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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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## A REVIEW ARTICLE

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*John H. Armstrong*

**GUARDING THE HOLY FIRE: THE EVANGELICALISM OF  
JOHN R. W. STOTT, J. I. PACKER, AND ALISTER  
MCGRATH**

Roger Steer

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker (1999).

368 pages, paper, \$25.99.

**R**oger Steer, a non-Anglican and the acclaimed biographer of both J. Hudson Taylor and George Müller, now provides the wider evangelical cause with a most important look at the impact of evangelical faith and practice upon the Anglican communion. In his Introduction Steer offers a clear sense of the direction his work will take when he writes:

This is the story of a brand of Christianity which, at its best, has burned with the fire both of holiness and evangelicalism. I chose the title because I think it captures the zeal, commitment and burning spirituality which have characterized the best manifestations of Anglican Evangelicalism from the days of Wycliffe and the Lollards to the era when the present Archbishop of Canterbury found Christ in an Evangelical parish church (9).

To my mind Steer accomplishes his purpose quite well. He never passes over the ambiguities of Anglicanism with-

out criticism. He doesn't miss the subtleties of the story either. He plainly demonstrates that Anglicanism has always produced a mixture of seeming opposites.

Born as a communion of English churches which formally broke away from Rome because of the dissolution of Henry VIII's marriage, Anglicanism from its beginning had the influence of both Catholic and evangelical streams. Consider for a moment the historic roots of reform in England. John Wycliffe (1330-84), whose ideas and life anticipated the Reformation to no small degree, left an indelible mark on the English churches. Long before the break with Rome, over two centuries later, English Christianity plainly had a distinctly "evangelical" flavor. This flavor has continued for over six hundred years. Wycliffe's parish church (St. Mary's of Lutterworth) stands in the present time. On the south side of the church is what had been called for centuries "Wycliffe's door." This door is so called because the great preacher was actually carried through this entrance to his death after he had suffered a stroke while leading worship on December 31, 1384. But it was John Huss (c. 1372-1415), the Bohemian reformer and Wycliffe's most famous disciple, who spread his evangelical ideas even more widely, leading to the people called Lollards (a Dutch word meaning "mumblers"). These Lollards focused upon simple preaching and tracts which stressed the need for "personal faith in and obedience to Christ and the Bible" (19). The Lollards laid great emphasis upon the written Scriptures. They eventually found their greatest champion in the great English Bible translator and martyr, William Tyndale (c.1494-1536).

But it was the martyr Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) who eventually gave Anglicanism its most obvious evangelical direction. Cranmer's life is now much better understood because of the major biography of Diarmaid MacCulloch (1996). In fact, as Steer notes, "Of interest to the

historians of Anglican Evangelicalism is the fact that MacCulloch uses the word 'Evangelical' to describe the religious Reformation which developed in England during the 1520s and 1530s" (23). As Steer observes:

For MacCulloch "Evangelicalism" is the religious outlook which makes the primary point of Christian reference the good news of the *euangelion*, or the text of Scripture generally. He regards it as a convenient word which can be applied across the board, except to a small number of English reformers who went in a more radical direction. In the eighteenth century, the word began to be used in the English-speaking world to describe a party within Protestantism and within the Church of England but MacCulloch has argued that the word "Evangelical" can do a useful job in describing the religious history of Tudor England (23-24).

There can be no serious doubt that historic Anglicanism has had significant evangelical influence upon it and within it, whether that influence has sometimes impacted the whole body of the Anglican communion, or more often, only an important minority within the larger church body. This reality has always produced tensions for confessing evangelicals, both within and without Anglicanism. This is no less true for the modern heirs of Wycliffe, Tyndale and Cranmer (i.e., Stott, Packer and McGrath) than it was for Wesley and Whitefield in the eighteenth century, or the Church Missionary Society and J. C. Ryle in the nineteenth. And the resurgence of evangelicalism in twentieth-century Anglicanism is a much more important and decidedly encouraging story than large numbers of non-Anglicans generally realize. Steer's account will rectify this shortsightedness for many readers, especially in North America.

This extremely readable account flows with ease. It

includes eight parts, covering the pre-Reformation and Reformation eras right down to the Church of England and the Episcopal Church (ECUSA) in the late twentieth century. Interesting stories include accounts of the recent Lambeth Conference (1998). This worldwide Anglican gathering of nearly one thousand bishops overwhelmingly passed a resolution against homosexual practice and marriage. (This has been a major divisive "hot button" in the contemporary Anglican scene.) Bishops from Africa, Latin America and Asia stood strongly against their more liberal peers from England and America, demonstrating to many that the future of biblical evangelicalism, within the larger Anglican community, might well come from the leadership of so-called "third world" Christians.

Steer devotes a large section to highlighting the virtual resurrection of the evangelical voice within the American Episcopal Church. These pages make for a thrilling story; e.g., the faithfulness of evangelical scholars and churchmen in the face of overwhelming odds. (These kinds of accounts always encourage faithful reformers to stay their course!) Consider the story, for example, of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania (270-81). Trinity is a little school that has had a very significant impact upon the larger Episcopal scene, an impact far beyond its numbers.

Steer observes that in 1900 evangelical Episcopalianism in the United States had "virtually died out" (269). The American Church, he writes, "went Liberal in two directions: Liberal Catholic and Liberal Evangelical" (269). Thus, "No classical Evangelical party existed from 1900 until the 1960s" (269). This trend has plainly been altered. But how?

In the 1960s and 70s a new evangelicalism entered back into the mainstream of Episcopal life in the United States. Both the charismatic renewal and the resurgence of an older evangelicalism had wonderful effects upon the

Episcopal Church. Steer states that renewal organizations and "renewed" parishes "multiplied" (269). Most of the classical Anglican evangelicalism came via Britain, where the labors of people like Stott and Packer had begun to produce fruit the world over. British evangelicals such as Peter Moore, the current dean at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, the late Philip E. Hughes, and the warm and engaging pastor/evangelist John Guest all brought important leadership to the American scene. One of the rare exceptions to this British influence can actually be seen in the story of Trinity. The labors of John Rodgers, who served as dean at Trinity for some years, is an American exception. Rodgers came to his evangelical position through the writings of neo-orthodoxy, especially the work of Swiss theologian Karl Barth. (This does not surprise me, since Barth was so decidedly Christocentric in his major thrust!)

When Trinity opened its doors formally in 1976, Peter Moore, now the dean, was then chairman of the board of trustees. In his opening address one gets the distinct flavor of what makes for a virile, healthy, truly evangelical Anglicanism. Moore noted that:

As Episcopalians we need the vitality and vision of evangelism. When Anglicans have that they are often at their very best. Worship comes alive; churches grow; people give; the Bible becomes a living book with great personal authority for the believer; people begin to love each other in the Spirit and long to share their faith with others . . . . As Evangelicals we need the Episcopal Church. Without it we feel rootless, cut off from the centuries of devotion, theology and practical wisdom. We need the Church's corporate concern for the needy and downtrodden. We need the Church's seriousness over liturgical worship, the Church's witness to the sacraments as a means of grace, the Episcopate as a God-given blessing for the guidance and oversight of his Church.

When evangelicals have embodied these qualities they have often been at their best—saved from a narrow parochialism, sectarianism and a myopic concern for their own special emphasis to the neglect of the broader and deeper dimensions of Christian experience (273).

For the non-Anglican this perspective is helpful in terms of understanding why evangelicals in the Anglican community do not feel as compelled to “separate” from their church bodies over theological differences that generally seem to constrain non-Anglicans to leave their denominations and form new churches. The stance generally taken by the evangelical Anglicans is one of “opposition” without “separation.”

Peter Moore represents the very best fruit of this renewal effort in the American church. A graduate of Yale, Moore grew up in New York City. He holds an M.A. from Oxford and degrees from Episcopal Theological School and Fuller Theological Seminary. He states that he came to Trinity “to be part of an Episcopal community dedicated to ‘live orthodoxy’. I mean by that, one that adores God with minds as well as hearts, and hearts as well as minds” (277).

Jim Packer, whose shadow falls powerfully over so much of what is genuinely good about twentieth-century evangelical resurgence in the Anglican Church, has spoken as plainly as any evangelical to the issue of separation and transformation. He has also suffered considerable misunderstanding because his views have not been understood or appreciated for what they actually say about the nature of the church. For those who contemplate leaving Anglicanism altogether Packer writes:

In a divided Christendom we are always free to move from one denomination to another. We oughtn't to think that guilt attaches to such a move. But I do want to say “Weigh the loss before you go.” You think only of the gain of not

having to live with these particular troubles . . . that would be at least ease—if ease is a gain, although I think the New Testament is ambiguous on that. But see what you'd lose. You would lose a heritage and I think the loss would far outweigh the gain (293).

Packer, observes Roger Steer, has preferred the option of what the Norwegian Lutheran Church calls the inner mission. According to this view, which Packer clearly practices with consistency, evangelicals get together within the church, establish their own links of fellowship and cooperation, and then work for renewal in the larger church body.

Steer cites Thomas à Kempis as an example of the same approach. A Catholic long before the Reformation of the sixteenth century, à Kempis was a member of what was known as the Congregation of the Common Life. This group sought reform from within the church. It was also à Kempis who asked,

Of what use is it to discourse learnedly on the Trinity if you lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity? Lofty words do not make a man just or holy; but a good life makes him dear to God. I would far rather feel contrition than be able to define it. If you knew the whole Bible by heart, and all the teachings of the philosophers, how would this help you without the grace and love of God? (293).

Thomas à Kempis was clearly alert to the corruptions of the church in his time; however, he did not feel it his responsibility to make it a primary duty to strive for institutional church changes so much as to strive for inner transformation in the lives of believers. It is this same approach that has been long advocated by nonseparatists such as Jim Packer and John Stott.

Many readers of this publication are keenly interested

in the work of such evangelicals as Jim Packer, John Stott and Alister McGrath. Their books are highly esteemed by many. Their influence has been huge. But many are also confused by the positions sometimes advocated by evangelical Anglicans such as these three men. Roger Steer's volume goes a long way toward alleviating the fears of such readers, even if they are finally unconvinced of their arguments. Steer dodges no issues or concerns. He takes up Packer's controversial approach to the charismatic movement, which is filled with so much good sense, as well as Stott's famous controversy regarding hell and annihilationism (cf. 220-21; observe that Stott has been seriously misrepresented by many on this doctrinal controversy).

This is, simply put, a well-written account that I heartily recommend to evangelical pastors and layfolk alike. You will better understand current controversies in the wider evangelical arena by reading Steer's account of historic evangelicalism within the worldwide Anglican community. You will also better understand why no single church communion is ever without the continual need of reformation and revival.

I believe it is fair to let Jim Packer, given his massive positive contribution to evangelical theology and practice, have the final word in this review. In 1979, shortly after he had left England for Canada, Packer was speaking at a Wheaton College (Illinois) conference titled "The Bible in America." He spoke of the need for evangelicals to "sharpen their wits, even as they guarded their hearts" (217). He warned that evangelicals wear "blinkers" that cause them to miss the respective strengths and weaknesses of various movements within the historic Christian church. He suggested we can and do become the "victims of (our) reactions." He elaborated by adding:

Reactions I mean against the sacramentalism of Rome, which

has made us distrust the sacraments; against the liturgical formalism of Rome, which has made us so distrust all set prayers; against the beauty and dignity of worship which is characteristic of Rome and on which our traditions have tended to turn their back. We are victims of reaction against the heavy theology of earlier generations, which has made us an untheological lot opposing head knowledge to heart knowledge and treating head knowledge as if it did not matter.

We are victims of reaction against the love of the past. History, we say in our hearts, is bunk . . . The Psalmist prays, "Give me understanding that I may keep thy law." One of the things that is needed for understanding is that we should find the way to freedom from cultural prejudice (217-18).

Packer, in the same address, stressed the need to interact with great writers in the historical tradition of the church if his listeners would better understand Scripture. He urged the audience to read Luther, Calvin, Augustine, Jonathan Edwards and the Puritans. But he did not forget to also urge them to read "John of the Cross and folk like that." He concluded that evangelicals needed to be liberated from

. . . the tyranny of being tied to our thoughts . . . from the tyranny of being tied to our own time . . . from the tyranny of being tied to our own heritage . . . The Christian ought to practise fellowship across those traditions. The Holy Spirit has been with all God's people in all traditions in all centuries. You can expect to find wisdom and truth and vitamins in those traditions as well as finding mistakes (218).

Well said, Dr. Packer. Your counsel has, and still does, serve this non-Anglican evangelical very well. And may the seeds sown by this generation of evangelical Anglicans produce a harvest in Anglican and non-Anglican churches the world over.

EDITOR