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# Here Come the Post-Evangelicals

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Many Christians will find their first introduction to this new movement in *The Post-Evangelical* by Dave Tomlinson, an Anglican pastor in London and the former leader of “Holy Joe’s,” a ministry located in a London pub. *The Post-Evangelical* is actually an updated edition of a British book that was first published in 1995, but the message is essentially the same.

Tomlinson and his colleagues hope to launch post-evangelicalism as a legitimate alternative to evangelicalism—the predominant form of conservative Christianity in both Great Britain and the United States. Determined to put distance between themselves and traditional evangelicals, Tomlinson offers his book as a manifesto for the new movement.

“The post-evangelical impulse does not necessarily imply a move away from Christian orthodoxy or evangelical faith,” Tomlinson insists. “Rather it demonstrates that to remain true to a tradition, we must come to terms with a changing cultural context in order to find an authentic expression of that tradition—‘you have to change to stay the same’.” Nevertheless, despite Tomlinson’s protestations, post-evangelicalism is a move away from Christian orthodoxy, and the very use of the prefix post indicates that it is not really evangelical either.

Tomlinson explains that his book emerged from an experience at Greenbelt, a festival of the Christian arts held annually in England. At Greenbelt, Tomlinson heard the phrase “we post-evangelicals,” followed by the qualifier, “whatever that means.”

Determined to give content to this new movement, Tomlinson offers his critique of evangelicalism and extends a call for frustrated evangelicals to join the post-evangelical wave.

The foundational issues for Tomlinson are cultural and philosophical. He is absolutely convinced that the emergence of a postmodern worldview requires Christians to make a fundamental shift in the way we conceive the Christian faith and the best means of communicating Christian truth. “Post-modernity,” argues Tomlinson, “has become the new context in which the integrity and credibility of [the faith] must be tested.” Rather than critiquing post-modernism, Tomlinson and his allies openly embrace this new worldview. Post-evangelicals, he argues, “are more comfortable with the mysteries, ambiguities, and paradoxes of faith,” and are thus quite at home in the postmodern milieu.

Evangelicalism, Tomlinson asserts, “was fueled by the modernist cultural worldview.” His reading of history is established in the primacy of the postmodern over all previous worldviews, and centers its critique of traditional evangelicalism and its supposed dependence upon a modernist concern for absolute truth. Postmodernism is here to stay, the post-evangelicals insist. As Tomlinson argues: “Those who assert that postmodernism is a figment of the academic imagination, merely a passing intellectual fad, could not be more wrong. Postmodernism closed directly from the musty corridors of academia into the world of popular culture. It’s on the pages of youth magazines, in CD liner notes and in the fashion pages of *Vogue*. It has abolished the old distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art and created new art forms out of things such as music videos, urban graffiti, and computer graphics.”

The evangelicals “are lodged in a cultural time-warp,” Tomlinson accuses, “still interpreting their faith using the language of, and in the shadow of, the modernist ‘big story’.” According to Tomlinson, the post-evangelicals have escaped this trap and no longer try to present the Gospel as a meta-narrative or comprehensive truth claim.

At this point the true contours of post-evangelical thought become clear. For traditional evangelicals, he asserts, “truth is rarely seen as problematic.” As Tomlinson explains, post-evangelicals “feel uneasy with such a cut-and-dry approach and find themselves instinctively drawn towards a more relative understanding of truth.”

This “more relative understanding of truth” includes an open rejection of absolute truth or the appropriateness of expressing truth claims in propositional forms. According to Tomlinson, “post-evangelicals are less inclined to look for truth and propositional statements in old moral certainties and more likely to seek it in symbols, ambiguities, and situational judgment.” How convenient. The post-evangelicals envision a Christianity free from all claims of absolute and comprehensive truth, liberated from the Bible’s restrictive moral commands, and severed from awkward claims of revealed truth.

Throughout the book, Tomlinson cites as authorities figures such as Don Cupitt, a radical British theologian who identifies himself as an atheist, and Walter Bruggemann, a post-modern biblical scholar who could hardly be classified in any way as evangelical. Notably absent from Tomlinson’s argument is an engagement with the Bible and with the undeniable fact that the Bible itself makes truth claims in propositional form.

Tomlinson describes the triumph of “critical realism” over “naive realism” and argues that “rejecting naive realism doesn’t mean one believes the Bible is devoid of historical content. However, it does mean that our faith need not hinge on everything in the Bible being historically factual.” Tomlinson routinely issues sentences like this without even explaining what does “hinge” on the Bible being historically factual.

Predictably, Tomlinson dismisses doctrines central to evangelical faith such as a substitutionary or legal understanding of the atonement. Instead, he commends a proposal suggested by Stephen Ross White, who argues that the cross is the ground of reconciliation between God and humanity because it was a demonstration of God’s love, “which always forgives, rather than through a once-for-all event of forgiveness.” Of course, from the Apostles onward, the Christian church has staked its truth claim precisely on the cross as “a once-for-all event of forgiveness.” Tomlinson may think he is merely offering a critique of evangelicalism, but his assault upon the truth claims central to the Christian faith is a rejection of what Christians have believed from the time of the earliest disciples.

The assertion of propositional truth claims did not wait for the development of modernism in the wake of the Enlightenment. Tomlinson’s historical naivety is not only lamentable, it is inexcusable in the context of a book that suggests nothing less than a reformulation of the Christian faith.

What about the Bible? Tomlinson acknowledges: “I think it’s fair to say that post-evangelicals have mixed feelings about the Bible. On the one hand they have immense respect for the Bible and are keen to rediscover its relevance for their lives and world. On the other hand they have a backlog of negative feelings about the way they have seen the Bible used.”

In response, Tomlinson offers an immediate rejection of Biblical inerrancy and suggests that the Bible is a form of “symbolic revelation.” According to this understanding, the words of the Bible are not truth “in and of themselves,” but are merely symbols of truth. “We can and should study them, analyze them, meditate on them, and absorb them—but we must not imagine that they are the truth,” Tomlinson insists.

Evangelism stands at the heart of the evangelical movement, but the post-evangelicals call for a complete reconsideration of what true evangelism means. Rather than presenting unbelievers with a “take-it-or-leave-it approach,” the post-evangelicals believe that Christians should “fund” spiritual journeys, “drawing on the highly relevant resources of ‘little pieces’ of truth contained in the Christian narrative.” Conversion is out—a gradual process of realigning a spiritual journey is in. The Gospel is not a collection of “little pieces of truth,” but a comprehensive truth claim. Tomlinson may believe such a truth claim to be out of step with the postmodern mind, but the Gospel has been out of step with every fallen worldview—foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews, said the Apostle Paul.

As he draws distinctions between evangelicals and the post-evangelicals, Tomlinson summarizes the shift in terms such as a transition “from propositional expressions of faith to relational stories about faith journeys” and “from the authority of Scripture alone to a harmony between the authority of Scripture and other personal ways God mysteriously and graciously speaks to Christians.” Further, the shift to a post-evangelical mode means moving “from arguing faith to the ‘dance of faith’,” and “from a search for dogmatic truth to a search for spiritual experience.”

The post-evangelicals also offer a cultural critique of the evangelical movement. Evangelicals, they argue, are far too comfortable in a middle-class culture and are unthinkingly attached to middle-class values. The real shift in the post-evangelical mind is perhaps most clear on the issues of marriage and the family.

As Tomlinson explains, “Christians of all persuasions agree that lifelong, faithful partnerships are desirable. There may be less agreement, however, about whether such a partnership must be state-and/or-sanctioned marriage. The concept of living together without a marriage ceremony has become an accepted social norm.” Tomlinson insists, “many of those cohabiting are Christians as deeply committed to their relationship as any formally married couple—perhaps even more so.”

The church, Tomlinson asserts, should not seek to “police” personal relationships but rather to welcome all persons “as travelers on a journey to and with Christ.”

The post-evangelicals’ dismissal of marriage as a biblical norm is sufficient proof that this movement is not only “post-evangelical,” but is set against the larger Christian tradition as well. It is certainly true that English-speaking evangelicalism has been far too comfortable in a middle-class culture, and all Christians should struggle with the realities of our own cultures over against the claims of the Gospel. Nevertheless, the post-evangelicals are moving far beyond the Christian tradition and have set themselves against the undisputed teachings of Scripture as held by virtually all Christians throughout the ages.

This makes the book’s foreword by Dallas Willard all the more perplexing. Willard is a popular Christian author and professor of philosophy. He argues that we “have to start with the realization that what Tomlinson calls post-evangelicalism is by no means ex-evangelicalism.” Willard went on to state: “There are of course ex-evangelicals, and even anti-evangelicals, but post-evangelicals are vital evangelicals, perhaps tenaciously so.”

If this statement is accurate, the term evangelical has lost all definitional meaning. The most honest aspect of this book is the post in post-evangelical.

