



A Rising Tide: Evangelical Christianity in New Zealand 1930–65 (Otago University Press)

Rev. Dr. Stuart Lange

An interview by Malcolm Falloon with (Rev Dr) Stuart Lange about his recent book on evangelical Christianity in New Zealand.

Stuart, the title of your book is A Rising Tide and it covers the history of the evangelical movement in New Zealand over the years 1930 to 1965. Is it a rising tide?

Absolutely. With regard to evangelicalism in New Zealand, before 1930 its identity had become quite clouded, but with the arrival of the university Evangelical Unions – as part of the whole British Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF) movement – that identity came into much sharper focus. Evangelical Anglicans and Presbyterians were very much caught up in that. For Anglicans, this was also through the ministry of William Orange and his protégés, often referred to as the ‘Orange Pips’. Orange and the EU/IVF movement worked closely together. So, whereas before 1930 evangelical Anglicans were scattered and isolated, from the 1930s onwards and into the post-war era there emerges a clear and confident evangelical movement. So, that’s a rising tide.

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Apart from your roles as a senior lecturer in Church History at Laidlaw College and co-chair of Presbyterian Affirm, do you have a personal connection with this story?

The period of this book was largely before my time, but I did know (or know about) some of the people who feature in the book. My knowledge and interest in the Anglican side of this story (which is a very major part of this book) was sparked by my predecessor at Laidlaw, Bob Glen, who was himself an ‘Orange Pip’ and had sometimes talked about some the figures I write about. In choosing a focus for my earlier PhD work, I was aware that much had been written on the post-war evangelical resurgence in Britain, centred on leaders such

as Martin Lloyd Jones, John Stott, and James Packer – and vast amounts on the neo-evangelical movement in the United States, with leaders such as Carl Henry, Harold Ockenga and Billy Graham. Historian Stuart Piggin has written on Australian evangelicalism, and Rawlyk and others on Canada. But, there has been comparatively little written in regard to New Zealand evangelicalism. So it seemed important to me to explore the evangelical story in New Zealand. I wanted to study how the evangelical movement here grew and took shape, especially among university students and in the two largest denominations in New Zealand, the Anglicans and Presbyterians.

You conducted a number of oral history interviews. What was your experience of conducting those interviews?

Oral history gives information that very usefully complements written sources, and enabled me to get inside what people really believed and felt. I conducted over fifty interviews, usually of an hour or two but some much longer. One interview was conducted over a period of nearly three days. Many interviewees have now passed on. I found many of those I interviewed very insightful. Their stories were often fascinating, and their commitment inspiring. Some were highly quotable. Some had become a bit vague about details of place and time, but remained clear about evangelical essentials. Everybody’s experience was unique to them, but as I analysed the interviews it became clear that there were some common evangelical patterns.

So there was a Rising Tide – how do you see the present situation? An ebbing flow – or is that being too negative?

Actually, I briefly pick this issue up in the Epilogue. The main body of the book ends at 1965, yet after that date a number of things happen. There was a growing secularisation of society, and a proliferation of religious and spiritual options. The liberal and ecumenical streams within the

mainline churches have gradually become smaller relative to that of the evangelical streams. The evangelical movement was in part overlaid with the charismatic movement. There was a huge growth of Pentecostal and independent churches. There was a fragmentation of evangelical Christianity in New Zealand. It's fair to say that the cohesion and clear identity that was a feature of evangelicalism in the 1950s and 60s is now long gone. But has the evangelical tide gone out? Well, taken as a broader movement, and relative to the other streams within the church, I think you can argue that tide is still in. It may possibly even be still rising! There's no doubt that Christianity as a whole is ebbing within New Zealand, but within the Christian community, in all its diversity, the tendency towards a more biblical and evangelical expression of the faith is still strong.

As evangelicals, we can be pre-occupied with understanding the Bible properly and getting our theology right – but how important is it for us to understand our history?

I think that history shows us how the faith works out in practice. You can't understand the present, let alone even guess at the future, without having some understanding of what has happened in the past. It becomes extremely valuable to know what has been – it's a dimension of life that I think we are foolish to neglect. Church history is really about how the faith has been lived, understood and applied in a whole lot of contexts, and also renewed, modified and adapted through time. It picks up from where the book of Acts leaves off. Church history gains its validity from the historical character of the Bible itself.

Without trying to guess at the future, what are some of the challenges that face the contemporary evangelical movement?

Reflecting broader trends within western thought generally, there is a fuzziness about questions

of truth, scripture, and salvation that seems to have made significant inroads into contemporary evangelical culture. Some of the things which I think were commendable about the evangelicals featured in this book were their concerns to be biblically literate and intelligently faithful, their insistence on holding and understanding certain doctrinal essentials, their consecrated lives, and their deep commitment to evangelising and discipling youth. In our very different context, those principles are still worth pursuing, but they have sometimes been too easily eroded.

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For people with a passion for evangelical history and looking to further study through Laidlaw College, or elsewhere, what are the parts of the story still to be told?

There is so much about the story of evangelical Christianity in New Zealand that is yet to be researched thoroughly – both before the period in this book and subsequent to it. There are lots of things I'm eager to look into – but there's room for many others to be in the field.

Stuart, thank you very much for all the work that has gone into writing and publishing this book. I'm sure it's a book that Latimer members will be keen to read. And thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

It's been a pleasure.