
THE EVANGELICAL IDENTITY CRISIS

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Dickens opens *The Tale of Two Cities* with the famous paragraph; “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way”. I could not think of a more fitting description of the present evangelical scene.

There are growing churches, bulging conferences and top quality resources. Alister McGrath does not hide his enthusiasm; “Evangelicalism has continued to increase substantially within Western Christianity, in terms of its numerical strength, its influence at every level of church life, and its theological sophistication” (McGrath, p.41). However, other voices are not so radiant. Iain Murray, in contrast, describes the past forty years as a period of drift for evangelicals; “From the mid-century position, where evangelical leadership was concerned to see no fundamental biblical truths compromised, a condition of indefiniteness with respect to teaching, and a readiness to tolerate the ‘insight’ of others, has come to gain wide acceptance” (Murray, p.250). It is the best of times, it is the worst of times. Evangelicalism is a force to be reckoned with, but some of us are not quite sure why.

Departing Evangelicalism

A few years ago now a new phrase seemed to be gaining ground. Dave Tomlinson used the term “post-evangelical” to describe his own departure from an evangelical background. His book of that title recounted his dissatisfaction with the evangelical sub-culture. Not only is evangelicalism a set of beliefs, he argued, but “an entire sub-culture of church services, events, festivals, concerts, conferences, magazines, books, merchandise, record companies, mission organisations, training schemes, holiday clubs and celebrities” (Tomlinson, pp.6-7).

Post-evangelicalism is partly a theological shift but mostly represents dissatisfaction with this sub-culture. Tomlinson's alternative has little theological weight (being barely distinguishable from classic liberal theology) but fits better with the felt needs of postmodern society; "At the time of writing the term 'post-evangelical' has no formal definition, there is no body of theology behind it, no published agenda and certainly no organisation" (Tomlinson, p.1).

What now seems remarkable about Tomlinson's agenda is that he was honest and forthright enough to define his position as something other than evangelical. Whatever "post-evangelical" might mean, it was departing from evangelicalism. Tomlinson's self-assessment is helpful. Many other Christians simply find the term flexible enough to fit all manner of theological innovations.

Clark Pinnock vigorously maintains his evangelical credentials on the basis of his commitment to "the biblical message as the supreme norm; belief in a transcendent personal God who interacts with creation and acts of history; a focus on the transforming grace of God in human life, and the importance of mission" (cited by Daniel Strange in Gray and Sinkinson, p.18). Within this loose definition of evangelicalism he has been confident to develop and promote a number of novel or unusual ideas. Pinnock argues that God cannot know for certain the course of future events and that there are further opportunities for non-Christians to repent after death. He also takes offence at the suggestion that he might not be an evangelical. Similarly, Steve Chalke has caricatured and dismissed the classic evangelical view of penal substitutionary atonement. Yet, he still defends his right to be described as an evangelical.

Millard Erickson concludes a study of radical thinkers like Pinnock with these words; "It does not yet appear that these theologians have moved so far as to surrender the right to be called evangelicals, but such movement cannot be unlimited" (Erickson, p.141). At what point does the term evangelical become redundant? These current debates bring to the surface a basic flaw running through many contemporary definitions of evangelicalism. Essentially, these definitions are too dependent on historians rather than theologians.

Defining Evangelicalism

"Evangelical" refers to the basic commitment to spreading the good news that all Christians should share. This was the sense in which Martin Luther used the term as far back as 1522 to describe himself and like-minded reformers. (This Lutheran heritage also explains the continued use of the term in continental Europe to refer to Protestant denominations that are not otherwise recognisably evangelical.)

David Bebbington famously defined evangelicalism in terms of four characteristics; "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may

be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross” (Bebbington, p.3). This definition is what we might expect from a historian - it is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Bebbington is not prescribing what an evangelical should be, merely describing the people who have happily adopted the label.

Many other works follow this lead. Derek Tidball emphasises activity alongside doctrine: “Evangelicalism is as much about an ethos and an infrastructure, a complex network of transdenominational organisations, societies, events and paraphernalia, as about a doctrinal position. Evangelicals are great activists. Their religion is always a busy one, as their history amply demonstrates, and they have the superstructure to go with it” (Tidball, p.13). Tidball shares Tomlinson’s sense that evangelicalism is a sub-culture. The doctrinal position is only one aspect of what defines an evangelical. Mark Noll, also shares this descriptive approach in the impressive opening volume of the series *A History of Evangelicalism: The Rise of Evangelicalism*. This history series begins with the Methodist revivals.

It is significant that these definitions of evangelicalism tend to date the emergence of evangelicalism from the eighteenth century revivals and particularly the work of Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley and George Whitefield (Bebbington, p.20). After all, this was not so much a period of theological reflection (as the Reformation and Puritan periods might be understood) as a period of missionary zeal. With this historical starting point, evangelicalism is obviously characterised by its activity.

Deconstructing Evangelicalism

Darryl Hart, formerly of Westminster Theological Seminary, has written a provocative contribution to this debate in his book *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*. Any book that can have a contributor to the dust-jacket blurb describing it as “wrongheaded obtuseness” must be worth a read! At the outset, Hart makes his thesis anything but obtuse:

“Evangelicalism needs to be relinquished as a religious identity because it does not exist. In fact, it is the wax nose of twentieth-century American Protestantism. Behind this proboscis, which has been nipped and tucked by savvy religious leaders, academics, and pollsters, is a face void of any discernable features” (Hart, pp.16-17).

Hart writes primarily for the American scene. He is persuaded that the very concept of an evangelical movement is largely a mirage. It was created in the twentieth century and the “wheels came off” after about 1980. Since then, attempts to keep the cart on track have only made more of a dilemma.

Having investigated the history of the term, Hart argues that it had an invented history. Those who constructed it were sincere Christians looking for an alternative

to fundamentalism; “Although the faith they created borrowed fragments from historic Protestantism, its design was to affirm a lowest common denominator set of convictions and practices” (Hart, p.183). The lowest common denominators have been shifting to accommodate increasingly divergent beliefs. According to one American poll over 40% of Americans claimed to be evangelical. The word has become fashionable and there is little stigma attached to being identified with Amy Grant, Billy Graham and George Bush. It isn’t what you know but who you would like to know that makes you an evangelical.

Hart’s analysis does challenge us to rethink what we mean by evangelical. In particular, it challenges historians and sociologists to ask more theological questions. Do the roots of evangelicalism stretch back further than Billy Graham?

Hart develops his argument in terms of the need for a tradition. A Christian must belong to a tradition of thought. He defines a tradition as a theological argument or position extended through time. It reminds us that the faith we have was not created in recent history but has been developed and worked on over the centuries. According to Hart, evangelicalism is not a tradition but only a ‘construct’. It cannot carry the freight given to it in recent years.

The British scene is different from that of America and perhaps the following problems in Hart’s thesis reflect our different setting. There seems to be a blinkered idealism in his dismissal of parachurch in favour of denominational churches; “Churches, unlike parachurch entities, have creeds that let people contemplating membership know the content of the denomination’s faith” (Hart, p.124). In the UK this claim would be laughable. How many denominations present the doctrinal cohesiveness of parachurch agencies like UCCF, the Proclamation Trust or various evangelistic societies? Hart’s concern for a creedal definition of faith is entirely correct but, certainly in the UK, it is far from clear that the denominations have been better able to produce this than parachurch agencies.

Why not abandon the term altogether? If we did so then the local congregations and national denominations would regain centre place in Christian self-definition. Rather than being “evangelicals” we would be Baptists, Anglicans and so on; “The worst that could happen to these believers is that they would not have a collective sense of being part of something big, like an evangelical movement” (Hart, p.188). However, this is hardly fair. It is the failure of mainstream denominations in two respects that have led to evangelical coalitions. Firstly, there is the internal doctrinal decay that has marked many denominations. Secondly, there is an unhealthy isolationism from other, legitimate forms of Christian witness found across the denominations. While I am happy to see our congregation “isolated” from theological liberalism I want us to taste some of the breadth of evangelicalism that was a part of my formative experience in Christian Unions.

A further problem in this rejection of evangelicalism is that it may betray an irrational rejection of the evangelical sub-culture. Much of that culture may be superficial and shallow compared to ancient liturgies and centuries-old hymns but that is neither here nor there. The real question is whether an evangelical witness or agency is true to the Bible, not whether its music is contemporary or old. The provocative writing of David Wells has been faulted on this point. David Clark responds to Well's *Losing Our Virtue*; "I do not understand why it matters to Wells what sort of seating a church installs or whether it uses drums. (If drums are unbiblical, what will the church in Africa do?)" (Clark, p.117). Much of what Wells has to say is important and timely but he can be in danger of confusing his own cultural preferences with what it means to be an evangelical. The creedal heart of evangelicalism permits great breadth of cultural expression.

Defending Evangelicalism

Hart certainly identifies a key problem with contemporary evangelicalism. It has allowed itself to be defined sociologically and not theologically. It is defined by characteristics rather than convictions. Part of this problem stems from the tendency to locate its birth in the Revivals rather than the Reformation.

If we take the Reformation as our starting point then evangelicalism is born out of a theological rediscovery. Of course there is a breadth to the Reformation but that breadth is held together by a shift in the location of authority from church councils and traditions to the Bible. Ultimately, to be evangelical is to be biblical in our approach to the knowledge of God and life. An evangelical does have a tradition - and that tradition is found running through the Reformation and the Puritans.

Garry Williams has made a compelling case for reading Edwards and Whitefield in these terms. Rather than identifying the source of evangelicalism with them it is better to place them in their own Reformed context. As a movement stemming from the Reformation, evangelicalism is essentially creedal. Not only that, there are clear doctrinal commitments that make up the creed. Of course, there is also breadth - but not quite the breadth claimed today; "If we think that evangelicalism began in the 1730s, then Wesley and Edwards become its most important fathers. This means that evangelicalism was from its origin *equally divided* between Reformed and Arminian theology; neither could claim to be the mainstream doctrinal position" (Williams, p.12) Arminianism should be identified as a later, marginal development within evangelicalism rather than part of its original definition.

This is exactly the kind of argument that Pinnock finds distasteful. He recognises and resists the apparent influence of Reformation theology within evangelicalism; "The Reformed group has occupied this position among us and to a degree still does and so is in a strong position to equate evangelical theology with their own viewpoint and declare who is in and who is out of the movement" (Pinnock, from

address to the Annual Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society 1997). Pinnock is opposed to this state of affairs because it would mean that the onus is on himself to justify how his theological innovations could be legitimately considered evangelical.

Historians of art and literature have used the image of the mirror and the lamp to describe the function of art. Art may be seen as either a mirror of society (reflecting its preoccupations and values) or a lamp (directing society in the way that it should go). Evangelical theology must be a lamp more than a mirror. While it is our concern to respond to and engage with contemporary issues, we are convinced that God has spoken and that His word in Christ is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. We should resist the descriptive definitions in which the term simply mirrors what people do in the name of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism demands a prescriptive, creedal definition in which our unity is in the truth and our methods are driven by the Bible.

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