

# BRITISH EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIANS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*An enduring legacy*

Edited by  
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# Contents

Contributors	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Thomas A. Noble</i>	
<b>1 James Orr</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>A. T. B. McGowan</i>	
<b>2 James Denney</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Thomas V. Findlay</i>	
<b>3 Peter Taylor Forsyth</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>Trevor Hart</i>	
<b>4 W. H. Griffith Thomas</b>	<b>71</b>
<i>Andrew Atherstone</i>	
<b>5 H. R. Mackintosh</b>	<b>93</b>
<i>David L. Rainey</i>	
<b>6 W. E. Sangster</b>	<b>113</b>
<i>Andrew J. Cheatle</i>	
<b>7 Martyn Lloyd-Jones</b>	<b>133</b>
<i>David Ceri Jones</i>	
<b>8 John R. W. Stott</b>	<b>155</b>
<i>Ian M. Randall</i>	
<b>9 James I. Packer</b>	<b>176</b>
<i>Don J. Payne</i>	
<b>10 Thomas F. Torrance</b>	<b>197</b>
<i>Robert T. Walker</i>	
<b>11 Leslie Newbigin</b>	<b>220</b>
<i>Donald LeRoy Stults</i>	

## Contents

<b>12 Colin E. Gunton</b>	<b>240</b>
<i>John E. Colwell</i>	
Coda: looking back to look forwards	260
<i>Jason S. Sexton</i>	
Index of names	267

# **Coda: looking back to look forwards – on the past, present and future of British evangelical theology**

JASON S. SEXTON

## **Looking back**

In several academic and professional fields, retrospectives provide valuable opportunities to look back at significant events, and reconsider and evaluate important works that have been produced. This book serves such a purpose, examining twelve of the key figures most relevant to represent the best of twentieth-century British evangelical theology. Its focus is not to showcase particular historical developments (although these are considered), nor is it to highlight various sociological features of the movement (although these are noted where relevant). Instead, concentration focuses on the theology operative in the work of these twelve exemplars whose ideas helped shape British evangelicalism in the last century, with its remarkable reach throughout the world. Here in this ‘Coda’, as a Californian who lived, studied and taught in Britain, and serves as the co-chair of the Tyndale Fellowship’s Christian Doctrine Study Group, I will try to think finally about how the gospel preached by these twentieth-century theologians faces today the changing context of our twenty-first century. While desiring to be true to the gospel preached by these twelve exemplars, the present context raises questions of the emphases and the presentation of evangelical truth.

## **The changing context**

This project has been a descriptive endeavour, largely celebratory, or at least paying tribute to those who have shaped our thinking. But can such an effort also be critical? This question, admittedly academic, is an important one

because the role that theology plays within the life of our institutions and contemporary culture (and also in the very life of the church) is not always clearly understood or agreed.<sup>1</sup> For example, evangelical theology is now done in a context where, since the end of the twentieth century, Britain has become much more obviously a multiracial society and the effects and unintended consequences of colonialism and empire are matters now on the agenda in a multiracial country. While evangelicalism cannot ever lose the biblical call to personal faith, the social context and the social ethics of the community of faith (remembering Wilberforce and Booth) also demand attention. Evangelical theology, the original impetus for world mission in recent centuries, and the inspiration for the anti-slavery movement, surely has much to contribute here.

The popular early twentieth-century notion of Britain as the heart of an empire ‘on which the sun never set’ is seen by many today as an imperialism akin to oppressive political regimes. But we may note that democratic principles led to the transformation of the empire into the Commonwealth as democratic nation states came to birth while the former ‘mission fields’ became partner nations with partner churches. Meanwhile, the evangelical student movement that brought numerous university graduates to commit themselves to missions around the world also led to the ecumenical movement, launched in 1910 at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference. This was of deep concern to several theologians profiled in this book (especially Torrance and Newbigin, to some degree Stott and Packer, although opposed by Lloyd-Jones) and changed the face of Christian missions away from the harmful colonial model of missions to encourage greater local development of indigenous leadership to which visiting Christian missionaries would submit.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the academic question of critique and context, and the desire to locate a usable past from which to draw, there also remains the ecclesial issue. Faith matters. It is passed down and tradition becomes, as it were, a faithful guide. More than the past left in the past, in the rear-view mirror as it were, the chapters of this volume aim to examine twentieth-century British theology – to learn from it, and incorporate its important parts, and also perhaps to recognize what should be discarded. This order is important, however, if evangelical theology is to be done in a manner that displays, as Steve Holmes has argued,

<sup>1</sup> See Jason S. Sexton, ‘The Critical Study of Religion and Division in the Age of Covid-19’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 15.2 (2021), pp. 157–176, <<https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341652>> (accessed 4 October 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See Lesslie Newbigin, ‘Mission to Six Continents’, in Harold E. Fey (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 2: 1948–1968, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp. 173–197. See also Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Mission and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990).

‘a respect for the past, rather than a freedom to plough our own furrows’.<sup>3</sup> Paying close attention to the features that might be maintained and carefully passed down is of great importance. St Paul’s admonition to Timothy is instructive in this regard: ‘what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well’ (2 Tim. 2:2, NRSVA).

This stewardship of faith and its inherent transferability are also due to its deposited character: ‘the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints’ (Jude 3, NRSVA). As such, the subject matter is not merely academic, but a matter of faithfulness to God and to the life of communities of faith – both to people who wish to belong to this faith at present, and to those who will embrace it in the future. ‘There is’, Tony Lane reminds us, ‘no virtue in reinventing the wheel in every generation and even less in repeating the errors of the past.’<sup>4</sup> Such an approach to tradition and to maintaining the character of the gospel in its sound articulation remains of enormous consideration when determining how best to hand down the Christian faith from generation to generation.

## British evangelical theology and academic theology

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of British theology in the modern world, since it arguably constitutes the fountain of English-speaking theology today. This is not merely a historical assertion, but acknowledges that much of the theology happening today (especially in the English-speaking world) has some direct linkage to British theology, and to the figures who have been shaped by British theology at some level. And British evangelical theology – from Wesley and Whitefield down to the current situation with the far reaches of its influence and nodes of institutional intersections – has arguably demonstrated an international significance beyond any other form of Christian theology in Britain.<sup>5</sup>

Theology positions within British universities and institutions of higher learning remain far more robust today than they are in other public university

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p. 164. See also Jason S. Sexton, ‘Introduction: Recalibrating the Church’s Mission’, in Jason S. Sexton (ed.), *Four Views on the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), pp. 7–16.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony N. S. Lane, ‘Tradition’, in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005), p. 812.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. the historical and cultural significance of the movement in the five-volume *History of Evangelicalism* series (Inter-Varsity Press). The post-war influence of evangelicalism in the UK as it revolved around the work of the Cambridge-based Tyndale House and Tyndale Fellowship is chronicled in T. A. Noble, *Tyndale House and Fellowship: The First Sixty Years* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006).

settings through much of the English-speaking world. This is partly because theology is mainstream in the UK, allowing for theology positions (including Cambridge and Oxford Regius Professorships) to be occupied by evangelical theologians. As with any such academic positions, they are open not only to British scholars but to those from overseas, and accordingly are open to scholars producing the best academic work. These are often evangelicals. They are able to appeal to the brightest minds of undergraduate and postgraduate evangelical students who take their faith seriously and pursue academic courses of study at leading British universities.

The ecologies of the theological colleges (training students for professional ministerial degrees), which are often accredited by major British universities, including the Church of England's Common Award accredited by Durham, generate an egalitarian spirit within British theological higher education that often lends towards cross-pollination among these institutions, especially those sharing close geographical proximity, or even actual space, offering cross-institutional degrees. One thinks of Ridley Hall, a Cambridge University affiliate college that trains Anglican ordinands but offers degrees from the University of Cambridge, University of Durham and Anglia-Ruskin University. One thinks of Regent's Park College, or Wycliffe Hall within Oxford University, which grants degrees for both institutions. New College, Edinburgh, is at the same time the Divinity School of the University of Edinburgh and a church college of the Church of Scotland, with the church often having a strong say in some university appointments.

Other major universities such as those south of the border like Durham, Roehampton, Leeds and King's College London, or those in Scotland such as St Andrews or Aberdeen, have had long histories of robust theology faculties where evangelical theologians with deep and personal evangelical convictions have often been found. They attract graduate students of remarkable calibre from around the world who are then able to generate high-quality scholarship from evangelical perspectives. A number of evangelical theological colleges, such as the London School of Theology, Spurgeon's College, Oak Hill, the Highland Theological College, and the Nazarene Theological College, are associated with major universities so are able to offer degree studies and doctoral research.

## **British evangelical theology around the world**

From the mid-twentieth century, graduate students have come from around the world to pursue British PhDs. As serious-minded scholars, many of these have



also been leaders passionate about serving the church in their own home contexts. Sometimes through the Langham Partnership established by John Stott,<sup>6</sup> they have had access to resources to come to receive the highest education possible from an evangelical faith perspective and have returned to their own countries with the resource-tools received through a rigorous high-level education. Some of these have come to study with several of the scholars who have contributed essays to the present volume.

Such developments are often the fruit of the positive relationships seen today within Commonwealth countries, having emerged in the twentieth century out of the old empire, and thus demonstrating a reverse-colonialist model. British scholars and theologians thus serve and educate leaders throughout the world who wish to study in the UK (and in this way will always be connected to the UK), and yet with an emphasis towards serving the churches within other social, political and geographical contexts. This open-handedness of British evangelical scholarship has effectively trained hundreds if not thousands of theologians around the world with evangelical faith-based perspectives that allow for careful contextualization.

This emphasis on making education available to students in the Global South and East has meant a host of students from India, East Asia (including China, Korea, the Philippines, etc.), Africa and Latin America, as well as those from the USA, who have received a British theological education before going back to assume leadership positions within the institutions of their own countries. The irony is salient for places such as Asia and Africa, which is where most early Christian theology comes from.<sup>7</sup> But in addition to theologians from around the world being trained in the UK, British theologians also go elsewhere, and the cross-pollination continues. And evangelicals such as H. R. Mackintosh, his student T. F. Torrance and every person profiled in this volume had as a motivating factor the desire to see conversion to Christ happen, and forgiveness extended, and reconciliation to God experienced. This openness to the world for quite a while viewed Western culture as already evangelized, although Torrance and Newbigin were especially aware that new, dominant, post-Christian sets of ideas – whether scientism, postmodernism, secularism or something else – posed new challenges back home.

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<sup>6</sup> See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), by the International Ministries Director of Langham Partnership International.

<sup>7</sup> On African origins of Christian theology, see e.g. Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

## Evangelical theology and British culture

While much of the theology of the twelve theologians profiled in this volume took shape within the framework of traditional systematic theological categories (especially the doctrine of Scripture, Christology, the atonement, the doctrine of salvation and mission), their theologies were deeply shaped by the issues of their day. They were not done in a vacuum. Whether it was Hegelianism, challenges to doctrines of biblical inspiration or sources of authority,<sup>8</sup> or science and the myth of progress,<sup>9</sup> or the rise of social sciences such as psychology,<sup>10</sup> or the real pressures of war time,<sup>11</sup> the British evangelical theology that developed in academic settings and in pulpits was in response to characteristic questions of the context. This demonstrates the significance of culture and context in doing theology.<sup>12</sup> They also demonstrated a self-awareness and proximity that encouraged irenic debates and helped resist the fundamentalism that developed in the USA.

British churches composed of predominantly white people are declining today in attendance, membership and finances, with many closing. Yet within Britain, some of the biggest and fastest growing churches are Pentecostal churches comprised largely of evangelical believers from the African diaspora.<sup>13</sup> But the world of British evangelical theology is wide. It is Scottish, English, Welsh, Northern Irish, Commonwealth countries, immigrants and refugees. It is Langham scholars and postgraduate students who come for a British theological education, and then go elsewhere. British evangelical theology is a very large and growing family, and in the future will almost inevitably be both very different from and similar to what it looked like in the twentieth century.

## Looking to the future

There is no doubt about the significant role British evangelical theology played in Britain and elsewhere during the twentieth century, and continues to play in the contemporary world. But with regard to the future, much is changing.

<sup>8</sup> See chapter 1 above, on Orr and his response to these challenges.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 10, on Torrance on theology and science.

<sup>10</sup> See chapter 6, on Sangster: Lloyd-Jones also addressed this.

<sup>11</sup> See chapters 6 and 7, on Sangster and Lloyd-Jones respectively.

<sup>12</sup> See Graham McFarlane, *A Model for Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2020), pp. 22–25.

<sup>13</sup> It was noted in the England football team during England's 2021 European Cup run, the only players who appeared to acknowledge God on the field were black players. See also Julian Coman, 'God-Given Talent: Saka, Rashford and Sterling Blaze a Trail for Black British Christians', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2021 <<https://amp.theguardian.com/football/2021/jul/17/god-given-talent-saka-rashford-and-sterling-blaze-a-trail-for-black-british-christians?>> (accessed 4 October 2021).

British demographics are changing, especially in the church. As acknowledged in this volume's introduction, evangelical theology in twentieth-century Britain was almost entirely the work of white males. Whether their work served to perpetuate white supremacy amid the ongoing effects of colonialism by which we are all infected remains for further research to address. But with British society and the British churches now being multi-ethnic, British evangelical theology must become so too. With the rich egalitarian tradition going back to the Clapham Sect as the early slavery abolitionists, British evangelicals should welcome this development. British evangelicalism should also welcome the greater presence of women to articulate the future of evangelical theology. Increasingly this theology will traverse the worlds of missiology, theological ethics and political theology, but all of it can certainly incorporate the span of Christian doctrine in conversation with the tradition.

British evangelical theology today continues to be cross-pollinated, not just between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but among evangelicals around the world. This wide community of faith – this evangelical family – requires a responsibility of maintenance (of particular features, distinct traditions, etc.) and clarity of articulation in order to help faithfully proclaim the evangel with the focus on 'Christ crucified' that we have seen in these twelve theologians. Theology, then, is seen as perhaps less defensive and apologetic than it has been, and yet continues to take up the task of rendering an orderly account of the Christian faith with an evangelical fervour and passion that spills out into our everyday practices, and what we might call practical, public and even political theology. As such, this kind of evangelical faith, articulated and expressly lived out, showcases – or rather witnesses – an emergent mode of reasoning that amounts to an exercise not only in wise and critical reception, but also and especially in astonishment, gratitude and righteous actions that do good works in service of the church and the wider world, until the Lord Jesus returns.

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