

What is an Evangelical?

by Dr Roy Clements

One of the features of the recent debate among Anglicans has been the bandying about of the term "the evangelicals". A vociferous group has emerged purporting to give "the evangelical view" as opposed to "the liberal view". The defining issue in this polarisation of Christian opinion has been homosexuality. Some of us, however, have found it difficult to locate ourselves comfortably within these party labels. We have always regarded ourselves most emphatically as "evangelicals", and our theological position has not changed in anyway. But we have been denounced as "liberals" because we do not accept the purported "evangelical view" on the gay issue.

There seems to be a determined attempt, at least by some within the evangelical camp, so to embed a particular view of homosexuality within the evangelical identity that there is no room left for dissenters like us. Indeed, the very existence of "gay evangelicals" has been conspicuously ignored in the entire debate. It seems, therefore, an appropriate moment to ask: "What is an evangelical?".

Simply to frame the question, of course, is immediately to encounter a problem of method. Should we seek the answer by a study of the historical connotations of the term "evangelical"; or by an analysis of the writings of recognised "evangelical" leaders; or simply by appeal to the pronouncements of an organisation like the Evangelical Alliance? All of these would be possible and valid lines of enquiry, but in this short essay I adopt a comparative approach. I want to define evangelicalism by identifying the position evangelicals have taken with respect to two controversies that divide the wider church.

In much of the press coverage of the current debate, evangelicals have been portrayed as blinkered and intolerant extremists; and it must be admitted that the recent moralising pontifications of some self-appointed evangelical spokespersons have tended to encourage such a negative image. However, I want to suggest that, when they are true to their tradition, evangelicals are not extremists at all. On the contrary, they occupy the middle ground on these two key axes of Christian debate. It is only those who are currently trying to hijack the evangelical wing of the church and turn it into an anti-gay bandwagon who are extremists. And it is doubtful whether they deserved to be regarded as true evangelicals at all.

## Reason and the Bible

The first of these axes of Christian controversy on which evangelicals have always occupied the centre ground is that of reason and the Bible. When faced by a doctrinal issue, should we base our argument on the text of Scripture or the rational conclusions of human logic and science? Evangelicals are, of course, first and foremost "Bible people". They have always insisted that to confess that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, as they do, must invest its teaching with supreme authority. However, it is nonsense to suggest that evangelicals take their stand on the authority of the Bible in defiance of human reason. This has never been their position. True evangelicals have always sought to demonstrate that reason and the Bible are in harmony. When conflicts have arisen along this axis, evangelicals have always sought to hold on to both, even if this involves accepting a high degree of intellectual tension or uncertainty. The classic example of this, of course, has been the debate about creation and evolution. Thinking evangelicals have never yielded to the blinkered dogma which insists the world must have been made in seven days because Genesis says so. They have recognised that it is no part of Christian

discipleship to turn a blind eye to discoveries of science which indicate the earth is millions of years old. On the contrary, a surprising number of our most able scientists are evangelical Christians, including biologists who are thoroughly persuaded of the general accuracy of evolutionary theory.

There are, of course, some Christians who do reject the findings of modern science; but such obscurantists are not representative of evangelicalism. Although the term is not ideal, I shall call these the "fundamentalists". While it would not be fair to place all young-earth creationists in that pejorative category, the majority of them undoubtedly do adopt a blinkered literalism toward the Bible which science is not permitted to challenge. Equally, there are some Christians who experience no difficulty in embracing modern science, because they see the Bible as simply a fallible witness to the human experience of God, rather than the inerrant Word of God. Once again, such rationalism is not characteristic of the evangelicals. I shall call these the "liberals". Evangelicals, I say, occupy the middle ground between the fundamentalist and liberal "extremists".

They do not occupy it, let me hasten to add, by seeking some insipid compromise between the two. On the contrary, they wrestle with the intellectual issues involved, sometimes over many decades, until a satisfying resolution of the tension between reason and the Bible is forthcoming. Almost invariably, such a resolution is associated with an advance in biblical hermeneutics. Evangelicals have always resisted the crude literalistic approach to biblical interpretation espoused by the fundamentalists, just as they have also refused to accept the liberals' dismissal of parts of the Bible as "human error". They have insisted that the truth is not to be found by letting go of either reason or Scripture, but only by holding on to both.

In my judgement, their refusal to take sides in that theological tug-of-war has been vindicated. As a result of it, their confidence in the authority of Scripture is not expressed as a mindless recital of fundamentalist proof-texts. They seek rather a carefully nuanced and academically informed exposition of the Bible, that does full justice to its historical and cultural background, its literary genre and to the uncertainties that still surround the original meaning of some parts its text. As a result, evangelical scholarship has won considerable respect.

### The Church and the individual

The other axis of controversy on which the evangelicals hold the centre ground is that of church tradition and the individual conscience. When faced with a doctrinal issue, should we yield to the dictates of ecclesiastical councils, or should we follow our private understanding of the Holy Spirit's leading? Evangelicals distinguish themselves from both conservative catholics and radical protestants in this matter. By the former, I mean those who rely heavily on the institutional church for both the definition of doctrine and the means of grace. By the latter I refer to those who blithely insist that all they need is provided through their "personal relationship with God" and who demonstrate little or no submission to the Christian community as a result.

As I say, evangelicals once again occupy the middle ground in this regard. On the one hand, they insist the grace of God is mediated to the individual Christian through a personal faith relationship with Christ, not through the priest or the sacraments. On the other hand, they also insist that this faith relationship inseparably connects the individual Christian with "the body of Christ" —that is, the fellowship of all true believers. Just as in the case of reason and Scripture, this is not a matter of seeking some unsatisfactory

halfway house between hierarchical authority and individualism. Rather they seek to affirm the legitimate claims of both these points of view and to keep them in creative tension.

In practice, this has meant two things. Firstly, evangelicals have always stressed the importance of commitment to the local church. Secondly, they have always tolerated diversity on a wide range of issues which they accept should be regarded as matters of private opinion. Thus, while they recognise that the institutional church has often erred, the majority of them have chosen to remain within the mainstream denominations, rather than to form exclusively evangelical groupings. And in the para-church organisations they have set up to pursue their distinctive concerns, evangelical statements of faith have always been limited in scope. Major doctrinal and ethical controversies have been deliberately sidestepped, out of respect for liberty of conscience. Baptism is a good example of this. The conservative catholic would see such a sacrament as a necessary and even a "saving" rite. The radical protestant might see no need for it at all. Evangelicals stand in the middle, recognising the importance of this mark of church membership, but happy to leave the quantity of water involved and the maturity required of the candidate as matters of opinion. Thus paedobaptists and adult baptists, sprinklers and immersers, all happily coexist within the circle of evangelical fellowship.

In fact, in spite of all the early rhetoric of the ecumenical movement, evangelicalism bridges the gap between Christian denominations at the grassroots level far more successfully than the World Council of Churches has ever done. It has achieved this remarkable a degree of spiritual fellowship not by denying the importance of either church tradition or human reason, but by insisting that their proper place is to aid us in our understanding of the inspired Scriptures which God has given to direct our faith and conduct.

What does this mean for the current debate?

It is thus completely false to portray evangelicals as extremists. We are a centralist grouping who refuse to abandon either reason or Scripture, church authority or individual conscience. We strive to balance these axes of controversy in a way that acknowledges the legitimate claims of their antithetic poles without drifting into polarised and inflexible positions on contentious issues. That is why the bad press which evangelicals are currently attracting to themselves as a result of their role in the debate about homosexuality is so tragic and regrettable. A determined attempt is being made to relocate evangelicalism much closer to the fundamentalist and conservative catholic extremes. Seeking middle ground on the controversial issue of homosexuality is being portrayed as a compromising betrayal of biblical truth and church tradition.

The fact is, however, that it is nothing of the kind. The middle ground is precisely where evangelicals should be on this matter. Why? First, because the issue of homosexuality, no less than the debate about creation and evolution, raises key questions of a scientific nature. Only a fundamentalist would argue that, since the Bible talks exclusively about demon-possession, modern psychological ideas about mental illness must be wrong. Similarly, only a fundamentalist would suggest that, because the Bible has no idea of homosexual orientation, that this modern psychological understanding of what it means to be "gay" has to be rejected. Evangelicals occupy the middle ground when reason and Scripture seem to collide, and seek an interpretation that does justice to both. Second, because the issue of homosexuality, no less than the debate about baptism, threatens to divide true Christian believers and rend the church. Only a very conservative catholic would try to force all Christians to follow a single line on an issue by appeal to the

decisions of synods or the edict of popes. Evangelicals know that the unity of the church must be maintained without doing violence to the private consciences of individual believers. It is, thus, always better to tolerate a degree of diversity in faith and practice than to reintroduce the politics of the inquisition. By allowing themselves to be railroaded on this issue, evangelicals are ruining their hard-won reputation for intellectual rigour and social relevance. All the progress that they have made in establishing the credibility of the Christian gospel within modern western culture is being threatened by a group of loony militants who loudly insist that what a person thinks about gays is a crucial mark of orthodoxy.

Worse still, gay evangelicals are being spiritually abandoned. Serious spiritual damage is being inflicted on this vulnerable minority. Their withdrawal from the evangelical churches that seem so determined to reject them is surely now inevitable. Those who are playing ecclesiastical power games no doubt consider this a small price to pay for the political leverage they have achieved by raising the stakes on the gay issue so high. But there is a worrying absence of the Spirit of Jesus in their contemptuous disregard for the welfare of brothers and sisters whose only crime is to love someone of the same sex.

There is no disastrous compromise in opting for the centre ground in this matter of homosexuality. Evangelicals belong there whenever reason seems to collide with Scripture, or the church's tradition with the individual's conscience. The intellectual flexibility and political manoeuvrability that comes with that central location has, on many other issues, enabled evangelicals to find a position of biblical balance, over against the contentious extremism of fundamentalist literalism, liberal scepticism, ecclesiastical authoritarianism and rabid individualism.

Yet, for some unaccountable reason, evangelicals are not willing to keep either their minds or their options open over the question of homosexuality. Instead, they are allowing themselves to be aligned with conservative catholics and fundamentalists on the issue. It is, I say, a tragic abdication of our distinctive heritage. There will, of course, always be Christians around who perceive the wisdom of humbly holding the middle ground on the crucial twin axes we have discussed. The question is, will they for much longer want to call themselves "evangelicals"?

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