

The Curious Case of the Kind Evangelicals

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Most Christians believe in kindness to animals, but few see it as an ethical priority. By contrast, evangelicals of the past showed a passionate kindness towards 'God's beasts', and were pioneers of animal welfare reform from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Today, Christians in general, and evangelical Christians in particular, are more likely to be seen as part of the problem than as pioneering solutions. This article discusses the theological differences behind this contrast, and the practical implications for evangelism in a world of growing animal advocacy.

Introduction

Most Christians believe in kindness to animals. Yet I have never heard an evangelical sermon on the subject, and few preachers consider animal cruelty to be an ethical priority. Indeed, in 2013 the present evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury, unlike his four immediate predecessors, distanced himself from the RSPCA by declining to be Vice-Patron for precisely this reason. Lambeth Palace emphasised that his decision arose from prioritising his commitments due to 'time constraints', and not from his having been pheasant shooting.¹ When I recently approached the Evangelical Alliance about animal welfare, I was told 'we do not work in this field at all'.

A survey of pastors in the USA suggests some theological reasons for this disinterest: animals do not have souls; humans have dominion; our focus is on souls; mercy does not apply to animals; I feel no mandate concerning animals.² Where pastors lead, their flocks follow. The *Collins Bible Companion*, endorsed by many evangelical leaders in the UK, says that God created animals 'to provide a source of food and companionship'.³ In fact, most UK evangelicals agree with the US pastors cited above: concern about animal cruelty is regarded with suspicion, and many are hostile even towards vegetarianism, let alone animal rights.⁴ In the USA, attitudes can be quite polarised. Even at the height of its brief fling with the green agenda from 2006, US evangelicalism never embraced animal ethics.⁵ Moreover, US evangelicals tend to be less coy in their hostility than their British counterparts. At the conservative end of the spectrum, Wayne Grudem contends that those with a vegan ideology are at the 'extremes of the modern "animals rights" movement which flows 'naturally from evolutionary thought', a destructive influence opposed to biblical truth.⁶ For other conservative commentators, those referred to by Paul as following the 'doctrines of devils', turn out to be vegetarians.⁷

Interestingly, secular opinion also believes this to be the Christian view, especially environmentalists who might otherwise know little theology. At best, 'dominion' gave animals into our hands; at worst, it justifies our cruelty.⁸ Either way, no-one expects Christians, let alone evangelicals, to be leaders in animal ethics. Indeed, 'dominion' is widely held to bear a 'huge burden of guilt' for environmental destruction and animal cruelty in the West.⁹ As RSPCA vice-president Bill Oddie remarked of Justin Welby's decision, it served only to reinforce his opinion that the church has a 'dreadful record' on animal welfare.¹⁰

In view of this theological consensus, it is perhaps unsurprising that few modern evangelicals write about animal ethics. Stephen Vantassel is an exception, and has been influential on both sides of the Atlantic among conservatives. His conclusion reinforces the consensus: animal suffering is not part of the problem of evil, and Christians may 'inflict and/or ignore a fair amount' of it without troubling their conscience.¹¹ This is, in practice, what most evangelicals I have met believe. They have, I am often told, better things to worry about. Our evangelical forebears disagreed, and they did so with a passion.

A reputation for kindness

It is now well established that the campaign against animal cruelty 'grew out of the (minority) Christian tradition that man should take care of God's creation', and that 'an essential role was played by Puritans, Dissenters, Quakers and Evangelicals....'¹² Three of these four groups held what we would now call a 'conservative' evangelical theology. From the piecemeal reforms by seventeenth century Puritans to the anti-vivisection Act of 1876, such evangelicals were pioneers.

The Puritans, says Christopher Hill, were known for their hatred of cruelty: Macaulay's jibe that they 'hated bear-baiting...because it gave pleasure to the spectators' was wholly unfair.¹³ By the eighteenth century, consistent witness against animal cruelty had established evangelical Christianity in the public mind as a compassionate religion which valued kindness. Conversely, kindness to animals marked a person out as an evangelical. John Wesley's views were well known, and many of his followers shared them. Horace Walpole is said to have remarked in 1760 that a certain man was known to be 'turning Methodist; for, in the middle of conversation, he rose, and opened the window to let out a moth'.¹⁴ John Lawrence, writing against animal cruelty from an Enlightenment perspective in 1796, was worried that he would be dismissed to 'a snug corner in the holy temple of Methodism' by his more secular readers.¹⁵ As late as the evangelical Welsh revival of 1904, it was said that a converted miner could always be recognised because his pit pony did not flinch when he raised his hand.¹⁶ It was not evolutionary thought which inspired the language of human duty towards an animal (whose 'proper right and interest' rests in Christ), but the Bible; and it was not Darwinians who were passionately opposed to animal cruelty, but evangelicals.¹⁷ Whilst animal advocates could be found among other Christians, evangelicals were known for it.

A theology of kindness

The contrast between this and Vantassel's modern evangelical ethic that we need not trouble our consciences about animal suffering could hardly be sharper. But why did our forebears have such a reputation for kindness, which has now all but disappeared? It was not merely a matter of sentiment, but was rooted in their theology. Archbishop John Tillotson put it well in the late seventeenth century. There is nothing, he said, 'more contrary to the nature of God' than 'a cruel and savage disposition' towards both man and animals.¹⁸ Why not? Well, as God is kind and compassionate towards all He has made, so there is nothing more contrary to the nature of God than cruelty. Moreover, the earth and its 'fulness' belongs to God, and that animals were made to praise God, not as ingredients. Animal cruelty denied God his due, is a sign of wickedness, and is incompatible with righteous living (Prov. 12.10). In fact, nineteenth century evangelicals bluntly described it as demonic, in an age when people took demons more seriously than we do today.¹⁹ This theological position lent a passion to their ethics which would nowadays mark them as extremists.

Expletives deleted

C. H. Spurgeon was the most celebrated evangelical preacher of the late nineteenth century, a national figure by the time he was thirty. He supported mission, founded an orphanage, and pioneered education; his collected works extend to 49 volumes. Spurgeon was evidently a busy soul, and you might think that, like the modern evangelicals I mentioned earlier, he would have had better things to do than concern himself with animal ethics. Yet he found time to preach and write against cruelty in terms which would today attract the attention of the police.

In 1873, Spurgeon remarked of a man who had been cruel to animals: 'if we were not averse to all capital punishment we should suggest that nothing short of a rope with a noose in it would give him his deserts'. Today, this kind of passionate, even intemperate, sentiment is more often associated with extremists of the Animal Rights movement than with Baptist preachers. Spurgeon's views were even too robust for the Anti-Vivisection Society of his day. He wrote the Society an open letter of support, but they declined to make it public, saying: 'the extreme strength of the expletives was considered to transgress the borders of expediency!'²⁰

Spurgeon's passion for kindness towards animals was unusual for his day, but it was not uncommon among his evangelical brethren. Counter-cultural animal ethics had marked evangelicals from the Magisterial Reformers on. John Calvin, immersed in urgent theological, pastoral and diplomatic tasks, nevertheless found time to warn his Genevan farmers that 'God will condemn us for cruel and unkind folk if we pity not the brute beast'; and, remarkably, to assert that we owe an equal duty to animals as we do to people.²¹ John Wesley and Augustus Toplady, despite obvious theological differences, were at one in their evangelical animal ethics.²² Lord Shaftesbury was fully occupied as an evangelical leader of nineteenth century social reform. Yet he found time to chair the Anti-Vivisection Society. 'I was convinced' he wrote, 'that God had called me to devote whatsoever advantages He

might have bestowed upon me to the cause of the weak, the helpless, *both man and beast*....²³ Similarly, Wilberforce co-founded the RSPCA alongside campaigning against the slave trade.

The gospel of peace

These Christians' passion for kindness did not commend them to everyone. Indeed, it often brought them opposition and ridicule, for they criticised cruelty in others. The powerful voices and interests of their day objected, from the hunting fraternity and growing industrial meat industry to the increasingly authoritative medical establishments. In fact, it often increased the difficulty of proclaiming the gospel. A man who gets up to help a moth can easily be dismissed as a fanatic—along with his evangelical beliefs. Nowadays this would be seen as a reason for preachers to avoid animal ethics. Yet before the twentieth century, evangelicals passionately spoke against animal cruelty of all kinds, considering it to be integral to the gospel of peace. It is a striking fact that God blessed their ministries to a degree unknown among modern evangelical preachers, as well as using them to make England a world leader in animal welfare reform.

All creatures bless God

According to modern evangelicals, animals were made for us to eat. The older evangelical reading of the Bible made clear that they were not. Both humans and animals were originally created vegans; they were made to praise God, not as ingredients. As John Owen rather drily put it in 1668, all God's works are for 'the manifestation and declaration of the holy properties of his nature': 'so the ... brute creatures ascribe unto God the glory of his properties, even by what they are and do. By what they are in their beings, and their observation of the law and inclination of their nature, they give unto God the glory of that wisdom and power whereby they are made, and of that sovereignty whereon they depend'.²⁴

His elder contemporary, Thomas Adams, was more lyrical: 'All creatures in their kind bless God.... They that have tongues, though they want reason, praise him with those natural organs. The birds of the air sing, the beasts of the earth make a noise ... the very "dragons in the deep" ... sound out his praise'.²⁵ An animal screaming in agony cannot praise God.

Our sins in Adam

Of course, the evangelicals knew that the world is fallen, and that it groans on account of human sin. One consequence is that we may have to kill animals to survive. As Ralph Venning observed in 1669: 'the way in which we now use the creatures bear witness against sin.... since sin our appetite has been more carnivorous'. To be so reminded of sin might almost put you off your hamburger. However, even those of our forebears who refused meat themselves affirmed its lawfulness. It is cruelty which is wicked; necessity must not compromise kindness when we eat our supper. It is bad enough that sin had brought death into the world, but to make animals groan louder for our pleasure is egregiously wicked. As Dod and Cleaver had asked in 1612, '... have our sinnes in Adam brought such calamities upon...animals, and shall we add unto them by cruelty in our owne persons?'²⁶

Dark deeds

Evangelicals of the past saw cruelty daily in the streets. From the late nineteenth century, transport was modernised and slaughterhouses moved out of town centres. Polite society was able to turn a blind eye to suffering, allowing a mechanised meat industry to take cruelty by the hand. Surgery without anaesthesia became routine and remains so; teeth clipping, castration, and caustic horn bud removal are all legal today. The advent of miniature cameras has more recently shone a light on illegal cruelty. Undercover filming regularly reveals deliberate beating, kicking, burning and electrical torture; prosecutions and prison sentences have followed. Although we prefer not to know it, even well-regulated industries skin animals alive so often that workers become accustomed to it; millions of others are scalded to death. Sexual abuse of vulnerable animals has also been uncovered.²⁷ Perhaps not even Spurgeon could have found an expletive adequate for such wickedness.

The US meat industry has responded to exposure of its cruelties with agricultural gagging laws, making undercover filming a criminal, even a terrorist, offence. 'Men loved darkness rather than light', says John, 'because their deeds were evil' (John 3.19). But the revelations continue, and thoughtful people are increasingly refusing to look the other way. Vegetarianism is growing rapidly, especially among younger people. Meat-free food has become a rapidly expanding, multi-billion dollar business, with the UK market alone worth nearly £1 billion annually.

Conclusion

Many millions of people, especially young people, take kindness towards animals seriously. Jonathan Safran Foer estimates that 18% of US college students describe themselves as vegetarian.²⁸ Why would such people listen to a church with a reputation for complicity in cruelty? Indeed, one sixth-form evangelist in the UK told me that Christian complicity in animal cruelty is among the most common reasons he hears for rejecting the gospel. Evangelical churches have recently sought to be inclusive, yet few have a policy on animal ethics beyond offering a vegetarian option at church events; some do not even do this. Churches keen to attract the younger generation should take note that this is a serious obstacle to evangelism. Where evangelicals once led their generation in kindness, today's are silent; indeed, some leaders suggest that animal cruelty is not an evangelical concern at all. But God is at work in the world. His groaning creation looks towards restoration when the children of God will be revealed. God can renew His church and soften human hearts. Kindness (Gal 5.22: *χρηστότης*) is a fruit of the Spirit.

For further reading

- David Clough, *On Animals: Vol. 1: Systematic Theology* (T&T Clark/Continuum, 2012).
- Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (Hamish Hamilton, 2009).
- Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto, eds, *Animals on the Agenda* (SCM, 1998).
- Rod Preece, *Brute Souls, Happy Beasts and Evolution* (UBC Press, 2005).
- Philip Sampson, *Six Modern Myths* (IVP, 2001), chapter.3.
- Matthew Scully, *Dominion* (St. Martins Press, 2002).

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- ¹ 'Welby "wrong" to turn down RSPCA', *Church Times*, 23 August 2013 (online).
- ² Larry Brown, 'How Can So Many Christians Be Indifferent to Animal Suffering?' *Dayton Daily News*, 25 January 2013.
- ³ Martin Manser, ed., *The Collins Bible Companion* (Collins, 2009), 653.
- ⁴ For examples of suspicion, see Tony Sargent, *Animal Rights and Wrongs* (Hodder and Stoughton 1996), 2-4. For characteristic attitudes towards vegetarians, see <http://www.thirdwaymagazine.co.uk/editions/may-2014/high-profile/talking-the-walk.aspx>.
- ⁵ See: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/97007/evangelical-climate-initiative-creation-care#>; <http://www.resistingthegreendragon.com/>.
- ⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (IVP, 1994), 287.
- ⁷ For references to 1Tim. 4, see [godeatsredmeat.com](http://www.godeatsredmeat.com); and <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/vegetarianismqa.htm>. There are, of course, exceptions in both the UK and US: see examples in Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *Eating* (Arrow, 2006), 239ff.
- ⁸ See Philip Sampson, 'Evangelical Christianity: lord of creation or animal among animals?' in Andrew Linzey, ed., *Handbook of Religion and Animal Protection* (Palgrave, forthcoming).
- ⁹ Philip Sampson, *Six Modern Myths* (IVP, 2001), 72; for discussion, see ch. 3.
- ¹⁰ John Bingham, 'Welby too busy to be RSPCA Patron?', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/environment/10250923/Welby-too-busy-to-be-RSPCA-patron-But-they-dont-do-anything-says-Vice-President-Bill-Oddie.html>.
- ¹¹ Stephen Vantassel, *Dominion Over Wildlife?* (Resource Publications, 2009), 175, 167.
- ¹² Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (Penguin, 1983), 180.
- ¹³ Sampson, *Six Modern Myths*, 82.
- ¹⁴ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 180. For Wesley's views, see *Sermons on Several Occasions* vol. II (1872), Sermon 60 'The General Deliverance' (1771).
- ¹⁵ John Lawrence, *A Philosophical and Practical Treatise on Horses and on the Moral Duties of Man towards the Brute Creation* (Longman, 1796), 1:126.
- ¹⁶ David Matthews, *I saw the Welsh revival* (Ambassador, 2004), 55.
- ¹⁷ George Walker, *God made visible in his works, or a treatise of the external works of God* (1641), 161, 227; John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (1583), 877, col. 2; Rod Preece, *Brute Souls, Happy Beasts and Evolution* (UBC Press, 2005).
- ¹⁸ John Tillotson, *The Remaining Discourses, on the Attributes of God* (1700), 7:129.
- ¹⁹ E.g., Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible* (Baker, 1810-1826), on Prov. 12.10; Spurgeon, 'A Word for Brutes against Brutes', *The Sword & Trowel* vol. 3 June 1873; Shaftesbury shared this view: Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer* (Lion: 2010), 204.
- ²⁰ Francis Power Cobbe, *Life of Francis Power Cobbe* (Swan Sonnenschein, 1904), 648.
- ²¹ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 770 col. 1; 877 col. 2.
- ²² Wesley, *Sermons*, Sermon 60; A. M. Toplady, *Works* vol. 3 (Baynes, c1778; 1825), 459-466.
- ²³ Quoted in Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (SCM, 1994), 36.
- ²⁴ John Owen, *Exposition upon Ps 130*, in *Works* vol. 6 (1668), 186-7.
- ²⁵ Thomas Adams, *The taming of the Tongue*, in *Works* vol. 3 (1629; 1862), 10.
- ²⁶ Ralph Venning, *Sin, the plague of plagues* (1669), 75-6; John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A Plaine and Familiar exposition of the eleventh and twelfth chapter of the proverbs* (Thomas Man, 1612), 141.
- ²⁷ See Philip Sampson, *Is Halal Meat Ethical?* *KLICE Comment*, October 2014; Ted Genoways, *The Chain: Farm, Factory, and the Fate of Our Food* (HarperCollins, 2014). See *Animal Aid* and *Peta* websites for video evidence.
- ²⁸ Jonathan Safran Foer, 'On "Eating Animals"', *Washington Post*, 19 November 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2009/11/13/DI2009111303078.html>.