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EVOLVING DISCIPLES? A COMPARISON OF THE TELEOLOGIES OF JOHN
WESLEY AND GEORGE WHITEFIELD WITH THE TELEOLOGY OF THE
HTB/ALPHA MOVEMENT.
A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Evolving Disciples? A comparison of the teleologies of John Wesley and George Whitefield with the teleology of the HTB/Alpha movement

A research proposal

A question that is almost as old as British evangelicalism is ‘has it lost, or is it about to, lose its way?’¹ It is a generational question as successive movements have sought to outwork the biblical, crucicentric, activist and conversionist movement in their era.² Numerous paradigm shifts can be noted since the Evangelical Awakening of the Eighteenth Century,³ with the sociological adage ‘when America sneezes Britain catches a cold’ increasingly true from the mid-twentieth century.⁴ One such paradigm shift occurred with the arrival of Renewal in the 1960s, accentuated markedly by the influence of John Wimber in the 1980s alongside the rise of the church growth and seeker-friendly movements. The Evangelical landscape in Britain that I am part of has been radically altered by these influences, and this essay explores the resultant teleology of the contemporary charismatic Anglican church through the lens of the HTB/Alpha movement and contrasting it with the teleology of John Wesley and George Whitefield in the Evangelical Revival.

Skevington Wood (1967) helpfully set out the core doctrines, as he saw them, of Wesley the evangelist;⁵ i) Scripture as ‘*the only standard of truth*’⁶; ii) Salvation by faith as ‘*the standing topic*’⁷; iii) sin as ‘*loathsome leprosy*’⁸; iv) the regeneration through the Spirit by which we may be ‘*properly said to live*’

¹ e.g. Lord Shaftesbury quoted in Bebbington 1989, 2 ‘*I know what constituted an Evangelical in former times, I have no clear notion what constitutes one now.*’

² See Bebbington 1989, 5-16 on how these factors have defined evangelicalism (at least to the 1980s).

³ cf. King, 1969, 1 who notes Keele in 1967 was one such paradigm shift.

⁴ Considerable literature traces the historic connections: cf. David W. Bebbington, ‘Evangelicalism in Modern Britain and America: A Comparison’, in Rawlyk, G & Noll, M (eds), (1994) *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press).

⁵ Skevington Wood, 1969, 209-279.

⁶ *Works* II: 367

⁷ *Works* 8:349

⁸ *Sermons* 1:323

⁹; v) assurance as '*an inward impression on the soul*'¹⁰; vi) holiness, '*the grand depositum*'¹¹; vii) a desire to '*flee from the wrath to come*' as the 'one condition' required of those wanting admission to the societies.¹² Outler reduces these to three: i) original sin, ii) justification by faith alone and iii) holiness of heart in those who have been born again.¹³ Whitefield's focus was similar: 'the big truths of the Book of Truth,'¹⁴ summarised by Maddock as 'original sin, justification by faith and the new birth' (although he notes the 'subtle but highly significant theological differences' and hence pastoral applications, that flow from Wesley and Whitefield's varying usage of identical terms).¹⁵

Wesley and Whitefield's teleologies reflected their anthropologies ('it is not enough to say all men are sick of sin. No we are all dead in sin and trespasses')¹⁶, and their eschatology ('every sinner is under the sentence of hell-fire' until he turned to Christ)¹⁷. This led both preachers to argue that the 'pursuit of inward and outward holiness ought to categorise the regenerate life'.¹⁸ This teleology was set in place by the conversionism that has hitherto been one of the four core marks of the evangelical movement. They called 'dead' sinners, into a regenerate life pursuing holiness (albeit with varied views on the extent that holiness could be outworked in this life). This paper,

⁹ *Sermons* 2:234; Skevington Wood, 240: 'Wesleyanism is sometimes classed with Arminianism, but it essentially differs from it in the central place it gives to the work of the Spirit in regeneration.' (Orr, J 1897, 300) cf McGonigle 2001, 8 who elaborates on this theme.

¹⁰ *Sermons* I: 208

¹¹ *Letters* 8: 238

¹² *Works* 8: 270. Skevington Ward notes Strawson on the dangers of isolating or exaggerating this doctrine, before (rightly) attacking Rattenbury, Lyles and Wilson for under representing Wesley's appeal to '*the terrors of the Lord*'. Skevington Ward points to numerous Journal articles and the unpublished PhD research of Cyril Downes (1960) *Eschatological Doctrines in the Writings of John and Charles Wesley*. Edinburgh. As Wesley wrote to William Law "Can you conceive of the Most High dressing up as a scarecrow, as we do to fright children." *Letters Vol III*, 370. He argues that if there is no hell then the Scripture is not trustworthy so there is also 'no heaven, no revelation.'

¹³ Outler, 1975, 69. cf Maddock, 2011, 178

¹⁴ Conrad, 66

¹⁵ Maddock 2011, 176 cf especially debate about 'prevenient grace' vs 'total depravity' and the impact each has on the doctrine of election.

¹⁶ Wesley in Whitefield's funeral sermon. Outler *Works* 2:342 cf Sermon: *Original Sin* in Outler *Works* 2:173. A significant sermon for our study as Wesley was keen to emphasise their common ground.

¹⁷ *Sermons*, Vol I, 157; Sermon VII

¹⁸ Maddock 2011, 241

at its core, will examine the extent to which HTB/Alpha can be considered to stand in that tradition.

The tradition has certainly evolved. King argued determinedly that (traditional) Evangelicalism needed to change after Keele 1967,¹⁹ and Webber unpicks the sociology behind the two ensuing shifts he perceives. In the mid-1970s 'traditional' evangelicals were challenged by the rise of the 'pragmatic' evangelical, challenged in turn in the 2000s by the 'younger' evangelical. In these terms in recent years HTB/Alpha has a largely 'pragmatic' senior leadership, seeking to influence / manage 'younger evangelicals'.²⁰

Our investigation will explore any impact of this pragmatism. King claimed that, '*Evangelicalism is nothing if it is not about conversion and a direct encounter with the living Christ*',²¹ and while Bebbington indeed notes that the first waves of renewal led to a re-emphasis on conversionism,²² there is a question whether that is true of Alpha post the influence of Wimber and The Toronto Blessing. Alpha is clearly focused on a *direct encounter* but we will consider the extent to which its pneumatological focused model fundamentally undercuts the core (traditional) evangelical spirituality of *conversionism* (from sinner to regenerate, from lost to found, from hell-bound to heaven-bound),²³ by encouraging assimilation (belonging before believing) and a therapeutic spirituality that allows for a presumption of belonging without a crisis of conscience.²⁴

¹⁹ King, 1969 former editor of the *Church of England Newspaper*.

²⁰ Warner, 2007, 122 see HTB in this category and argues: 'Pragmatic evangelism colonises its host cultures, enlightenment and existential, with an urgent and opportunistic zeal.'

²¹ King, 1969, 35

²² Bebbington 1989, 247 quotes Wallis articulating that '*the experience of the new birth is more fundamental, more radical than that of receiving the Spirit*.' He also notes that although there 'was *'some shift away from concepts like 'sin' and 'salvation' to less abstract terms like 'healing' and 'life'*' Hopkinson's analysis has shown there was continuity in essentials between evangelical and charismatic vocabulary in the 1970s. However even then Harper was warning of a 'downgrading of the Word of God' among charismatics seeking experiences and 'the removal of the death of Christ from its central position'. Yet Bebbington concludes that by the 1980s Evangelicalism was altered, not superseded by the Charismatic movement, 248.

²³ see discussion of conversion as core Evangelical spirituality in Gordon, 1991, 314-316.. King, 1969, 35.

²⁴ Percy 1998, 16 describes Alpha as selling a 'bargain bucket weekend for two in eternity'.

Hunt notes 'a dismal lack of doctrine' in Alpha itself, and Hand takes the critique to the extreme arguing that '*The God of Alpha is not the God of the Bible, the plight of man in Alpha is not as serious as in the Bible, and the Jesus Christ of Alpha is not the Jesus Christ of the Bible.*'²⁵ Given the 'Bash camp rationalistic conservatism' still reflected in the course,²⁶ this is an extraordinary, even vituperative charge. That it can be made, (even if unfairly), Warner puts down to the 'paradoxical hybrid' of combining conservative roots with 'Wimberist charismatic expressivism' operating 'within the milieu of late twentieth-century marketing'.

Whitefield and Wesley of course had their critics too. Adam Gib even argued that "George Whitefield is no minister of Jesus Christ...his whole doctrine is, and his success must be, diabolical; so that people ought to avoid him, from duty to God..."²⁷, so criticism needs evaluating with care. Yet there is a case that merits investigation. To what extent (if any) have marketing savvy²⁸ and an 'individualistic', 'therapeutic' Wimberian/Toronto Blessing understanding of the Spirit²⁹ left HTB/Alpha bereft of the impetus of conversionism and, if that can be shown, what are the consequences for its teleological trajectory?³⁰

Having sought to examine this hypothesis through ethnographic and literature based research we then have to face the 'so what' question. The context HTB/Alpha operates in is markedly different to the eighteenth-century. If a theological/teleological gap can be established between the two eras developmental studies could simply attribute that to a more nuanced or

²⁵ In Hunt, 2001 p.50

²⁶ Warner, 2007, 122; for an account of the Bash camps at Iwerne Minster see Ward, 2013, 37f. John Stott, David Watson, Michael Green and Dick Lucas were among many influential clergymen whose faith was cultivated under the ministry of 'the quiet, unassuming Revd EN Nash' (known as 'Bash').

²⁷ cited in Noll, 2004, 103-04

²⁸ see Guest 2004, 72 for how conflict avoidance and marketing can change the message.

²⁹ Percy on Wimber, 1996; contra this Millar [pers comm] who sees Wimber as thoroughly biblical. Poloma 1999 raises interesting questions about the impact of the Toronto Blessing.

³⁰ Barton 2003, xvi argues that, 'the language and practice of holiness have atrophied under the impact of modernity and secularisation' but see Ponsonby, 2010 for a Wimberite Anglican insider's rally call for churches to (begin to) pursue holiness.

developed view of anthropology and eschatology. Missiologically it could be argued that HTB/Alpha is more adequately ‘proclaiming afresh the Gospel in every generation.’ Pragmatically a movement bucking the church decline trend is likely to have significant kudos with church hierarchies. It could be argued that the (possibly evolving) HTB/Alpha worldview is a ‘successful’ response to changing twenty-first century cultural needs. To what extent is a comparison reasonable between how Wesley/Whitefield spoke to people who (in Kent’s term) had a ‘primitive religion’³¹ with those trying to reach the ‘wine-bibbers and latte aficionados’ from today’s ‘educated and mobile middle classes...’³²

A model used by Jim McNeish in training leaders both at HTB³³ and at a national level in the Church of England³⁴ makes this development point strongly. In this tertiary field of psychological, personal and organisational development his framework is a revised version of his former mentor psychologist Clare Graves’ ‘*Emergent Cyclical Levels of Existence*’ known as the *Spiral Dynamics integral [SDi]*.³⁵ This suggests that as society develops in a Hegelian fashion to successive new prevailing ways of seeing the world (known as ‘vMemes’ or ‘level of consciousness’) its leaders then need to likewise develop to speak the language of those they are communicating with. Arguably the model provides a lens for seeing each movement against the dominant cultural norms of their time and explaining their varying appeal to different sections of society. It gives a framework for evaluating what is gained and lost through theological and organisational developments, and in its

³¹ Kent 2002

³² Luhrmann 2012 (describing the Vineyard movement).

³³ McNeish has influenced many of the younger leaders at HTB. Archie Coates went on his Scottish retreat. Van der Haart, 2016, married to the HTB pastoral director references McNeish alongside HTB leadership director Pete Wynter in a Christianity article encouraging personality profiling. The HTB Worship Central website references him for making a ‘completely unique contribution to leaders’, claiming his work is ‘characterised by the space he creates for leaders to think differently.’ [\[www.worshipcentral.org/events/worship-central-training-day-edinburgh-uk accessed 3/12/16\]](http://www.worshipcentral.org/events/worship-central-training-day-edinburgh-uk).

³⁴ McNeish is used in senior leadership development at various levels ranging from the new Bishops / Deans induction programmes to the Strategic Leadership Development Partnership advocated in the Green report. It has proved popular: Pete Wilcox tweeted 1/12/15 about an ‘exhausting, stimulating’ Dean’s training day with McNeish.

³⁵ As popularized by Beck and Cowan, 1996

integral version offers a hypothesis to be tested as to how such a movement might now need to develop

Method

To evaluate the efficacy of Spiral Dynamics I intend to utilise what Osmer calls a transformational interdisciplinary approach.³⁶ SDi has the potential to be a useful tool within a pastoral cycle of reflection on the perceived gap between the teleologies of Wesley and Whitefield and the HTB/Alpha movement. To the degree that it is valid it enables me to ask pertinent questions in evaluating two movements separated by so many cultural shifts and presuppositions. However it, along with other development models, poses significant questions: Can the perceived developments can be categorised as Christian developments? Do they reflect a growth in holiness as well as 'consciousness'? Do the models have anything to say about sin? How can we evaluate whether integral consciousness is a spirituality the Church of England / HTB should foster in its leaders?

The Whitefield/Wesley research is relatively straightforward. It involves utilising primary and secondary source material and seeking to establish the hypothesis that they held a clear teleology without pushing that to breaking point given their varying theologies on many key issues. Considering them both together provides a helpful theological range on which an eighteenth-century teleological mirror for the current era can be placed. While they may disagree for example on the outworking of original sin, they clearly agree on sin as a primary theological/anthropological category to be incorporated in a gospel presentation. I consider Maddock's comparative work and test his conclusions against other authors and original sources. This offers opportunity to consider the veracity of revisionist interpretations of Wesley and Whitefield's motivations and seek to discover if there is a synthesis that adequately takes into account what Piper (2009) describes as the power and depth of the supernatural change which opened [their] mind[s] to a new

³⁶ Osmer, 2008 129

reality.

The published data on HTB/Alpha is sparser, and as a contemporary movement this paves the way for much needed ethnographic research. Those who have written about the movement have tended to either be critics (like Percy, possibly scarred by his youthful experiences at the Wimber influenced Christ Church Chorleywood)³⁷ or those concerned directly with the propagation of the movement (in publications like Alpha News). As can be seen in the literature review there is a wider body of literature that examines the contemporary charismatic scene, including John Wimber and The Toronto Blessing, which will be very important in correlating original findings. But substantial parts of the story that is HTB/Alpha have never been adequately scrutinised or written up, with almost nothing written, for example, about John Collins, the Vicar of HTB who paved the way for Sandy Millar's appointment and counted hugely influential leaders like David Watson, David McInnis, John Mumford and Millar himself among his curates.

So the method I am taking will combine literature based research with developing a 'thick description of HTB/Alpha through participant observation in the HTB network and semi-structured interviews with key practitioners. I have already conducted seven of these with Sandy Millar and six key church planters from the 1980s to current era, and held informal conversations with Nicky Gumbel, Mark Elsdon Dew and John Collins. These all merit a repeat conversation now the teleological focus to my study has been clarified. I propose to conduct a further ten semi-structured interviews spread among those who might be considered to be 'traditional', 'progressive' and 'younger' evangelicals within the movement to build up this thick description adequately.

Outline of study

³⁷ Percy's PhD provocatively equated Wimber with fundamentalism (which Anderson 2004, 258-59 notes requires a 'very wide definition' of fundamentalism).

Although only provisional at this time, a broad outline of how I envision the study coming together would look like this:

Introduction

Setting the context for the research

- Introducing the teleological question.
- Setting up the tension between Whitefield/Wesley and HTB Alpha.
- Establishing how a tertiary field (Spiral Dynamics) expands the comparison within a practical theology framework.

Methodology

An outline of the methodology underlying the research, and the chosen methods for carrying out the research

- Explanation of and justification for the primary and secondary sources utilised in the historical analysis relating to; John Wesley, George Whitefield and HTB/Alpha, but also in tracing influences on recent Evangelical development including latterly the Vineyard Movement and The Toronto Blessing.
- Explanation of and justification for the social scientific methods employed in collecting the necessary data relating to HTB/Alpha.

Wesley and Whitefield's Teleology

A survey of the literature relating to teleology exploring the impact on this of core constituent beliefs:

- Anthropology
- Conversion
- Eschatology/Judgment
- Holiness

Recent Developments in Evangelicalism

A contextual chapter positioning HTB/Alpha within 'a flexible and adaptable movement'.

Particular emphasis given to:

- Webber's traditional/pragmatic/younger framework
- John Wimber
- The Toronto Blessing

Ethnography

An account of the fieldwork and participant observation carried out, including the semi-structured interviews

- Initial interviews considering doctrinal practices and teaching of participants
- Correlating interviews with evidence drawn from sermons (substantial online data available).
- Follow-up interviews

Findings and analysis

Extensive analysis of the data collected throughout the study

- In particular, considering whether the teleological hypothesis is backed up / challenged by the data.

Spiral Dynamics as an explanatory aid

Considers whether Spiral Dynamics helps justify any teleological changes apparent between the movements and how these may be being implicitly/explicitly used by the contemporary charismatic church. To the degree that it does this chapter then explores whether such

developmental models themselves need critiquing in the light of Christian tradition, as well as for other reasons (such as any empirical failings).

Conclusion

Drawing together findings. Suggestions for renewed praxis.

Potential ethical issues

All ethnographic research projects need ethical attention. This is especially the case in the light of my role as a participant observer and involvement in the HTB/Alpha, which I anticipate and hope will postdate my research. I will comply with the ethical regulations set down by Durham University's ethics committee, adhering to the Data Protection Act, and ensuring the confidentiality of all participants where necessary and appropriate. I will seek and gain approval for this aspect of my research.

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