
What It Means To Be An Evangelical

An extended review of EVANGELICAL AFFIRMATIONS, edited by Kenneth S Kantzer and Carl F H Henry, Zondervan, 1990, pb, pp 535, and distributed in the UK by McCall Barbour, 28 George IV Bridge, Edinburgh, EH1 1ES, at about £10.

In May 1989, The National Association of Evangelicals in the USA and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School co-sponsored a consultation on Evangelical Affirmations to which over 650 evangelical scholars, pastors and lay leaders were invited. They naturally represented a broad range of churchmanship and viewpoint but within the main stream of evangelical Christianity. 'The purpose of this working consultation of theologically concerned leaders', we are told in the Preface, 'was to unite evangelicals in their commitment to the great biblical truths of our faith by calling the church to vigorous evangelism and discipleship, responsible social action, and sacrificial service to a needy world' (p 13).

The consultation focused on the important issues confronting evangelicals at the close of the twentieth century. This book therefore includes ten major addresses on key subjects (Who are the Evangelicals?; Salvation; New Challenges to the Gospel; Word and World; Biblical Authority and the Quandary of Modernity; Personal Ethics; Social Ethics; Black Evangelical Theology; Evangelicals, Ecumenism and the Church; Modern Science; Religious Liberty) with responses given at the consultation. Also included are the Evangelical Affirmations (pp 17-38) on key doctrines agreed upon by the participants but after considerable discussion and redrafting. **This is intended 'to be a confession of what it means to be an evangelical'** (p 14).

In his Foreword (pp 17-23), Carl Henry points out the various and conflicting nuances of the term 'evangelical' in the twentieth century. Charles Colson's Keynote Address (pp 41-66) surprised and encouraged me by its forthright insistence on the historical and revelatory nature of true Christianity. In this absorbing and immensely readable chapter, he repeatedly underlines the need for sound biblical theology:

'The challenge for us today', he adds, 'is to hold fast to the truth, to know and believe there is a God who lives, who has spoken, and who reigns... We need to take our stand on doctrine and hold fast to that truth as a beacon of light and truth in a world that is in disarray' (p 57).

In order to restrict the review to a reasonable length, I intend to concentrate on just three of the more significant addresses and responses but I do so in the hope that you will be persuaded to read the whole book!

'**Who are the Evangelicals?**' is the subject handled by Carl Henry (pp 69-94). He laments that:

'Expository preaching and doctrinal teaching have been at low ebb in a generation that has pitched evangelism at an experiential high... For all that, the

theologically conservative churches (in the United States) continue to grow' yet confusion persists over precisely what 'being an evangelical' means. Henry takes us back to basics by reminding us that the term 'evangelical' has its roots deep in the bedrock of the Greek New Testament: *evangelion* meaning 'good tidings' or gospel. Quoting 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. Henry writes: 'in less than twenty-two Greek words the apostle Paul epitomizes this incomparable good news. Remarkably, more than a fourth of that total word-count he devotes to the fact that Scripture vouchsafes this good news; twice, in fact, he declares the evangel to be 'according to the Scriptures'. The good news is scripturally-identified, scripturally-based, scripturally validated; inspired Scripture is its verifying principle...' (p 77). His final statement is:

'Evangelicals are a people of the Bible and of the risen Redeemer; historically speaking, consistent evangelicals have never been cognitively constrained either to demean the Saviour or to demean the Book in order to be wholly faithful to one or both' (p 94).

In his response to Carl Henry, Nathan Hatch details three pressing challenges that face American evangelicals on the eve of the 21st century: the reality of rampant pluralism, a need to recover a higher view of the Church and the need to nurture first-order Christian scholarship. Hatch does not think, however, that the evangelicals are prepared to face the challenge.

Jim Packer contributes a helpful and pointed chapter on **Evangelicals and the Way of Salvation: New Challenges to the Gospel** (pp 107-131). At the outset, Packer warns: 'Truths that seem to me vital are threatened, and to reaffirm them effectively I shall have to hit out — not only at non-evangelicals, but at some of my evangelical brothers too' (p 108). Packer deals with four 'strong tendencies at work today' that press Evangelicals to revise their biblical doctrine of salvation (p 113).

The first tendency is that '**salvation is less URGENT than Evangelicals have thought**' and raises the issue of universalism and the destiny of those who never heard the Gospel. Dr Packer pinpoints several motivations towards universalism which operate today (pp 115-116) before providing a solid, biblical response to the universalist thesis (pp 118-122). Answering Sir Norman Anderson's position that God may have regenerated a person in another religion thus 'enabling him, in his twilight...to throw himself on God's mercy', Packer gives a positive 'yes', yet insists:

'...we have no warrant from Scripture to expect that God will act thus in any single case where the Gospel is not yet known. To cherish this hope, therefore, is not to diminish in the slightest our urgent and never-ending missionary obligation, any more than it is to embrace universalism as a basis for personal and communal living. Living by the Bible means assuming that no one will be saved apart from faith in Christ, and acting accordingly' (p 123).

The second tendency suggests that the question of '**salvation is less AGONIZING than we thought** because after judgement day the unsaved will not exist' (p 124). The four basic arguments for Conditionalism are briefly but effectively answered before his concluding paragraph:

'What troubles me most here...is the assumption of superior sensitivity by the Conditionalists. Their assumption appears in the adjectives (awful, dreadful, terrible, etc) that they apply to the concept of eternal punishment as if to suggest that holders of the historic view have never thought about the meaning of what they have been saying' (p 126).

He then replies to John Stott's belief that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.

'Respectfully, I disagree, for the biblical arguments (as used by Conditionalists) are to my mind flimsy special pleading and the feelings that make people want conditionalism to be true seem to me to reflect, not superior spiritual sensitivity, but secular sentimentalism which assumes that in heaven our feelings about others will be at present, and our joy in the manifesting of God's justice will be no greater than it is now. It is certainly agonizing now to live with the thought of people going to an eternal hell, but it is not right to reduce the agony by evading the facts; and in heaven, we may be sure, the agony will be a thing of the past' (idem).

The third and fourth tendencies concern the central tenet of the Reformation: namely, that **'Justification by faith is a less CENTRAL doctrine than evangelicals have thought.** It is contended that for Paul, its chief expositor, justification was only significant for anti-Jewish polemic, and the heart of his Gospel was elsewhere! The fourth revision claims that **'faith is a less SUBSTANTIAL reality than evangelicals thought'** (p 113). Packer's argument is polemical. He offers five reasons why Paul's doctrine of justification was not mere anti-Jewish polemic, concluding:

'It would be ruinously enfeebling for us to be allured away at any stage from a central emphasis on justification by faith' (p 129).

He also responds to the fourth revision, namely, that saving faith is an assent to the truth about the atonement, and a formalized receiving of Jesus as Saviour without the need for repentance or discipleship (see John MacArthur, **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS**, Zondervan). His answer is three-fold:

- i. 'Faith must be defined, just as it must be exercised, in terms of its object. But the Christ who is the object of saving faith is the Christ of the New Testament, who is prophet and king no less than he is priest...' (p 130).
- ii. 'There is an evident confusion here between faith as a psychological act (ie something you do) and faith as a meritorious work... There is no need to restrict faith to passive reliance without active devotion in order to keep works-righteousness and legalism out of the picture!
- iii. 'The pastoral effect of this teaching, if taken seriously, can only be to produce what the Puritans called "gospel hypocrites"...I know what I am talking about, for I was such a gospel hypocrite for two years in my teens before God mercifully made me aware of my unconverted state. If I seem harshly critical when I categorize this proposed redefinition of faith as a barren intellectual formalism, you remember that I was once myself burned by teaching of this type, and a burned child dreads the fire' (p 131).

The response to James Packer by John Ankerberg and John Weldon is favourable and supportive. They declare: 'We have found that the doctrine of justification by faith has been replaced and the doctrine of eternal punishment vehemently rejected...the situation is sufficiently critical that blunt words are needed in addressing the church' (p 139). **Seven affirmations which 'summarize what we are convinced needs to be said'** then follow:

- i. 'Jesus Christ is the principal figure responsible for the doctrine of eternal punishment. The denial of eternal punishment is tantamount to a denial of the deity of our Lord and Saviour'.
- ii. 'Rejection of hell is a denial of biblical authority which opens the door to additional revisionist and syncretistic tendencies in other areas'.
- iii. 'The problem is not a scriptural issue but an emotional issue, contaminated by secularist and humanistic thinking' (p 140).
- iv. 'To reject eternal punishment and accept other ways of salvation is to affirm that the cross was unnecessary'.
- v. 'To affirm universalism is a denial of the church's mission to preach the gospel and warn men to escape God's wrath and eternal punishment'.
- vi. 'The doctrine of eternal punishment is the watershed between evangelical and non-evangelical thought'. One reason for this is its interrelation with many other doctrines. So 'when friends, such as John Stott, P E Hughes, Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, Basil Atkinson, etc... reject the traditional view of eternal punishment, the church suffers serious or even fatal erosion in its doctrinal foundation' (p 141).
- vii. 'Universalism logically repudiates the doctrine of justification by faith'.

In their conclusion, Ankerberg and Weldon insist:

'the truth of hell is that eternal punishment is a vital doctrine — It cannot, it must not, be ignored or abandoned — We must have the courage to preach it from the pulpits, in Bible schools and seminaries, and to a lost world...' (p 147).

The third chapter/subject I want to refer to is **Evangelicals, Ecumenism and the Church** and this is handled by Donald Carson (pp 347-385). He rightly indicates that within evangelicalism there is an enormous diversity of opinion regarding the nature, work, government and unity of the church. His aim in this chapter, therefore, is the more modest one of addressing:

'from a theological perspective those features of evangelical ecclesiology that ought to govern our self-understanding and therefore our relations with others' (p 348).

Dr Carson addresses, first of all, the problem of **EVANGELICAL SELF-IDENTITY** and probes two facets of the problem:

(1) Who is an 'evangelical'?

The term 'evangelical' functions predominantly in North America to refer to Christians who are faithful to both a *material* principle (ie the gospel as understood in evangelical Protestantism) and a *formal* principle (ie the truth, authority and finality of the Bible). In this sense, 'evangelicalism' is tightly tied to the 'evangel' (p 349). But who defines what this gospel-content really is? Carson here points out three factors that bedevil recent attempts to define evangelicalism:

(a) as recently as 1975 evangelicals and fundamentalists were both committed to an inerrancy view of the Bible but this is no longer the case. A growing number of evangelicals affirm the 'infallibility' of Scripture but refuse to acknowledge the Bible's reliability on the various subjects it speaks on.

(b) The label 'evangelical' is applied to confessional Lutherans, Presbyterians, Pentecostals and others such as Fundamentalists who do not think of themselves in this category.

(c) For many evangelicals the expression is almost synonymous with 'true christian' (p 353).

'The combination of these pressures', claims Dr Carson, 'forces us to think of evangelicalism as a movement determined by its centre, not its boundary. So understood..., contemporary evangelicalism, consistent and otherwise, embraces a wide range of people; but not all their theological opinions' (p 354).

(2) What is 'the church'?

The second facet of the problem is ascertaining the depth and diversity of evangelical ecclesiology. Two answers, he suggests, are possible. Evangelicals have been slow to 'articulate profound statements on the church' and this 'springs partly from the fact that its driving impetus lies elsewhere, and partly from the theological suspicion that those who devote too much attention to the church are in danger of diverting attention from Christ Himself' (p 356). But the second answer is that evangelicals 'have produced too many ecclesiologies, or ecclesiological studies, ranging from the barely competent to the fairly sophisticated' (p 357). Examples include old-style dispensationalism, covenant theology, evangelical Lutherans, reformed theology, Wesleyans (who 'have tied their ecclesiology to the holiness movement'), the 'believer's church' tradition springing from Anabaptist roots and contemporary Pentecostals who are now raising their ecclesiological voices. These differences are considerable so that a cynic may think there is no such thing as a distinctive evangelical ecclesiology. Carson thinks the cynic is wrong and suggests several theses indicating the 'shared ecclesiological perspectives' of most Evangelicals. They are:

- i. The church is the community of the new covenant (pp 359-361)
- ii. The church is the community empowered by the Holy Spirit (pp 362-3)
- iii. The church is an eschatological community (pp 363-4)
- iv. The church is the 'gathered' people of God (pp 364-7)
- v. The church is a worshipping community (pp 367-9)
- vi. The church is the product of God's gracious self-disclosure in revelation and redemption (pp 369-370)
- vii. The church is characterized by mission (pp 370-1).

In the final and major section of his paper, Donald Carson offers several **EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ECUMENISM.**

(1) By definition, the church is made up of regenerate believers (pp 371-4).

(2) It follows that church discipline must be practised (pp 374-6).

(3) From an evangelical perspective, it is not strictly *necessary* to list the sacraments/ordinances as one of the defining marks of the Church, even though the overwhelming majority of us are happy to do so (p 376).

- (4) A Christian who detaches himself or herself from the church, or a 'parachurch' group that is largely independent of the church, is self-contradictory (pp 376-8).
- (5) Evangelicalism's views of Scripture and of the church make sustained co-operation with classic liberalism or with traditional Roman Catholicism extremely problematic (pp 378-381).

While co-belligerency on some points such as abortion, social justice or environmental stewardship may be practical, Carson warns that 'sustained co-operation remains difficult and dangerous' (p 378). He adds:

'We do not agree with Roman Catholics about the locus of revelation, the definition of the church, the means of grace, the source of contemporary ecclesiastical authority, the significance of Mary, the finality of Christ's cross-work, and more. Though we recognise the immense diversity of contemporary Catholicism, we do not find that official pronouncements since Vatican II have bridged the chasm that remains' (p 379).

Carson is equally firm in his brief comments concerning 'liberalism'. After referring to David Edwards and John Stott in their book *ESSENTIALS*, Dr Carson maintains: 'the differences of opinion regarding the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Christ, the nature of salvation and therefore the nature of the church are as wide as ever: indeed, the gap yawns wider' (pp 379-80).

In his concluding reflections, Dr Carson claims that 'in many parts of American society, ecumenism has become a dead issue...because it has been outflanked 'by Pluralism... What need of ecumenism if all 'issues' are mere variations of a universal movement toward God? **The view most widely despised in many reaches of American society is the one that says it is right and that others are wrong.** And no view matters much anyway, except the one that worships Pluralism itself' (p 381).

'This is the time', therefore, 'for evangelicalism to understand itself, to resist fragmentation, to return to basics, and to think through its mission in the light of the changeless evangel and the changing patterns of unbelief all around us', (idem).

There is so much more which could be quoted and commented upon but I hope that I have now provided you with adequate samples of the book's content. For the reviewer, the overwhelming impression was the relevance and helpfulness of the various chapters. Together with the questions posed for study at the end of each chapter and the useful bibliographies/footnotes supplied by each writer, this book will serve as an excellent study guide for us to appraise once again the meaning and implications of the term 'evangelical'.

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