whole estate, and our situation challenges us to state, and prove, that this is so. In order to make out our claim, there are two things in particular that we need to contend for at the present time.

(a) *A confessional definition of Anglicanism.*

It is habitual today to define Anglicanism in terms of the Anglican Communion as a whole, and to do so on the principle that 'whatever is, is right' - in other words, to equate Anglicanism with whatever the Anglican Communion happens to have become. What sort of definition is produced by this method? The most that can be said is that Anglicanism is a diversified liturgical ethos growing on a family tree of Orders. (Pardon the odd metaphor - it describes an odd thing.)

What the Anglican Communion has in common is the fact that all its prayer books have some genealogical link with 1662, and all its Orders can be traced back to Archbishop Matthew Parker. Beyond this, there is no common factor; for most of the churches in the Anglican Communion have ceased to demand clerical subscription to any part of the Thirty-nine Articles, and some do not even print them in their Prayer Book.

Properly speaking, of course, Anglicanism means the religion of what Magna Charta called the *ecclesia Anglicana*, the Church of England. To find out what this religion is, one ought to look at the constitution of the Church of England, as historically settled. However, the desire to define Anglicanism in terms of what the Anglican Communion is today has led some to dabble in the black art of hindsight, and to re-write the relevant history retrospectively, in order to make out that what the Anglican Communion is today the Church of England always was. Here, for instance, are some remarkable statements taken from an editorial in *The Times* commenting on the plea made last year [1960] by the Dean of St. Paul's for a revision of the Thirty-nine Articles. (I quote them, may I

say, not because they are in any way authoritative, but because they are representative of accepted ways of thinking. An opinion has to be pretty respectable, and pretty well established, before it gets into an editorial in *The Times*!) Now note what is said.

it is part of the essence of Anglicanism [affirms the writer] to hold that [what Christians believe] is better expressed in the forms of corporate worship than in theological definitions ... It is the Book of Common Prayer, ... and not the Articles, in which Anglicanism consists.

What is the significance of the Articles, then? we ask. And this is what we are told.

their [the Articles'] essential merit is that they were the work of politicians concerned to find formulae which would enable men of diverse theological opinions to maintain a common religious practice.

*This is smooth and confident speaking. The writer evidently has no qualms as to the truth of what he is saying. But the facts of history tell a completely different story.*

Were the Articles drawn up by politicians? No; they are the work of theologians, chiefly Archbishop Cranmer.

Were they meant to function as ambiguous compromise formulae, holding together men of really divergent convictions? No; to start with, they are not ambiguous at all, in their historical setting; and furthermore, it is clear that the intention of those who drew them up and required subscription to them was to ensure that nobody who did not believe as much as the Articles asserted should be able to officiate in the Anglican ministry. Bishop Pearson correctly characterised their aim and nature when he wrote, three centuries ago, as follows:

the book of Articles is not, nor is pretended to be, a complete body of divinity ... but an enumeration of some truths, which upon and since the Reformation have been denied by some persons; who upon their denial are thought unfit to have any cure of souls in this Church or realm;

because they might by their opinions either infect their flock with error, or else disturb the Church with schism, or the realm with sedition.<sup>6</sup>

What, then, of the much-vaunted comprehensiveness of the Articles? It consists precisely in the fact that they are minimal in what they require, and leave men free to differ on many subjects on which other Reformation creeds laid down a precise determination. But it was never intended that the Church of England should accommodate clergy who fell short of the minimum which the Articles define.

In view of these facts, it seems unhistorical nonsense to say that the Articles are not of the essence of Anglicanism. The truth (unquestioned in the Church of England till a century ago) is that the Articles are basic to the life and outlook of the Church of England, for they constitute the Church of England's confession of its faith.

### **Three things follow**

But if this is so, then three things follow at once.

It follows, *first*, that Anglicanism, the religious position of the Church of England, is essentially a confessional position, to be defined in terms of the Thirty-nine Articles.

It follows, *second*, that Anglicanism is evangelicalism, and evangelicalism is Anglicanism, inasmuch as the faith defined in the Thirty-nine Articles is the evangelical faith, founded on the twin principles of biblical authority and justification by faith.

It follows, *third*, that the Anglican Communion, so-called, is theologically a very problematical phenomenon; for most of the daughter churches in the Anglican family have formally dropped the mother church's confession of faith, and then gone on to revise their prayer books on non-evangelical principles. What significance can be held to

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<sup>6</sup> J. Pearson, *Minor Theological Works* (1844), II, 215

attach to the concept of a 'Communion' in these circumstances? The answer is not obvious.

But the one thing that does seem obvious in our present situation is that it is part of our responsibility as evangelicals to insist on a confessional definition of Anglicanism, in terms of the Thirty-nine Articles.

That means that we must continue to maintain the positive significance of clerical subscription. For a century the Church of England has been asking itself the wrong question about clerical subscription - the question, namely, how little subscription need mean. But surely the right question to ask is how much the act of subscription ought to mean. We must raise this question, and answer it by insisting that the act of subscription ought to imply a true and hearty endorsement of the doctrine, and the proportions, and the stresses, of the Articles, and a firm intention of teaching their doctrine, and living by it, and seeking to order everything in the Church's outward life in accordance with it.

## **Prayer Book Revision**

This brings us to the second thing that we need to stand for in the present situation.

(b) *A confessional check on Prayer Book revision.*

We live in an era of liturgical change and experiment. We cannot change that fact, even if we would. Nor, surely, is it necessarily a bad thing to try and revise and perhaps amplify our statutory services, provided that is done in the light of the doctrine of the Articles, and with the intention of expressing that doctrine more fully and effectively in our public worship today. Unfortunately, however, that is not how it is being done.

It is most disturbing to find ourselves offered new services which represent a deliberate attempt to get away from truths that the Articles

teach, and which our present services clearly embody. It is disturbing, for instance, to find that in the proposed new Baptism services the doctrine of original sin fails to appear, and, though they speak explicitly of the water as mystically washing away sin, they make no clear reference to the death of Christ as the ground on which sins are forgiven: and that despite the emphatic assertions of original sin in Article IX and of the meaning of Christ's death in Article II. It is disturbing also to read in the 1958 Lambeth Report how desirous the Bishops are to have a new eucharistic liturgy for the whole Anglican Communion which will make the essential action of the service, not the sacramental receiving of Christ, but the symbolical self-offering of the worshippers in Christ: and this despite the emphasis on receiving in Article XXVIII. How, we ask, can clergy who have cordially subscribed the Thirty-nine Articles be expected to approve of such services? It would be scandalous if they could.

What we need to plead for, in the present situation, is that the work of Prayer Book revision should be governed at each stage by the relevant teaching of the Thirty-nine Articles. In the realm of liturgical revision, the Church of England is at the moment allowing itself to behave in a way which is not merely irrational, but positively schizophrenic; for proposed new Canon II affirms that the Articles are 'agreeable to the Word of God, and may be assented to with a good conscience by all members of the Church of England', and yet here is this endeavour being made to enrich our worship by means of new services which represent a retreat from the Articles! This sort of thing will make the Church of England a laughing-stock! In the name of common sense, as well as of revealed truth, evangelicals are challenged by this situation to raise their voices against the threatened separation of our liturgy from our Articles, and to demand a full acceptance of the principle that the faith of the Articles must decisively control any attempted revision of the Prayer Book.

Such are some of the ways in which the present situation seems to me to issue a theological challenge to evangelical churchmen. I hope and pray that under God we may be enabled to meet the demands which it makes upon us.