

1966
and all that

AN EVANGELICAL JOURNEY

Basil Howlett



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members of Trinity Baptist Church in Gloucester and their pastor at that time, Douglas Jones.

A lot has been written about *The Westminster Fellowship* and this book is no exception. Suffice it to say here that no minister could have had a better 'school of theology' or more illuminating seminars on pastoral matters.

Although I have 'retired' from being a minister of Carey Baptist Church, Reading, I still have the enormous privilege of being an elder of the church. The friendship that exists between the elders, and the fellowship we enjoy is a great blessing to my soul.

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Basil Howlett

Introduction

Almost every English schoolchild knows that something important happened in 1066. On October 14th, William the Conqueror from Normandy and his army landed at Hastings on the South Coast of England and inflicted a terrible defeat on England and poor Harold in particular.

The book *1066 and All That*, written by W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, is a cheeky but clever parody of the history of England, based on the idea that history is a mixture of half-remembered facts and garbled legends. It first appeared as a series of articles in *Punch* magazine and eventually was turned into a musical comedy. Included in the book are some joke test papers with amusing instructions such as ‘Do not attempt to answer more than one question at a time’ and ‘Do not on any account attempt to write on both sides of the paper at once.’

Every Englishman knows that something important happened in the realm of soccer in 1966. England beat Germany and won the World Cup. Ever since there have been endless discussions and a thousand action replays. Sir Geoff Hurst, who had the distinction of scoring a hat trick in that

match (the only player ever to score a hat-trick in a World Cup final) entitled his autobiography '1966 and all that'¹ but long before Sir Geoff put pen to paper, that title was used for an article in an Evangelical journal which referred to an unforgettable event in the Christian world.

On 18 October 1966, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, minister of Westminster Chapel and probably the greatest preacher of the 20th century, addressed a densely packed meeting in London and made an impassioned appeal for evangelicals who were divided up among the denominations to come together 'as a fellowship or association of evangelical churches' and to stand together for the gospel. The chairman, John Stott, feared that many people would be stirred into action and, although he had already given his own views earlier in the meeting, he arose at the end of the address, not to close the gathering, but to contradict what had just been said. His words were 'I believe history is against what Dr Lloyd-Jones has said ... Scripture is against him.'

The result was sensational but sad. The meeting was polarised and ever since Christians have been arguing about it. Gilbert Kirby, one-time secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, writing a decade later said that inviting Lloyd-Jones to speak about unity that night was 'probably one of my biggest mistakes.'² *The Church of England Newspaper* dismissed what Lloyd-Jones had said as 'nothing short of hare-brained.'³ One person telephoned J. I. Packer, late on the 18 October 1966 asking 'Is John Stott mad?' Another stated, 'Your friend Martyn Lloyd-Jones has gone off his rocker,'⁴ and similar remarks are still made. Like 1066 and other events in English history, comments made today, of what happened and what was said back in 1966 are often a 'blur of half-

remembered facts and garbled legends' Hence the title of this book '*1966 and all that*'.

The big issue won't go away

'Of making many books there is no end', declares the writer of Ecclesiastes rather wearily (Ecclesiastes 12:12). After all that has been written and said, both true and false, about the events of 18 October 1966, some may ask, even more wearily, whether anything else needs to be written. Many now think that the whole matter is best buried and forgotten. But some Christians cannot so easily forget, because what was said that night had a profound impact on their lives. As a result of the Biblical challenge which was given they did secede from their doctrinally confused denominations and suffered for it, but they do not regret that for one moment. In their experience, secession was not just a negative separation from falsehood and compromise, but a positive entrance into a richer, deeper fellowship with other evangelical groups and people from whom they were previously separated.

We feel that their story should be told. Much of what has been said and written about '1966' has been from a negative standpoint, by men, many of whom seem to have no intention of ever leaving their denomination, no matter how doctrinally confused or morally wayward it becomes, or by men who were in wholly evangelical denominations and who had no need to consider the issue of secession in a personal way. Some of the most negative comments have been made and are still being made by men who were not even born in 1966. This book is written by one of the many who were there, who were in denominations blighted by heresy and totally committed to false ecumenism, and who are now filled with gratitude to God that on that night, through the preaching of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, we were challenged to take action on

an issue over which we had been dithering far too long. We are fewer now. Young men in their twenties and thirties that night are now in their seventies and eighties, and a number have gone to heaven. Before we all make that epic journey, it is important that someone should write about the positive effect and outcome of that memorable night—especially as we approach the fiftieth anniversary!

There are three particular reasons why their story needs to be told

First, we thank God that since 1966 a great number of people have come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Understandably, many of them are unaware of the difficult times and critical events which preceded and followed that controversial meeting, so naturally they wonder what all the fuss was about. They need to know the facts, because the very churches to which many of them belong either left one of the main denominations, or even came into existence at that time.

Even more importantly, the issues of 1966 are still with us and often in a more alarming way. Martyn Lloyd-Jones would have dismissed the suggestion that he was a prophet, but maybe he was, and saw the future direction of the church in the Western world more clearly. In 1966 it was liberal leaders of mixed denominations who were denying the substitutionary nature of the atonement, but now it is men who claim to be evangelical who are doing so. In 1966 it was liberal men, mainly but not entirely, who were advocating fellowship with Catholics, but almost thirty years later in 1994, prominent evangelicals including J. I. Packer and Os Guinness were signatories to a document entitled 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium'. This has been described as the most significant development in Protestant-Catholic relations since the dawn

of the Reformation. Whether or not we can have fellowship with those who deny the truth and teach falsehood is still a big question that needs to be considered.

The ecumenical movement is still with us but in a more subtle form. In 1990 the British Council of Churches, which tried to impose unity from above, morphed into *Churches Together*, with its avowed aim to pursue ecumenism at a local level. We are now constantly being urged to join other churches in united services of worship, prayer meetings and evangelistic activities. If all the other local churches and their leaders involved in a united activity are wholly committed to the one true gospel there is no problem. Lloyd-Jones encouraged such biblical ecumenism and so should we. Often, however, some of the churches and leaders with whom we are urged to unite neither believe nor preach essential gospel truths. Some do not accept the inerrancy of Scripture, the eternal punishment of the unsaved, or that Christ died bearing the punishment due to sinners. Some deny the deity of Christ, his virgin birth, miracles and literal resurrection. Others teach that religious ceremonies such as baptism, the mass and the adoration of Mary have some saving efficacy. Yes, the issues raised at that meeting in 1966 are still very much with us. They won't go away!

There is a third, perhaps more controversial, reason why young Christians today need to hear the story of 1966. The fact that the appeal made on the 18 October 1966 has been disregarded, even denounced by some is, in the opinion of many of us, one of the greatest tragedies of the last 50 years. We have little doubt that the increased confusion and fragmentation within evangelicalism is largely a result of our failure to take the challenge of that evening—the importance of evangelical unity—seriously. On the one hand

some evangelicals seem to be more determined than ever to remain in their denomination, no matter how heretical the doctrine of its leaders or unbiblical their behaviour. At the other extreme, there are evangelicals who divide and separate from fellow evangelicals without any qualms of conscience. The biblical theme that gospel-loving people should stand together and should be seen to be doing so (John 17:20–23) is still a big issue.

Almost 50 years on, the matters raised so clearly and powerfully by Martyn Lloyd-Jones on the 18 October 1966 have not gone away and are not likely to do so.

Chapter 1

Life in a doctrinally mixed denomination

They are often referred to as main-line denominations but, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out, many of them are not on the main line at all but are off the rails theologically, or at best they are in a siding! It is better to call them doctrinally mixed. They may include evangelical people whose beliefs about the Bible, the Person of Christ and his atoning work, justification by faith, heaven and hell, and the way of salvation are thoroughly orthodox, but they also include those who deny the inerrancy of the Bible, who question the deity of Christ and his miracles, and refuse to believe that he shed his blood and died for sinners to bear the punishment of their sin as their substitute. Some would believe that everyone will eventually be saved; others would question whether Jesus is the one and only saviour, believing that religious ceremonies and charitable deeds have some saving power. As the saying goes, not everyone in the denomination is 'singing from the same song-sheet', or to put it more seriously, not 'reading the same Bible.'

To understand and assess what happened in 1966, it is necessary to know what life was like in a doctrinally mixed denomination in those days. Mercifully, many people who have been converted in more recent years have been spared the experience! They live at a time when there are many independent evangelical churches faithfully preaching the Bible, several evangelical publishers producing excellent books, quite a few evangelical colleges giving sound theological training and a good choice of annual evangelical conferences to attend. It has not always been like that.

In the 1960s most theological colleges were downright liberal, not to say heretical, and the few evangelical students in them had a bruising time. In most doctrinally-mixed denominations evangelicals were marginalised and mocked. Many young, gospel-loving ministers were fighting for survival.

In 1961, Michael Ramsay, the Archbishop of Canterbury publicly declared that he would see atheists in heaven. In 1962, John Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich wrote his infamous book *Honest to God* in which he denied the existence of a personal God. A year later, the president of the Baptist Union, Howard Williams, joined the stampede to publish heretical material with his book *Down to Earth* in which he questioned the bodily resurrection of Christ. The following year saw parliament legalizing Mass vestments despite evangelical protests and soon after, prayers for the dead were reintroduced. In 1965, Donald Soper, the Methodist leader proposed a ban on Bible reading! The reason he gave was ‘The present situation with regard to the Scriptures is intolerable. They represent an incubus that cannot be removed until an almost completely new start is made.’

In the same year, Leslie Weatherhead, the famous

Methodist minister of a Congregational church published *The Christian Agnostic* in which, among many other outrageous statements, he maintained that ‘The Christianity of tomorrow will embrace all truth wherever it is found or however men have come to apprehend it, whether through specifically Christian teaching or through Buddhism or Mohammedanism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism or even through the bleak desert of apparent atheism.’ The thing that caused most distress to true believers was his suggestion that our Lord was born of a sexual relationship between Mary and Zechariah. Earlier, in 1962, at a lunchtime service in Manchester, he had read from 1 Samuel (using a Bible borrowed from a member of the congregation, because he did not have one!) just to show, he said, ‘what unworthy ideas of God the Old Testament taught.’ *The Methodist Recorder*, published an article by John Vincent entitled ‘*The Methodism Gone Forever*’ in which he stated that all the doctrines of justification, of saving faith, assurance and holiness ‘belong to an intellectual and theological world which is no longer ours. They describe experiences which are no longer normative for Methodist people.’ In the light of this, it is not surprising that when a brave evangelical stood up at the Methodist Conference in Plymouth in 1965, and proposed a motion, calling the church back to the truths of the Bible he was defeated 601 votes to 14.

In addition, the ecumenical movement, driven by the World Council of Churches, the British Council of Churches and local Councils of Churches, was on the march, determined to unite all who called themselves Christian, and anyone who stood apart from it was regarded as a fool or fanatic. If you were not part of the ecumenical set-up there was very little chance of being appointed as a hospital chaplain or of getting planning permission to build premises

for an evangelical church. In Cheltenham I was on the rota at the local cemetery and crematorium for taking funeral services for people who did not have any church connection. It was a good opportunity to visit unchurched bereaved families at a time of great need, but liberal ministers in the town clubbed together to get my name removed from the rota because I was not part of the ecumenical Council of Churches.

It was tough being a young minister in such an environment. Today, it is not unusual for people to poke fun, or at least smile blandly, at evangelical ministers of my generation because of the way we thank God for Dr Lloyd-Jones. They accuse us of being guilty of hero-worship or of living in a time warp, and those who write about him favourably are charged with 'hagiography', but these critics have no idea of what it was like to live and minister in those days, and of how much we owe to him for his godly example, tireless encouragement and, above all, his unwavering faithfulness to the Lord and the Scriptures. The Bible commands us to remember and honour such leaders (Hebrews 13:7).

Converted and called in spite of a doctrinally mixed denomination

The following testimony, of what life was like in a doctrinally mixed denomination in the 1960s, could be repeated by many other men and I hope it will help others to understand some of the battles we had to fight.

From my earliest days my parents took me to a Baptist Union church in Norwich. During the time of the Second World War the church was served by a minister who had a pastoral heart and evangelistic zeal. Although I was a very

young child I can remember people speaking of him with great affection. Sadly, he was followed by a man who was very academic, thoroughly boring and (as I now realise), wholly liberal in theology. When I was about 14 he asked whether I had ever thought about being a member. 'No' I replied, but he insisted that I should become a member. That gave me the impression that I must be okay spiritually. For the next 5 years, behind that Sunday facade of church attendance and membership, I lived a very ungodly life, drinking, smoking, swearing, cursing and doing other things which shame prevents me from mentioning. Speedway and motorbike racing, and all that went with it, were my life.

Clear-cut gospel messages, which warned us of our sin against God, the danger of hell and of our total dependence upon Christ and him crucified were very rarely heard in our Baptist Union church, so I maintained this ghastly hypocritical existence relatively undisturbed. Just occasionally I was made to think about eternal issues. I clearly remember four occasions when that happened.

In that liberal church there were one or two people who stood out. I now realise they were Evangelical people who were probably struggling in a church which had become liberal in its teaching. One of these men was Alfred Newell, whose godly demeanour was so obviously genuine and arresting. He and his equally godly wife had lost a son in a submarine disaster in the Second World War and then their home had been destroyed in a bombing raid. Their real concern for a godless young fellow like me affected me and I now realise that they were truly converted and loved the Saviour. One Sunday Alfred Newell asked me whether I was saved. Embarrassed, I blurted out 'Yes' but it should have been

‘No’—his sincere question and my dishonest answer troubled me.

The death of a friend in a car crash and the subsequent funeral service shook me. A group of youths regularly raced cars or motorbikes from Norwich to Newmarket and back, to see who could do it in the quickest time. One of them rolled his car over and was killed. That was the first funeral I ever attended and it made me tremble. It could so easily have been me in the coffin.

Then there was an ecumenical Good Friday service. Why I went I do not know: normally I went to a motorcycle race meeting on Good Friday, but I was there and was bored out of my mind. Seated at the front were many church dignitaries all dressed up in their clerical finery. The preacher managed to preach, on this day of all days, without even mentioning the death of Christ, not that that troubled me then. Suddenly, at the end of the service, a young soldier stood up in the gallery. Rumour had it that he had recently been ‘converted or something’ in Suez. His voice boomed out across the crowded building, ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.’ And he repeated it even more loudly. My word! Those who had fallen asleep during the boring sermon were now wide-awake. Who was this young whippersnapper who had dared to quote a Bible verse in church? People muttered their condemnation of him as they left the chapel. His church leaders censured him and at the time I thought he was crazy, but I now recognise that he was the bravest man in the building. Looking back, I realise that was the first time it ever occurred to me that there was something very special about the death of Christ.

Another thing that disturbed me in those rebellious years was the singing of church members who regularly came

to our house after the Sunday evening service. I cannot really explain why they sang truths in our home, which were ignored, even denied in the pulpit of their chapel. It may well be that they were confused, bewildered and numbed by the arid or empty teaching they were getting and their reaction was this hearty singing after the services of the day were over.

One night I heard these visitors singing:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth and followed thee.

(Charles Wesley 1707–88)

And I said inwardly, 'I would love to be free' but all human efforts to break free from the terrible sins that bound me failed. The only counsel our minister gave me was to try harder to lift myself up. Poor man, he did not realise the depth of the pit I was in nor how helpless I was to get myself out of it.

All these things occasionally made me think, but nothing really convicted or disturbed me. That is, until one Sunday evening a visiting preacher at our church 'broke the rules' and did proclaim the gospel, clearly and boldly. Needless to say, he never came again! He 'hit me between the eyes' with a sermon which had four prongs. The first three, sin, judgment and hell, annoyed me. The fourth point about the death of Christ being my only hope, amazed me and led to my salvation. Now by God's grace 'my chains fell off' and I really was free from the guilt and bondage of sin, as well as the fear of hell, and the wonder of that never ceases to amaze me.

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!

(John Newton 1725–1807)

In the wonderful providence of God, on a separate occasion, another visitor to the church gave her testimony, and that night a teenager from a non-christian home, who had started attending the church after being very ill with TB, was converted and later become my wife and has been my partner in the Lord's work for over fifty years. Two young people, from a very poor background, saved in a liberal 'church' through the ministry of visiting speakers! 'God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.'

My mother had often said that she would like one of her sons to be a minister. The firm, dogmatic response from my lips had always been, 'Not me, never!' I could not think of anything worse than being like one of those dull men in fancy dress (clerical collar and gown!) who bored me to tears every Sunday, but that all changed in May 1960. By then we had another minister, a pleasant man who eventually became an Anglican vicar. We were never taught much doctrine but, to be fair, his preaching was more interesting and had a gospel flavour about it. It was through a sermon he preached on Genesis 35 that God clearly called me to become a preacher of the gospel. When I told him about God's call, he replied, 'You must go to the Baptist College where I studied, you will get on well there.' At the time, I was so spiritually naïve and untaught that I had no idea whatsoever that there were liberals (modernists) and evangelicals. I thought everyone was a simple believer like me so I was ill-prepared to become a student at one of the most liberal theological colleges in the country—Manchester Baptist College.