

## *Miall on Assent*

Miall claimed that Victorian evangelicals, in their preaching, did little or nothing to provoke their hearers to think. Rather, they aimed to present facts or propositions which the congregation were required to accept, and meekly accept at that. Miall thought this very wrong. For his part, he desperately wanted preachers (using the term in the widest biblical sense)<sup>1</sup> to stimulate – provoke – thought. This, of course, was only the tip of the iceberg. Miall was approaching the widespread curse of incipient (if not explicit) Sandemanianism.<sup>2</sup>

Let me explain. A Sandemanian thinks saving faith is nothing more than mental assent. If a sinner accepts the facts of the gospel, he is saved. To talk about the heart, or feelings, is to introduce works, and ruin the grace of God in salvation. Sandemanianism was developed by the Scotsmen, John Glas (1695-1773) and his son-in-law, Robert Sandeman (1718-1771), more especially the latter. It is not a mere historical aberration. Rather, it is, forgiving the oxymoron, very much alive today, and wreaking massive damage.

While Miall did not get so far as to deal with Sandemanianism, his work is helpful in that it highlights the inadequacy of mere assent to facts.

Miall laid out his stall:

I venture to suggest that the special and distinctive method of Christianity in placing divine truth before the human mind is not generally apprehended, or is almost entirely overlooked, and that, whereas God's plan is expressly adapted to stimulate a process of enquiry, that most resorted to by us attaches importance, almost exclusively, to its results.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Pastor*.

<sup>2</sup> See my *Secret*.

<sup>3</sup> Miall p169.

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Let me unpack this. God, in his word, has shown us that the way in which he reaches the heart, the soul, the life of a man is through his mind:

Thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed (Rom. 6:17).

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me (2 Tim. 1:13).

Now this does not mean that God requires men to be taught facts, facts which they learn by rote, simply accept and regurgitate. No! God wants men to be given the facts. After all, what we preach is squarely founded on historical facts (Acts 2:22-32; 4:20; 10:37-41; 2 Pet. 1:16-18; 1 John 1:1-5). And what we preach must be factual. But those facts are to be presented to men in order to make them think, to think through, to comprehend, the gospel. This is the way the truth penetrates the heart, governs the will and leads to obedience in experience. It must be understood that none of this is possible without the Spirit of God; only he can accomplish this essential work (John 3:3-8; 1 Cor. 2:12-14).

William Gadsby saw the necessity of the Spirit to enable believers to sing, with profit, spiritual songs:

To be employed with solemn pleasure in singing the praises of God with the spirit, and with the understanding also, is a blessing peculiar to God's elect; nor can even they be thus engaged, [but] only as the blessed Spirit influences the mind, and favours them with the unction of his grace. It is one thing to have the ear charmed, and another to have the heart engaged in this most delightful part of God's worship in his church below. 'Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound'.<sup>4</sup>

How right Gadsby was! Who does not have to confess to being emotionally moved by the music, the poetry of the words, the affecting power of congregational singing? I am not in the least denigrating emotion, but spirituality is

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<sup>4</sup> Preface to his hymn book.

something else. And true spirituality is only possible by the Spirit of God. The Devil can produce mass hysteria, and frequently does. Men can produce it or excite it. It can be spontaneous. Witness the Nuremberg rallies under Hitler, the blind emotion at pop concerts, and the outpouring of inordinate public grief in response to Princess Diana's death following a car crash.

Facts! Rote learning! Learning 'tables' by rote at school, which the child can then instinctively or automatically repeat without thought, is one thing – and there is a place for it. But the same does not apply to the gospel. Men are not to be treated as parrots who can be made to repeat phrases without having a clue as to what they mean. I am not saying a word against a child being catechised; there is a place for it. Take for example teaching a child to stop immediately on parental command, without thinking, at the parent's say-so; just stop when told. This could save the child's life if the parent sees the child stepping off the pavement (sidewalk) into traffic. But this is not how men are blessed under the gospel. Men are not robots, nor must they be treated as such. It is not merely the form of words, the facts, but the principles which must grasp the mind. And it is this that leads to feeling, the governing and moving of the will, the heart, the life and the experience.

This is what Miall was driving at. And how necessary a word it is today. Too many preachers deal in facts, devising clever alliterations, concentrating on presentation techniques, PowerPoint presentations, handing out written notes complete with smart outlines. Learn the facts, it all seems to be saying; repeat the facts. Those who hold classes for unbelievers are specially prone to this risk. Pagans can be schooled or coached – as parrots – to learn a text and repeat it word perfect. Harry S. Stout spoke of it in 17th-century New England. He called this system 'the methodical gospel preaching' whereby:

New England congregations... learned to label every stage of their spiritual experience from humiliation, to saving faith, to true obedience. Such labelling gave them a vocabulary for self-examination and a basis for personal hope in the

knowledge that guilt and anxiety were necessary prerequisites to the healing work of the Holy Spirit. In addition, the language of stages provided an objective standard by which ministers and congregations could judge the claims of aspiring members... Before appearing for their public testimonies... prospective members understood the mysterious order of salvation as it had been instilled over many years of Bible study, introspection and gospel preaching.<sup>5</sup>

Yes, indeed, it is only too true – sadly – that sinners can be schooled, trained, into giving the right answers, and it is highly dangerous. Such practice will produce many an Ishmael but never an Isaac (Gal. 4:21-31).

Miall continued with his criticism of what he saw staring him the face:

We [that is, the preachers and churches he was criticising] lay the weightiest stress upon logical propositions, [whereas] the structure of revelation appears to me to take more account of the principles of mental and moral investigation by which we arrive at them. The *letter* of faith is of paramount moment in our view, [whereas it is,] in the view of God, the *spirit* of faith.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that Miall wanted real thought in the hearers, not mere acceptance of facts handed down across the pulpit desk. He wanted discussion, reasoned dialogue, the asking of questions, and the like. He wanted preachers – churches, indeed – to provoke this. He was, I am afraid, wishing for the moon! Try asking a question or two! If you do, take immediate cover!

Miall explained, driving right to the root of the problem:

May there not be learned orthodoxy, or an accurate view of the logical forms of revelation, without even a glimpse of their divine significance, or a single pulsation of heart in

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<sup>5</sup> See my ‘Preparationism in New England’. While I dissent from some of the construction Stout placed on this, he has given us a serious warning which we neglect at our cost.

<sup>6</sup> Miall had ‘the Supreme’. Miall pp169-170. To give Miall’s voice more power, I have altered the order of the last sentence.

unison with what God meant to convey to the soul through their instrumentality?<sup>7</sup>

Let me stress this. We may teach a parrot to repeat a confession of faith – the Westminster or the 1689 Particular Baptist, for instance – but the parrot will never be made a spiritual creature by possessing that ability. Similarly, sinners can repeat the doctrine of justification by faith alone on the basis of grace, but that does not mean that they themselves are actually justified. The mind may be programmed, but the heart left untouched. Only God, by his Spirit, can regenerate the sinner and give a new heart. But nothing short of regeneration leading to saving faith and repentance will do. This must never be forgotten.

Was Miall against propositional teaching, the teaching of clear scriptural principles? By no means! Miall:

Unquestionably... sound, consistent and scriptural theological views will be [an inestimable advantage] to the man who finds delight in the manifested God.<sup>8</sup>

But note the order. If a man's the heart is renewed so that he delights in God, then, of course, that man gains tremendous benefit from having the soundest and clearest of views of scriptural truth. Indeed, such is essential. But until the heart is renewed – that is, until the sinner is regenerated – truth floating in the mind is woefully inadequate. Nobody is pleading for ignorance. It is the order of things that is vital. More, great care needs to be exercised in presenting the truth. Yes, the truth must enter the mind, but the preacher should always be looking to persuade and move the heart. I say again, only the Spirit can effect this, but such is the promise of the new covenant (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-27). And in doing this mighty work of regeneration, the Spirit generally uses the word of God, the gospel, preached (once again, in the fullest new-covenant sense of the word) (Rom. 1:16-17; 1 Cor. 1:17-18,24; 2:4; Eph. 1:13; Jas. 1:21). Yes, the mind must be

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<sup>7</sup> Miall p171.

<sup>8</sup> Miall pp171-172.

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renewed (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23), but so must the heart (Tit. 3:5).

Joseph Hart hit the nail squarely on the head:

*A form of words, though e'er so sound,  
Can never save a soul;  
The Holy Ghost must give the wound,  
And make the wounded whole.*

*Election is a precious truth,  
But, Lord, I wish to be,  
Assured by thy own Spirit's mouth,  
That thou hast chosen me.*

*Sinners, I read, are justified,  
By faith in Jesus' blood;  
But when to me that blood's applied,  
'Tis then it does me good.*

*Imputed righteousness I own  
A doctrine most divine;  
For Jesus to my heart makes known  
That all his merit's mine.*

*To perseverance I agree;  
No truth can be more clear,  
Because the Lord has promised me  
That I shall persevere.*

*That Christ is God I can avouch,  
And for his people cares,  
Since I have prayed to him as such,  
And he has heard my prayers.*

*Thus, Christians glorify the Lord,  
His Spirit joins with ours  
In bearing witness to his word,  
With all its saving powers.*

Miall had more to say:

But, I gather from God's method of revealing himself, both in his works and in his word, that an eye for the divine in them is of greater value than an accurate perception of their form or letter, and that to exercise and nourish the faculty of

spiritual insight is a better thing than to gain assent to the fairer side of the controverted dogma.<sup>9</sup>

Miall knew that the mind has to be informed by the truth. No question of it. But, while the mind has to be informed, unless the heart is moved by the truth, no lasting good will be done. To rest content with objective truth – agreement with facts – and to fall short of the subjective – heart-felt experience of the truth – is a disaster of the first magnitude.

Miall:

Now it appears to me that the British churches invert this order. The objective in Christianity has been too exclusively regarded – the subjective overlooked, and even discouraged. As in some schools, a great deal of propositional knowledge is imparted when the powers of the mind are neither elicited, exercised nor trained, so in the churches just thoughts are more eagerly insisted upon than just habits of thinking – and orthodox conclusions have engrossed the zeal, no small part of which ought to have been devoted to the culture of the faculties by which they are to be apprehended and assimilated.<sup>10</sup>

Miall was deploring what he saw as excessive concentration on facts, and getting hearers to agree with the system being put forward. This, he saw, was to commit a great wrong:

Letter, which has its own sphere, and that a not unimportant one, has usurped the place of spirit – and overweening concern for what men shall believe has produced carelessness as to the cause and character of their faith.<sup>11</sup>

This incessant call for facts! Thomas Gradgrind put it as well as any. With apologies to Charles Dickens, let me accommodate (in square brackets) Gradgrind's words to the issue in hand. Under the heading 'The One Thing Needful', this is what the schoolmaster [that is, the preacher] spelling out his philosophy of education, had to say:

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<sup>9</sup> Miall p172.

<sup>10</sup> Miall p172.

<sup>11</sup> Miall p172.

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Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these [sinners] nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. You can only form the minds [convert sinners] upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them... Stick to Facts, sir!.. In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!<sup>12</sup>

Miall was right. But the idea that churches, elders, ministers, preachers should be stimulating serious thought, even allowing for disagreement – more, actually encouraging discussion and debate, the raising of questions – is so novel, so earth-shattering, words fail. Try it and see! But oh! that churches would use this approach to sinners! May God bless those who are engaged in such efforts! And may God challenge and disturb those of us who would rather stay safe and sound within our comfort zone, handing out facts which must never be questioned, but merely absorbed and regurgitated at the appropriate time!

And that leads to the next chapter – clericalism. Miall had some weighty, and pertinent, things to say about that!

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens: *Hard Times*.