
Contemporary Trends in Evangelicalism

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This over-view of the evangelical scene is descriptive of how things actually are rather than prescriptive of how things ought to be. We wish to make it clear from the outset, however, that we speak from **within** evangelicalism and that in reflecting on its condition we must share any of the rebuke or encouragement which is appropriate to her condition.

Who are we including?

Our purposes will be served by defining an evangelical Christian as **one who grasps and upholds the relationship between the gospel, the Bible and the church**. An evangelical is someone who has heard, believed and received the authentic good news of Christ in genuine experience, ie it expresses **what they are** before it says anything about **what they understand**. Such an experience of the gospel includes trusting Christ and his saving work but it also includes trusting that he was right in what he said about the authority of the OT and what he promised about the writing of the NT. Consequently an evangelical submits to the teaching of the Bible not primarily because of the apologetic arguments of scholars but as a fruit of their own experience of Christ in the gospel. The church they see as comprising all those who have similarly experienced Christ and so are committed to one another because they are committed to him.

Evangelicals are not the only **converted** Christians but they are the only **consistent** Christians. Liberals have not seen how the authority of Christ extends to the whole of Scripture; Catholics have not seen how that extends to the traditions and institutions of the church. One trend among some so-called evangelicals relates to the interpretation of Scripture. A contributor to the journal *THIRD WAY* (Jan 94) wrote *I still read the Bible but I no longer believe it contains absolute truth. It can't do because language just isn't like that*. Yet, in later correspondence the author insisted that she holds to the Lausanne Covenant statement on Scripture, to which the journal is committed in its Trust! Many are saying that evangelicalism is now a *plural tradition*, with a spectrum of positions on Scripture, as on many other doctrines. The symposium, *DIFFERENT GOSPELS* (C S Lewis Centre, 1988), is a supposed defence of orthodox Christianity but it lacks any statement on justification by faith or the final authority of Scripture.

There is no visible body of evangelicalism as a whole

Evangelical Christians are distributed widely across denominations and differ greatly on many matters other than the gospel. Some no longer use the title 'evangelical' to define themselves, eg Anglican evangelicals who believe it would divide them from their fellow Anglicans to make an issue of this title. Even our insistence on the final authority of the Bible is no longer enough. There are Charismatics who have a high view of Scripture but are impatient with evangelicals who claim to believe in an inerrant Bible but deny that some chapters relating to spiritual gifts are relevant to us today, claiming that this is no better than liberalism or dispensationalism. Some evangelicals find it difficult to recognise others as genuinely evangelical unless they accept a similar doctrinal position

on issues not essential to salvation, eg Reformed theology.

1. Trends in relation to the gospel

- a) Experience is being elevated above doctrine. Books of a sensational kind sell better than books on theology; there is impatience with sermons needing concentration; a concept has emerged called *entertainment evangelism*.
- b) Specifically, less importance is being given to the doctrines of the transcendence and holiness of God; a subjectivist culture has produced child-centred education, which has led in its turn to man-centred evangelism.
- c) The emphasis in preaching (and worship) has moved away from the Cross of Christ to the Throne of the King; sin is not seen as the greatest problem of mankind; the substitutionary sacrifice is seen only as one *model* of salvation, with others equally valid. No one definition of salvation is considered adequate for the variety of cultures in our global village.
- d) It is increasingly common to hear uncertainty expressed over the eternal punishment of the wicked and it is no longer only liberals who teach the possibility of the unevangelised being saved by Christ but without hearing of him. *'The criterion of salvation is not how much you know but how you respond to what you do know'* Chris Wright, Principal of All Nations Christian College (THEMELIOS, Vol 18, No 2, Jan 1993). In some quarters this is now regarded as the evangelically orthodox position!
- e) Social involvement is now ordinarily considered to be *an essential element* of gospel witness, rather than *a fruit of* gospel witness. Both are seen as equal partners in the mission of the church. This can (but does not necessarily) deflect from the eternal issues of gospel work and it does raise the question of whether traditional evangelism has been too abstract and not sufficiently earthed in the genuine needs of contemporary life. Is there enough preaching about such topics as the idolatry of *economic progress* and its attendant evils, afflicting the lives of millions?
- f) The content of the gospel is being broadened to include *signs and wonders* and some will co-operate only with those who agree with this insistence. This is probably the major stumbling block today to joint evangelistic projects at local level.
- g) Some sectors are showing renewed concern for evangelism, eg March for Jesus; the Decade of Evangelism; *Seeker Services* along Willow Creek lines; some unusual initiatives are being taken, such as *Chill Out Areas* at the huge parties attended by 30,000 ravers!

2. Trends in relation to the Bible

- a) Evangelicalism has become 'popular' even 'trendy' in some quarters! There are more evangelical ordinands than ever in Anglicanism, some say up to 50%, but their doctrinal grasp is weaker and there is less training given in expository preaching, hence the emergence of the Proclamation Trust. The Anglican Evangelical Assembly covers a broad spectrum of positions on how to use the Bible as the authoritative voice in morals, the church and national life.
- b) The use of the Bible has been extended by modern language versions and much visually attractive literature is available in a modern idiom from the Bible Society and others. Some evangelicals retain conscientious problems over this. Among Anglican evangelicals the Good News Bible is widely used, among Free Churches there is increasing use of the NIV, whilst the New King James Version is finding acceptance among

reformed churches committed to the *Textus Receptus*.

- c) One growth area of scholarship has been in hermeneutics, putting pertinent questions to traditional views. *Interpreting the given text in the ever-changing contexts is an ongoing challenge involving the need for a coherent theological methodology and a greater sensitivity to the social sciences and to the dynamics of cultural behaviour and the communication process.* BEYOND CANBERRA, p 9. The real danger of this contextualisation issue, however, has been the alleged justification under this guise of, among other things, homosexual acts by Christians and Third World political revolution movements in the name of Christ.
- d) The issue of prophecy has moved from the millennial debates of yesterday to questions about the contemporary role of prophecy in the church today. At worst, this can become an easy way to hear the voice of God without the hard work of Bible study. The writings of Wayne Grudem have been popularised in the UK by Roy Clements. Those who have read them are asking whether all the defences of the traditional view do justice to the discontinuity between the OT and the NT.
- e) There have been many better publications about the Bible in recent years, e.g. NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH, Brian Edwards, is available now in a new edition; cp also the IVP series *The Bible Speaks Today*, the EP Welwyn Series commentaries and the continued publishing programme of the works of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

3. Trends in relation to the Church

- a) Some Christians have become indifferent to the church itself; para-church bodies fulfil many functions of the church so a person can be converted in a school SU, gain experience in the college CU and become a missionary with OM without becoming part of a local church at all. Some complain that church structures are inflexible, others express dismay that church politics are irrelevant to their real needs, tracing a parallel with worldly power struggles. In a mobile population, evangelicals forced to move are going to a church where the gospel is, not necessarily where their former church allegiance is represented.
- b) Attitudes to the ecumenical movement have softened. The new CCBI and its national and local bodies includes Roman Catholics as full members. A group of over 100 people 'with evangelical concerns' attending the 1991 WCC Assembly in Canberra signed a call for greater evangelical involvement, included among them was David Coffey, BU General Secretary and a member of the EA Council. Anglican comprehensiveness has been strained by the change in the status of Scripture evident in the women priests decision. Multi-faith worship, compromising the uniqueness of Christ, is being opposed by a minority. But some are now talking of the end of the liberal ascendancy and an opportunity for evangelicals to take over the whole church! Meanwhile the fact that both Catholics and evangelicals hold to an objective corpus of doctrine is creating pressure for closer links between them, on both sides of the Atlantic.
- c) Sweeping changes in worship style have exploded over the last decades, with a new generation of hymns and Scripture songs, more informality and congregational participation. We now have something called *Evangelical Applause!* Whilst the nature of God must determine the character of how we worship him, we must also reflect on the fact that mankind is more than a mind on legs. She/he has a heart and feelings and needs to feel the warm acceptance of being part of a worshipping community.

- d) The big events have untold influence. Keswick has been dwarfed by Spring Harvest, Word Alive, the Bible Weeks and the FIEC Family Week. Big numbers do encourage those from small churches. But in such events there is a danger of mass psychology and manipulating the vulnerable. There is danger too in coming back to a local church and discarding what has stood the test of time. All change is difficult to control, whilst for some the greater peril lies in inflexibility. Great pastoral sensitivity is called for.
- e) Regrettably, biblical separation can result in practical isolation, what one recent speaker dubbed *hyper-independency*. Differences over church order are not of the essence of the gospel. How far should we go? Independency shows its weakness when the local church seems unable to cope with its own problems, eg in ministerial training and pastoral settlement. The BEC expresses at a practical level the need for some visibility of the unity of the *Church catholic*.
- f) There are no indications of a major re-alignment of denominational structures. Despite tensions for gospel men in the Church of Scotland and Methodism, denominational loyalty remains more important than evangelical unity. In one sense, the involvement of such people in the EA renders structural changes less likely. The EA's higher profile, however, makes it open to a triumphalism which ignores those conscientiously unable to co-operate on their terms.
- g) A renewed interest in social issues has provided opportunities for evangelical co-operation in the Pro-Sunday Coalition and making common cause over witness to national legislators on moral matters. Not all, however, have avoided seeing these as examples of ecumenical co-operation, which they are not. We must distinguish between our witness as Christian citizens, rightly encouraged by our churches, and our distinctive gospel witness as churches *per se*.
- h) The national economic situation is creating mounting pressure on local church life, eg in reduced giving, in the numbers of members unemployed and in the stress on those with jobs, now even less able to give time to their family and church. On the other hand, early retirement is freeing a number of evangelicals for Christian work.

Where is the blessing being seen?

God blesses his gospel despite who and what we are, not because of who and what we are. By so doing he does not validate everything we say we believe. Churches grow not because they are perfect but because God is gracious. Growth is being seen in churches some consider to be ecumenically compromised, excessively charismatic or over-rigid about separation. How do we account for this?

We need to recall that the Scripture issue (inerrancy), the church issue (separation), the doctrinal issue (Calvinism) and the practical issue (using an 'altar call') are not the only truths in the Bible. The Holy Spirit honours, among other things, the exaltation of Christ, obedience to the Great Commission, a relevant ministry, holiness of life and earnest prayer. We need to keep the Biblical balance of dependence on him and personal responsibility to him. *According to your faith be it unto you*. Is there as much genuine prayer for revival as there once was? There is a move away from the central significance of the church prayer meeting and serious decline in those before regular Sunday services. Could this be the most significant trend of today's evangelicalism?

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