



Interview: Don Carson

The new John Stott—that's how he'd been described to me—and as I sat listening to him speak to a group of young people about motivations for full-time ministry, I glanced down at the questions I'd prepared and felt a little nervous. What do you ask a man who's written more Christian books than you've read lately?

If you've heard Don Carson speak, you will know what an impressive individual he is. He stands at the lectern, back straight, eyes sweeping over his audience. His voice has the fluency and lilt of his French Canadian upbringing.

He continued speaking about the Great Commission and the importance ("Nay, necessity") of us making disciples. He questioned some of the usual motivations for evangelism (which focus on making us feel guilty if we don't do our part), and suggested that it should be more a case of "from the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks". His words were warm and challenging, and as his own commitment to Christ and his gospel became steadily more apparent, I began to think of him less as a Professor of New Testament and more as a brother.

With nerves subsiding, I met him after the talk and we wandered outside into the grounds of the University of NSW to chat. I thought I'd start with my best question.

"You probably have as much experience of the international Evangelical scene as anyone alive today. Where do you think Evangelical-

ism is at right now? And where's it heading?"

He paused for a second or two, and said, "Yes..." and almost sighed.

"Evangelicalism, internationally, is so diverse now that it is very hard to make generalising statements.

"Historically, Evangelicalism was self-consciously set against sacramentarianism. That is to say, salvation was perceived to be based on the objective, finished work of Christ's cross and was mediated through faith. Any sacerdotal or sacramentarian emphasis was therefore judged to be dangerous to the purity of the gospel and, in some ways, in danger of depreciating the significance of Christ or the atonement.

"Then, as the Enlightenment came along, with its influence and impact on Biblical studies and theological colleges and universities, another wing developed in the church which is now called Modernist or Liberal or whatever. And so Evangelicalism set itself against that kind of approach, because it depreciated the finality or significance of the Biblical revelation.

"So that, until about twenty or thirty years ago, Evangelicalism, in its various cycles of strength and weakness, was nevertheless characterised by a clear, strong insistence on the basic elements of Christianity that have always characterised the Christian church when it has been virulent. And there was the notion that, properly understood, Evangelicalism was not *one branch* of the church, but is the church re-

turning to basics; it is the church returning to the purest and simplest form of the gospel; it is the church at its straightforward best.

"But today, we find the borders of Evangelicalism changing. And so we can find people who designate themselves as 'Evangelical Catholics', which a bare generation ago would have been perceived as a contradiction in terms. What they mean by that is that they have some sort of warm, glowy experience, some kind of pietistic heritage or fervour, combined with Catholic aesthetics in worship and perhaps Catholic theology in sacraments. And you can find 'Liberal Evangelicals' in much the same vein.

"So at the very point when Evangelicalism has again grown quite considerably over the last forty years, it has in fact lost its heart. Now it is broken into a number of branches that are highly diverse: Charismatic emphases on the one hand, a kind of pietistic retreat in other centres, Reformed theology in Britain that is now fragmenting and fighting over the spoils... Or in parts of Africa, vast numbers of new people are coming into the church, with desperately ill-equipped pastors to train them, so that the whole thing could be washed over and dissipated in barely a generation.

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"And so we are, in many parts of the world it seems to me, at a turning point. Even the new emphases on collegiality, or on piety, or life in the spirit, as welcome as they are for many reasons, are principally dangerous because they have lost the heart—which is the reforming influence of the word of God on life and thought...

"What we need more than anything else is that older kind of piety that emphasises a spirituality of the word, and of prayer, and of discipleship, and works out *from there* to consider other things such as worship and social action and that sort of thing; but does not lose the centre.

"And that, in brief, is where Evangelicalism is going. It's going down a wrong path."

I was hoping that all his answers would be that brief when another thought struck him.

"No-one of lesser stature than Carl Henry has put it better than he. Talking to him recently, he said... oh incidentally some of your readers might not know Carl Henry..."

"No, they might not..." I said.

"Carl Henry is the doyen" (pronounced as a delightful French Canadian 'dwayahn') "of American Evangelicalism. He has published endless books, and has charted the movement, and defended it, and defined it in many respects. He now says that he is no longer certain how long the very category 'Evangelical' will mean anything."

"Because it has become so diverse?"

"Yes, so diverse, so all-embracing, and now is increasingly becoming a sociological term rather than a theological term. A person who says, 'I am an Evangelical' no longer means 'I believe certain truths'. Now he means, 'I belong to a certain party that manifests a certain kind of piety, a certain heritage of warmth'."

"Do you think we need a new term?"

"Oh, ideally we do. The trouble is that any term gets shanghaied after a while. In part it is a mark of the growing influence of Evangelicals in academic life, and in certain branches of the church, that has precipitated the problem. People have wanted to jump on the bandwagon, and this has brought about dilution and re-orientation. We no longer control our concepts and terminology by Scripture but by other sociological, ecclesiastical, psychological considerations. You can't simply impose a new term. One will eventually arise."

I got the impression that even though the international scene was bleak, Don was not particularly discouraged. His observations had no flavour of vitriol about them.

I posed the obvious question.

"Well, what we can do about it? If there are signs of decay, what are the crucial, strategic points of change?"

"There is a sense in which—and I will qualify this immediately—that even by phrasing it that way, we betray ourselves to be children of our culture, both in Australia and America. We immediately think: 'What can we do about it?'. It's a frontier, can-do mentality—'Just give this tough one to me, and I'll sort it out.' I guess at least it's better than hiding your head in the sand and bemoaning the fallen world, but it's not adequate.

"What we must do is acknowledge that unless God does something, we can't do much, even with our best effort. In other words, the starting point is to learn to pray, to seek God's face—like Daniel did at the end of the 70 years, confessing his sin and asking that God would fulfil his promise and bring about the restoration of Jerusalem. In other words, to pray the Lord of the Harvest that he would send labourers into his harvest.

"If we approach the thing exclusively from a 'can-do mentality' we are failing at the most fundamental level... If we think we can change things just by ourselves we will gradually, with various hiccups as we defend this bulwark or that, fade into spiritual anaemia.

"Having said all that, it seems to me that Christian leaders must focus on certain things. We have to raise up generations of preachers and teachers that not only know the word, but whose spirituality is shaped by the word, and whose desire is to proclaim the word with relevance, authority and contemporaneity. That is the heart of the issue—evangelism, preaching, ministry of the word, the shaping of church life, the whole thing."

With John Woodhouse's series of articles still in mind, I asked him about 'the Word'. It seemed to dominate his writings.

"I don't want to set word against spirit, because then it becomes simply an education matter—and you do not reform people by simple education. But if you appeal to 'spirit' without the control and constraint of the word, very quickly the church gets derailed. History has taught that again and again and again. The church becomes incapable of distinguishing true from untrue experience, valid from invalid. What is needed is a vision of the word as the locus of God's self-disclosing revelation—a proper ministry of the word is a spirit-anointed re-presenting of that word to other human beings..."

With Woodhouse under my belt, I ventured: "It's been one of the features of the Charismatic controversy that a wedge has been driven between word and spirit—that is certainly the case in Australia."

"Oh yes, and that's common enough worldwide. But it also must be said that sometimes in response, the so-called 'anti-Charismatics' flip over too far in the other direction.

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And then they become intellectual but not necessarily prayerful; they become teachers but not necessarily demonstrably anointed with the Spirit of God. Or they become so defensive that they become afraid to use certain Biblical categories: 'The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but love, joy and peace in the Holy Ghost'; 'Taste and see that the Lord is good'; 'Be filled with the Spirit'. It is important that in counteracting an error we don't flip so far to the other side that we actually feed the error."

"So by accepting their categories we end up selling ourselves short?"

"That's right. Richard Baxter said the whole thing rightly in his book *The Reformed Pastor*, writing at the end of the Puritan period. He says that when someone comes into your area preaching a false doctrine of, say, justification, your first action should not be to confute the person. Your first action should be to 'preach up' (that's his expression) the doctrine of justification 'better than they'. It will not do simply to

knock Charismatics and their emphasis on Spirit or experience—we must 'preach up' Biblical perspectives on the spirit and on experience 'better than they'. And then the truth begins to authenticate itself to the minds of thinking Christians who genuinely want to bow before the Lordship of Christ..."

"Is it hard being a Christian *and* a Professor of New Testament?"

"It's a lovely thing in some ways because you get to spend so much time in the Bible, and you're training bright young minds who want to go and serve somewhere. There are dangers to it. You can begin to worship academic life rather than the Lord. You can become so focused on the third Greek preposition from the left that you forget there's truth out there by which men are saved or lost. You can become so focused on work within Christian circles that you may not develop the contacts with non-Christians that keep your personal witness sharp. Yes, there are dangers."

Don's working life runs in three year cycles. He spends two years working at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois (as Professor of New Testament) and then a year writing at Tyndale House, an Evangelical research library in Cambridge. Interspersed are speaking trips (like this one) to many parts of the world.

"On the writing front, what are you working on at the moment?"

"I have tried to mix some things at the 'top end' (the academic level) with some things at the middle level (edifying pastors and the mythical well-read general reader) and a few things at the low end as well. Not everybody wants to have that mix, but I enjoy it, and view it in some ways as part of my responsibility—those whose delight and responsibility it is to spend much time in Scripture, owe it to pass on as much as they can to others.

"So I'm in the final year of finishing a syntactical concordance to the Greek New Testament, which is clearly at the top end—I've been working on it for about a decade, along with others. Also, by 1990 I have to finish a book on the Greek text of John's epistles. At the middle end I've just about finished a commentary on John, which is a kind of elongated Tyndale commentary. And I'm also doing an evangelistic book—one you can give away comfortably to your

friends, that presents Christ in a Biblical fashion. I've almost finished editing a book for the World Evangelical Fellowship on prayer.

"So I keep working across the sweep...and I'm grateful the Lord has given me the opportunity of working at both ends and in between."

"And when you're not writing or teaching or travelling the globe, what do you do in your spare time?"

"At the moment, with two young children in the home, when I'm home I reserve substantial blocks of time for the family. When I am at home, 5:30–8:00 each night is family time, not only for supper, but for games and Bible reading, playing with the kids, reading to them, whatever. And I try to reserve substantial parts of the weekend... I need to compensate for the time that I'm away. If at the end of my earthly pilgrimage I have written x number of books and preached in y number of countries, and have lost my children, I'm a pretty disastrous failure."

I wasn't really surprised at this response. Don Carson is a genuine man. He is one of the leading Evangelical thinkers and scholars of our time, but he would no doubt prefer the title 'Disciple of Jesus' to 'Professor of New Testament' after his name.

'A spirituality of the word, and of prayer, and of discipleship'—this is the kind of 'old' piety that he would like to see returning to its rightful place at the centre of Evangelicalism, and which, to all outward observation, seems fixed at the centre of his own life. □

Tony Payne

Note:

The Briefing is not issued in January.

Publication recommences on 1 February 1989.

Have a good Christmas.