

Why I am still an evangelical Christian

Roy Clements

1. Why I am still a Christian

Let me begin by thanking you most sincerely for the invitation to speak at this joint Autumn Conference. You have asked me to give two related talks in close succession on the general topic: “Why I am still an evangelical Christian”. I should confess that much of the material I plan to share in the first of these was presented at a talk with the same title that I gave in London for Courage a couple of years ago. So if one or two of you experience an elusive sense of déjà vu this morning, let me reassure you - you are not psychic - you have heard me say these things before!

It is worth perhaps pointing out as I did on that former occasion that my title can be interpreted in several ways, depending on where you put the sentence stress.

For instance, I am tempted to put the stress on the third word: “Why I am still an evangelical Christian”. The point being that there are many today who insist that I cannot possibly be one. I am a gay man, in a sexually-active relationship with a partner. Such a person, in the minds of many, is by definition an apostate and cannot possibly be a Christian, evangelical or otherwise. I doubt there is anyone of that opinion at this particular conference, but if by chance there is, I can only say we must agree to differ on that.

Having decided to avoid that interpretation of my title, it occurs to me that, alternatively, I could focus on that first-person pronoun: “Why I am still an evangelical Christian” - the point being this time that many of my gay friends who were evangelical Christians are so no longer. Some have drifted towards being Catholic Christians; some towards being liberal Christians. A few now dignify themselves with the rather bizarre adjective “post-evangelical Christians”. In the US a new group has sprung up wishing to be known as “red-letter” Christians. Saddest of all, I have seen a number of young and enthusiastic gay Christians abandon their faith altogether.

I am not without sympathy for the disillusionment that underlies that defection from the ranks of evangelicalism by so many honest men and women. In many respects, I share their exasperation. The evangelical wing of the church has been guilty of the most appalling blunder in the last 25 years. Theologically, they have veered towards precisely the kind of barren legalism that Jesus rebuked in the Pharisees and Paul in the Galatian Judaisers. Strategically, they have positioned themselves so ineptly that it is now almost impossible for them to evangelise Western culture successfully. Ask the man in the street today what he associates with the word “evangelical” and, if he can make any sense of it at all, you will hear synonyms like intolerant, old-fashioned, narrow-minded, killjoy ... and most common of all ... “homophobic”.

Having spent many years of my life endeavouring to enhance the reputation of evangelical Christianity among intelligent young students in Cambridge, I cannot find words to express the vexation of spirit I feel at this totally unnecessary loss of credibility – for it is entirely self-inflicted.

Nevertheless, call me a blinkered stick-in-the-mud if you must, I am still an evangelical Christian. In fact, my testimony is that the essential content and basis of my faith has not significantly changed since I first formulated it in my early twenties. If I am now disowned by the evangelical establishment, it is because the goalposts have been moved – the term “evangelical Christian” has been hijacked and redefined.

I hope to say a few things in my second talk in response to those Christians who are now understandably embarrassed by the title “evangelical” and wish to distance themselves from it. But I don’t want these talks to be entirely characterised by defensive polemic. I have decided therefore in the first talk to put the stress on the final word of my title: why I am still a Christian. So this will essentially be a personal testimony and my hope is that it will be a source of spiritual encouragement to some of you. In the second talk, I will put the stress on the penultimate word and try to explain outline why I still wish to call myself an evangelical Christian. This will be less a testimony and more (what John Henry Newman famously called) an “apologia” – a defence of my theological opinions – but more about that anon.

Let me waste no more time playing the overture. Why am I still a Christian?

The answer is I am still a Christian for two reasons:

The first reason is that nothing, absolutely nothing in my life compares in importance to the discovery I made 50 years ago that God is not (as I had supposed until that time) a superstitious hangover from mankind's intellectual infancy, but that he is real, he is a personal, and most extraordinary of all, he is interested in me.

The second reason is that, though I am now half a century older, absolutely nothing has changed on that score. I still believe passionately and unequivocally in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Before I tell you a little about how that faith was awoken and why it is still alive in me, let me issue a couple of disclaimers.

First, I am not a Christian because it makes life easier for me. I entertained the opinion in my unconverted days that Christians were a lot of pathetic psychological cripples who were incapable of staggering through life without the crutch of faith to support them. There was a small company of well-meaning Christians among my student friends – we called them “the God-squad” – and frankly, the things they said to me did nothing to disarm my thinly-disguised contempt for their lack of mental robustness.

"Oh Roy," they would say, "You're not very happy are you?"

"No," I would say, "I'm feeling a bit depressed this week."

"Well, you should be a Christian. Christians have joy!"

"Roy, you're looking worried."

"Yes, I am a bit anxious."

"You should become a Christian. Christians have peace!"

"Roy, you don't know where you're going in your life, do you?"

"Well, I am a bit confused, that's true."

"You should become a Christian. Christians have purpose!"

And so it went on. They made faith sound like some kind of psychotherapeutic panacea. Whatever your emotional problem was, come to Jesus and he would dispel it for you. I told them flat out I wasn't interested in that.

I wasn't going to become a Christian just to be happy - maybe the world is an unhappy place.

I wasn't going to become a Christian just to find peace - maybe the world is a disturbing place.

I wasn't going to become a Christian just to find purpose - maybe the world is a meaningless place.

"Natural scientists," I said with a superior air, for that's what I was in those days, "are committed to the pursuit of truth. We don't believe in things just because they are convenient. We believe in things because they are true."

Those of you who have read anything about the philosophy of science will immediately detect that I was a very naive science student in those days and at least twenty years behind the time even then in the 1960's. Few scientists these days would claim that their theories, even when soundly based on empirical evidence, are “true” in the absolute sense I intended the word. These days, scientists are content to regard their theories merely as descriptive models that fit the observable evidence and leave all talk about ultimate explanations and metaphysical truth to the philosophers. However, my intellectual arrogance did at least preserve me from turning to religion simply as a relief from my adolescent insecurities. I didn't become a Christian then, and I don't continue to be one now, because it makes life easier for me. Quite the contrary: I can assure you that, while my life has been immeasurably richer for having welcomed Christ into it, it has also been considerably more difficult than it would have been without him.

Having said that, let me immediately voice another disclaimer lest you run away with the wrong idea as a result of this vaunted scientific integrity I used to boast about so childishly. I am not a Christian because I think that I can prove scientifically that God exists or that the Christian message is true. In my unconverted days that kind of conclusive demonstration was what I often said I was looking for.

“You want me to believe? Prove it to me. Let's see the logical argument laid out on paper. You tell me there's an invisible God, and I tell you there are invisible fairies at the bottom of the garden. Now show me how your assertion about an invisible God has any more claim to be true than my assertion about invisible fairies.” And the God- squad couldn't do so.

I began life therefore as a precocious atheist. I gave up believing in fairies at the bottom of the garden,

God, and Father Christmas all at the same time- when I was 8 years old according to my now departed mother - and I remained in that state of adamant unbelief until my late teens.

Why did things change? It's simple – I read the Bible. A Baptist minister, patiently door-knocking on the terraced houses of my East London home, put it to me that if I read the Bible I'd be in a much better position to critique the Christian superstition. I would find all the errors and contradictions in it and be able even more effectively to pull the rug from under the feet of the God squad. It sounded such a good strategy; but, you see, I had no idea then what subversive dynamite the Bible is.

C.S Lewis comments of his own spiritual journey:

“A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.”

Too true, I began reading the Gospel of John, and within a few pages I was totally hooked. It blew my mind. There was I thinking I was going to take the Bible to pieces, and instead I found I was the one under ruthless interrogation. This man Jesus that John was presenting just mesmerised me. Even when I was bewildered by what he was saying and doing, he captured my attention. Some deep intuition within me reverberated uncannily whenever I engaged with him.

It felt rather like a scene from a horror movie. I had entered the darkened room convinced that all this talk about it being haunted was nonsense and determined to shine my flash-lamp into every corner to prove it so, only to be halted in my tracks by the sound of heavy breathing beside me and touch of an icy hand on my shoulder.

Jesus intrigued me. He just wasn't what I was expecting. In fact, as I read on in John's Gospel, I discovered that the inner questionings of my heart were being addressed in a way I had never experienced before.

You remember my riposte to the God squad: “We natural scientists are committed to the pursuit of truth. We don't believe in things just because they are convenient. We believe in things because they're true.”

Imagine my surprise then when I discovered this word “truth” kept on appearing on Jesus' lips.

With your permission I'd like to share three of the most important of these occasions with you. They are in the reverse order from that in which they occur in the Gospel of John, but it is easier for me to explain their impact on me if we look at them this way round.

John 18: 37-38

Jesus is here standing before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, on trial for his life. Pilate tries to interrogate him in order to identify some evidence of seditious purpose.

Jesus answered, “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” “What is truth?” Pilate asked.

I cannot tell you how disgusted I was by that response from Pilate. I hated it – for it smacked of the cynicism I saw in so many of my non-Christian friends and which sometimes, to my shame, I saw seeping into my own attitudes - the cynicism that had “given up” on finding anything really worth living for. The cynicism that had searched for truth, returned empty-handed, and so had decided it was going to shrug its shoulders and forget about the quest.

“All existing things are born for no reason” wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. “It is meaningless that we are born; it is meaningless that we die”

In the 1960's his nihilistic existentialism was enormously influential among young people. Just do your own thing; enjoy yourself while you can; that's all there is to do. For there's no absolute purpose to pursue; there's no absolute truth to discover. Science has shown that the world is just a vast colliding mass of random particles pursuing their own pointless and intrinsically unpredictable course. We human beings with our self-conscious questions about the meaning of life are just a sick joke in an absurd universe. Don't look for meaning in it all. You'll just be disillusioned. Just eat, drink and be merry - for tomorrow we die.

That I suspect was what lay behind this ironic rhetorical question of Pilate too. He had heard the waffle of the Greek and Latin philosophers and was unimpressed – political pragmatism was his philosophy - “Truth? What on earth is that?!”

Something very deep inside of me was repulsed by that kind of indifference to a word that that mattered so much to me. Everything inside me yearned for there to be a meaning to human existence. To say "What is truth?" in the kind of dismissive way that Pilate did was to relegate all human achievement and progress to an exercise in futility. In spite of myself, I couldn't repress the gut feeling that there had to be truth. To abandon the quest for truth was to retreat back to the level of brute beasts and mindless plants. I wasn't content merely to survive. I demanded to understand why I was alive.

And I couldn't escape a thrill of excitement when I realized that this enigmatic man Jesus agreed with me about that.

More than that, he regarded it as his mission to bring that truth to mankind. "For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth".

It was an astonishing claim, and one of course that I did not immediately accept, but it was important nevertheless because it demolished an unacknowledged barrier to faith in my heart. Perhaps my deepest fear about becoming a Christian was that it would involve some kind of intellectual suicide on my part. Faith, I was sure, was a blind leap in the dark. It could not possibly be an act of reason. It was more like an act of desperation. As the schoolboy said in his religious education essay, "Faith is believing what you know ain't true."

People believe because they need a psychological prop, I said – they're scared of dying or maybe of living – so they surround themselves with those emotionally comforting religious buzz words that the God-squad were always throwing at me – peace, joy, purpose.

It was an immense relief to me to discover that Jesus didn't see it that way. He wasn't asking me to give up the quest for truth and receive him instead. It was as the Truth that he wanted to be accepted – or not at all. He did not ask me to unscrew my brain and throw it away; he was as concerned as I was about intellectual integrity because he came to testify to the truth.

My testimony today, 50 years on, is that that discovery is as relevant and as compelling for me now as it was then. I am still not interested in comforting religious platitudes. I want my heart, my mind, my life to be compelled by the imperious constraint of the truth. That imperative goal has cost me much. But nothing else would do for me then, and nothing else will do for me now.

That leads me to the second statement on this key issue that I found in John's Gospel:

John 14: 5-6

*Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"
Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

If you look it up you'll find that as Jesus speaks these words, the bottom is just about to fall out of his disciples' world. For three years they had followed him looking for the kingdom he'd often spoken about. All their hopes focused around this climactic victory toward which he seemed to be moving. But now, within a matter of hours he was going to be crucified. In this passage Jesus is trying to prepare them for this terrible shock. There is a sense of dark foreboding. "I'm going away," he says, "But don't be afraid about it. I'm going to prepare a place for you."

And at that point, Thomas speaks up – Thomas, of course, is disciple that we famously meet later complaining that he cannot believe that Jesus has risen from the dead – this is the original "doubting Thomas" - and in John 14 he confesses himself to be in a typically hopeless state of bewilderment.

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

I have to say I find something just a trifle amusing about Thomas' gloominess. He reminds me distinctly of A. A. Milne's donkey, Eeyore. Thomas is so pessimistic about the possibilities of unravelling the mysteries of which Jesus speaks, he shrugs his shoulders in melancholic resignation. His enquiry is not so much a question as an affirmation that all questioning is pointless. 'We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Far from seeking spiritual illumination, Thomas is in a mood only to exaggerate the hopelessness of the darkness.

In short he is an archetypal agnostic. He gains perhaps some perverse satisfaction from what he takes to be his irremediable ignorance. We cannot know, so what is the point of talking about it?

At least we must compliment Thomas on his honesty. There are some people who never admit to perplexity about anything. They always insist they understand. It would have been very easy for Thomas to have donned such a mask of super-spirituality and made fawning noises of agreement in this situation. 'Oh, quite so, Jesus; of course we know the way you're going.

The church has more than its share of such spiritual yes-men, with their plastic piety and boring orthodoxy. I can tell you from personal experience, they make life very dull for a pastor. At least Thomas is candid enough to admit that he has got a problem. There is no stereotyped testimony of faith to which he feels he has to conform. If he does not know he will say so, with unrepressed candour. And we must conclude from Jesus' sympathetic response to his remarks that he entertained a good deal of respect for that kind of integrity. Maybe there is, as the poet says, 'more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds'. Certainly Jesus does not rebuke him as an unbeliever because he says he does not know. And, once again, that came as a great encouragement to me when I first read it; for, frankly, I had a lot of sympathy with Thomas's scepticism.

This Christian idea of "going to heaven" and "meeting God" had always been problematic for me. I was a scientist. Things had to be made of energy and elementary particles for me – for that's all the universe contains. Floating around on spiritual clouds in some numinous, "heavenly" world just wasn't real somehow. I couldn't help conjecturing that maybe Thomas's thinking was a little like mine in this respect.

Perhaps he too was a hard-headed rationalist. Maybe that's why he couldn't believe in the resurrection at first. He wanted concrete realities, not mystical abstractions and abstruse metaphors.

"Where is this Father's house you're talking about, Jesus? How on earth can we know the way to it," he asked? You might as well be Peter Pan inviting Wendy to go to Never Never Land, or Judy Garland singing about how wonderful it will be to visit the Wizard of Oz at the end of the Yellow Brick Road.

Jesus' answer is to redirect the conversation in a startlingly thought-provoking manner.

*Jesus answered, "I am the way, **the truth** and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

Once again, this wasn't what I was expecting.

I was anticipating Jesus would say, "It's all right, Thomas. If you don't know the way, I'll show you." But he doesn't say that. He says, "I am the way."

I was expecting he'd say, "I'll point you in the direction of eternal life." No, he says, "I am the life."

In short, I was expecting he'd set up a signpost to the truth." Instead, he says, "I am the truth."

It was a remarkably disarming response. He is substituting a person for a place. Instead of talking about himself as a guide on the journey, he speaks of himself as the pathway itself. It's as if he's saying to Thomas, "Look, you're taking my metaphors too literally. Don't think of the road to heaven as some kind of mystical path you must discover; think of it as a personal relationship – a relationship with me."

Someone in love might say: "I was just existing before I met him. I didn't know what it was like to feel really alive." In some much more profound and permanent way, Jesus here seems to be claiming something similar. A relationship with him puts us in touch with our true human destiny in a way that nothing else can. Life can have direction and meaning because we know him.

He tells Thomas he is like a man who complains he cannot get into the car when all the time the car keys are jangling in his pocket. Don't you realise that the answer to your agnostic uncertainty is staring you in the face, Thomas? You do know the way, for you know me. Eternal life is not a location to which you must journey Thomas, it is a relationship with me which you have already begun.

This, as I say, was an enormously influential discovery for me.

It made me realise why mere intellectualism was so unsatisfying. I had been thinking of the truth as some kind of idea that I had to objectively conceptualise. But Jesus said I was on the wrong tack – the truth is actually a person to whom I must subjectively relate.

Many cosmologists dream that they will be the one to solve the mystery of the Big Bang. But suppose we did? Supposing our mathematics outdid even Stephen Hawking's. Suppose we solved the fundamental problem of physics and formulated a grand Unified Theory of Everything. Would we really know the truth? Would the formula we discovered really satisfy our hearts as human beings?

Of course it would not. For as I said earlier, properly understood, science is not an exercise in explanation but description. Jesus is saying that the ultimate truth behind this universe is not an equation but a person. That's why people are significant. The only way we are going to make sense of our human existence is by recognising the ultimate person that stands behind our world.

This is why ordinary non-intellectual people who can barely recall their two times-table are often incomparably closer to "the truth" than Richard Dawkins. It is because they have such a relationship.

There is no concealing of course the stupendous personal claim which is implicit in these words of Jesus when he says: "I am the truth". But my testimony is that it is a claim I accept as fully and as unconditionally today as I did when I first embraced it 50 years ago.

It means of course I have to take Jesus immensely seriously. He insists upon it. Many people make the multiplicity of world religions an excuse for an agnostic lack of commitment to anything. There are so many different faiths. How can I be expected to know which is the truth?

Jesus will not permit that kind of evasiveness. He refuses to be damned with faint praise. He will not be relegated to the ranks of a mere prophet or philosopher. His claim is too momentous for that.

Please don't misunderstand me. This does not mean of course that Jesus resolves every unanswered question on my mind. He does not offer solutions to all my scientific and philosophical queries; he offers himself. According to him, the ultimate truth which we need to make sense of our lives is not a system of propositions or a mathematical formula to be proven by logic and apprehended by intelligence. It is not something "intellectual" at all. The ultimate truth behind this universe is personal: it is him.

It is to be apprehended, therefore, in the only way a person can be apprehended, by trust, by love. Some may call this a gamble. But then all personal relationships are gambles, and without them we beggar ourselves as human beings. Jesus invited me to take a gamble on him. He did not demand that I switched off my brain. He did not insist that I should immediately believe everything that Christians are supposed to believe. He asked only that I believed in him; that I consciously left the ranks of the agnostic "don't knows" and identified him personally as the route towards the answers I sought, irrespective of whether I could formulate those answers. He offered, not an encyclopaedia containing immediate solutions to every problem I raised, but a journey undertaken in the assurance that I was on the right road - 'I am the way, the truth, the life.' he told me – hesitantly, even a little reluctantly, I found myself believing him – and I still do.

That brings me to the third statement about truth that I discovered in the Gospel of John. I've left it to last because for me it was the most influential.

John 8:31 – 36

*To the Jews who believed in him, Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know **the truth**, and the truth will make you free."*

They answered him, "We ... have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

I can still remember, as if it were yesterday, the impact these particular verses had on me when I first read them. I'm not saying I was converted on the spot. There was a lot more I had to learn, but it certainly opened my eyes in a most dramatic way. You see, I had always thought - rather arrogantly - that it was the Christians who needed liberating. They were the ones who were in bondage to all those do's and don'ts. They were the ones who were tied up in all that church-going ritual. I was immeasurably freer than any of them.

Yet here was Jesus insisting it wasn't the case. Like the Jews he was addressing, I felt like saying, "Who are you kidding, Jesus? I'm nobody's slave. What do you mean, I shall be set free?" Jesus' reply hit home, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

I knew what he meant by that and I knew he was right about it. My freedom was freedom in a meaningless universe: the freedom of a random particle without significance and purpose. Oh, sure, my actions were free but they were free because all choices were equally arbitrary as far as I was concerned. I could live as I please, but that was cold comfort in a world where there was nothing to live for.

I could see what Jesus was getting at. Real freedom isn't a licence to do as you want. That's the most miserable bondage of all. Real freedom is the knowledge that enables you to live a meaningful existence constrained by the truth.

Peter Berger in his book *Rumour of Angels* pictures a child waking up after a nightmare in the middle of the night and, finding himself surrounded by darkness, crying out in terror. The child's mother rushes to him, comforts him and reassures him that everything's okay. He doesn't need to be afraid, everything is in order. But Berger mischievously asks if we are justified in communicating such assurances to children. Is the world really as beneficent and ordered as we like to pretend it is? My atheism could give me no such hope. Rather, the world was a dark and menacing place with no ultimate goodness, no ultimate love, no ultimate meaning at all and, like a frightened child, deep down I was crying out, longing for a voice to tell me that everything was under control and that I was safe after all.

And here was Jesus, offering me exactly the reassurance I sought:

"If you continue in my word, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

It is a remarkable promise. Jesus is saying that, without reading vast tomes of philosophy or mastering mysterious algebra, without any intellectual achievement on our part at all, he can put us in touch with the ultimate reality behind the universe. He can make our lives meaningful and deliver us from the bondage of our sinful so-called freedom.

Somehow in the daily routine of living with Jesus, we will find our lives to be integrated – they will make sense. Instead of feeling we are going nowhere, we'll find that we are going somewhere. Instead of feeling alienated and alone, we'll feel at home. We will begin to understand what we're in the world for. In short, "we will know the truth and the truth will set us free."

What a fool I had been with all that talk of mine about "proving it true." It can't be done, can it? To say, "I'll follow you, Jesus, if you prove to me that it's true," is putting the cart before the horse. Christianity can't be proved first and practised afterward. According to Jesus, the proof is dependent on the practice. Notice the conditional clause: "If you continue in my word, you will know the truth."

It was a gripping invitation – and I was tempted to give Jesus a chance to make his offer good.

However it has to be said, that one major problem remained for this adolescent in his pretentious quest for truth, namely **pride**.

I found the pejorative overtones in that phrase "a slave of sin" a decidedly unwelcome assault on my self-esteem. It had never occurred to me before that my atheistic self-determination could be regarded as reprehensible. I'd always defended it rather proudly, as evidence of my peerless, intellectual integrity.

As my reading in John continued, however, and the excuses for my unbelief began to unravel, it became more and more clear to me that Jesus was, as always, right when he implied that my real problem was not intellectual at all, but moral. My unbelief derived not from my logical mind but my sinful nature.

I'd always said that belief in God was unscientific. I was fond of quoting the famous example of the professors of Padua who refused to look down Galileo's telescope at the moons of Jupiter for fear that their geocentric prejudices would be disproved. But now it was I who was clinging to my prejudices and fearful of doing the decisive experiment.

To my shame, I discovered the real reason I was an atheist was not because the evidence for faith was inadequate, or that Christianity was intellectually incoherent; No, the real reason I was an atheist was because I didn't want God to exist. God was an undesired hindrance to my proud self-determination.

Some years later I found a passage in Aldous Huxley's *Ways and Means* that spelled out this perversity with frightening honesty.

Huxley wrote, "*I had a motive for not wanting the world to have a meaning and consequently assumed it had none and was able without difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The atheistic philosopher is not concerned exclusively with a problem in metaphysics: he's also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he should not do as he wants to do. For myself, philosophy was simply an instrument for liberation. The liberation I desired was from a certain system of morality. I objected to the morality because it interfered with my sexual freedom. The supporters of this system claimed it embodied the Christian meaning of the world. There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and justifying myself in my erotic revolt. I would deny the world had any meaning whatsoever.*"

Like Huxley, my boasted scientific objectivity was in fact a fake. I began to see it in all its despicable sham. My rationalism was an idol I had erected to defend myself against the obligations which an encounter with the true and living God would inevitably place upon me.

So an inner struggle began – ironically, I who was so concerned about “truth” was now desperate for this not to be true.

I remember that for 18 months I lived in a state of denial, if anything more strident in my atheistic pronouncements than ever. But it could not go on like that. Eventually the relentless hound of heaven caught his prey.

There is a wonderful paragraph once again in C S Lewis' autobiography in which he describes his moment of conversion in terms that resonate with my own experience perfectly:

"You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?" (**Surprised by Joy**)

That experience of the irresistible grace of God was much the same for me – it was not a decision, it was surrender. In fact, it felt a bit like coming out as gay – fearful / reluctant – but boy, after all those months of inner denial, what a relief!

And today, nearly half a century later, as I say, nothing has changed on that score.

I am still a Christian.

Weather-beaten perhaps, even a little battle-scarred - but essentially, nothing has changed.

Fifty years of living as a Christian has not diminished for me the magic of the one who, through the Gospel of John called me into a faith relationship with himself, and in doing so satisfied my heart's quest for truth.

So much then for “Why I am a Christian” – in my next talk I'll say something about why that qualifying adjective “evangelical” is needed.

Why I am still an evangelical Christian - Roy Clements

2. Why I am still an evangelical Christian

My first talk was essentially a testimony. It was about how I became a Christian and how nothing has happened in the last fifty years to make me change my mind. In this second talk, however, I want to qualify the word Christian in an important way. I want to talk about why I am still an evangelical Christian.

“Evangelical”? some may ask – why insert that adjective. Isn’t it enough to say you are a Christian?

Well, yes, in many contexts it would be enough. I’m reminded of the story of the man who goes to heaven and finds by his feet a trapdoor in the clouds. He asks his angelic guide: “What’s down there?” and is told, in a hushed whisper “Shh, that’s the evangelicals – they think they’ve got all heaven to themselves!”

Well, I certainly don’t expect that there will really be any party-labels of that sort in the world to come.

Nevertheless, I have to say that, within a couple of years of my initial surrender to Christ as a student, I discovered that I often needed to insert the word “evangelical” into my description of my new Christian identity ... and fifty years on, I still do.

Since I am addressing a company of Christians who also call themselves “evangelical”, I guess I am not alone in that, though I expect in recent years your loyalty to the word may have been sorely tested. Mine certainly has! As I said in my introduction to my first talk, this has not been because my theological position has changed in any major way, but rather because one particular ethical debate has been raised to the level of a defining issue by many evangelical leaders, institutions and churches. The goalposts have been moved in way that has caused great embarrassment to me and I know to many of you too.

The new defining issue I am referring to of course is homosexuality. Some of us, who have always regarded ourselves most emphatically as "evangelicals" have been disowned and disfranchised because we do not accept the purported "evangelical view" on the gay issue. There has been 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. Indeed, the very possibility of being a "gay evangelical" has been conspicuously ignored or denied.

In this second talk, therefore, I want to identify what I believe are the true defining characteristics of an evangelical Christian and why I believe the attempt to make a particular line on homosexuality a defining issue is thoroughly misguided.

Here are three evangelical distinctives that I believe are of vital relevance:

1. Evangelicals have a high view of the authority of the Bible
2. Evangelicals seek to interpret the Bible in a responsible and scholarly fashion
3. Evangelicals respect personal conscience in regard to controversial issues

1. **Evangelicals have a high view of the authority of the Bible**

The evangelical theologian, Jim Packer, asserts in his best-selling book that Christianity is about “Knowing God”. Christians can be brave in trouble because of what they know of God's sovereign providence. They pray for forgiveness because of what they know of God's love and mercy. They try to be a better people because of what they know of God's moral holiness. They are moved to worship because of what they know of God's sovereign majesty. They evangelise because of what they know of God's salvation for the world. All Christian belief, practice and experience is rooted in the possibility of knowing God.

“God” is not just an emotive buzz word for a Christian, a meaningless mantra we mindlessly recite in order to attain some spiritual high - it is a word rich in cognitive content. We are able to describe the God in whom we believe. Like Jeremiah, it's our boast that we understand and know the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on the earth (Jer. 9:24). So the primary question for any thinking Christian must be where do we get this treasured knowledge of God from?

There are two basic approaches; we can call them man-centred and God-centred

By "man-centred" I mean the view that human beings discover the knowledge of God through philosophical reflection or mystical intuition. In other words, we humans find God for ourselves. I came to the conclusion

very early that evangelical Christians were right when they insisted that this method did not work, and could not work. As the apostle Paul puts it in his first Corinthian letter: “The world by its wisdom has not known God” (1 Corinthians 1:21). If God is anything at all like the omnipotent person Christianity claims, he can never be turned into a passive object of human investigation. He is the “I am” – the eternal subject – he could never be reduced to an “it”.

Fortunately there is an alternative: the God-centred approach

Here the initiative lies not in our human search for God, but in God's voluntary self-disclosure to us. And this is why the Bible is so important to those of us who call ourselves evangelicals – because the Bible is the primary source of that crucial divine revelation from which we gain our precious knowledge of God.

In the Bible, God has taken a personal initiative to reveal himself. In the shorthand we conventionally use – in our view, the Bible is “the Word of God”.

It is important that there are no misunderstandings at this point, so let me immediately make three clarifications.

First, when evangelicals say the Bible is the Word of God, they do not imply that the human race has no access to the knowledge of God outside the Bible. Against the extreme position adopted by some theologians in the Barthian school, evangelicals accept the existence of what theologians call “general revelation”. The eternal power and deity of God are perceptible in the created universe, says Paul in Romans 1 – we do indeed have intuitive knowledge of God mediated through creation. The created world bears, as it were, the signature of the cosmic artist who designed it.

But there are two problems with this general revelation – first, we humans habitually turn a blind eye to it or distort the truth to which it witnesses because we are sinners – in rebellion against the God of whom it speaks; and second, while this intuitive awareness of God is enough to render us, as Paul puts it, “without excuse”, it is not enough to save us.

Second, when evangelicals say the Bible is the Word of God, they do not imply that God's self-revelation is limited to the inspired words the Bible contains. In recent years, a number of theologians have emphasised the importance of redemptive events as the locus of divine revelation. A book by G. E. Wright, written back in the 1950s, *The God who Acts*, was a seminal exposé of this view, and there is no doubt in my mind that it is a most important perspective. Unlike the Muslims and the Mormons, we don't just have a verbally inspired text that floated down from heaven in some mysterious way. Biblical revelation is anchored around supernatural divine interventions in history, and this historical context gives it objectivity and credibility which sets it apart from all the other religions which claim to be based on an inspired text. However, revelatory events need to be interpreted, and it is precisely the function of the inspired word to give us that interpretation; biblical prophets and apostles not only tell us what God has done in history, but what he means by it or achieved through it.

There is a fine example of this in 1 Corinthians 15, which many theologians believe is a very primitive Christian creed:

‘Christ died’	event
‘...for our sins...’	interpretation of event
‘...according to the Scriptures.’	source of the interpretation

Events only become revelatory acts as God himself explains them to us. And this is the chief function of the Bible; without it we're reduced to being spectators trying to make sense of a subtle TV drama where the sound volume has been turned down to zero. We are not at liberty then to interpret Christ's death on the cross in any way we please - God has provided us with his own authoritative commentary on that pivotal event - in the Scriptures.

Thirdly, when evangelicals say that the Bible is the Word of God, they are in no way contradicting the perfection of Christ as the full and final revelation of God's person to us. It would be equally true, and for many people far more appealing, if we said that our knowledge of God is primarily and supremely mediated through Christ. But fine and valid though such a statement would be, it would be unhelpful because it would not indicate what channel of access we who live in 2014 have to this Christ. There are today countless bogus Christs being offered to the world. There's Christ the Hollywood superstar, Christ the anti-colonial

freedom fighter, Christ the Eastern guru, Christ the humanitarian moralist. Everybody wants Jesus to hold their banner, to represent their enthusiasm. One is tempted to say, as in that old television quiz programme, 'Will the real Jesus Christ please stand up?'

Where are we to find him?

There is only one answer, and that is in the God-authorized documents that speak of him. In this regard we must give credit to the New Delhi World Council of Churches conference in 1961 which revised the confessional basis of the World Council to read 'A fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures'. Of course it must be 'according to the Scriptures', because there is no other Jesus to confess. Any other Jesus is an impostor. Christ coming as the Word made flesh did not supersede the need for the Bible. It made that need all the more obvious. Dare I put it this way - without wishing to seem impious - it would have been utterly pointless if God had sent Christ into the world without also accompanying his coming by an authoritative inspired interpretive word so that we could rightly understand who he was and what he had come to do.

Someone may protest that the whole idea of a divinely inspired text is too crazy to be believed, so perhaps a comparison may help at this point:

What happened to Mary that day in Nazareth? Christians believe that a fallible, sinful, human woman was so acted upon by the Holy Spirit that the child conceived in her womb was 100% human and 100% divine. He was her son and he was God's Son. He was, as John so provocatively describes him, the "Word made flesh".

And what happened in the cases of the prophets and the apostles? Evangelical Christians believe that in a similarly supernatural way, the Spirit of God so acted upon them, fallible, sinful and human though they were, that the words they wrote were 100% human and 100% divine - human words and God's Word. The Word made scripture.

Of course it is miraculous. In one case it's the miracle of the incarnation and in the other it's the miracle of inspiration. But for those who believe the former there should be no intrinsic difficulty in believing the latter. Humanness and divinity are united in the Word made legible in a manner not unlike the way they united in the Word made flesh.

If we are asked for evidence of such a miraculous doctrine then we have three arguments to cite:

The Bible's self testimony

'All scripture is inspired by God' (2 Tim. 3:16, RSV): that Greek word means 'exhaled by the creative breath of God'. If someone complains that to defend the inspiration of the Bible by quoting the Bible is a circular argument, then we reply that the validity of an *absolute* authority can only be established by argument that is in some sense circular. In the nature of the case, there is no authority *higher* than that of the Word of God to which appeal might be made for 'proof' of the Bible's divine origin.

The testimony of Christ

Even if we only accept that the Gospels provide us with a trustworthy account of Jesus' teaching and reserve judgment on the question of their divine inspiration, we are compelled to conclude either that the doctrine of inspiration is true or that Christ was mistaken, for it is quite clear that he accepted fully the Old Testament's divine authority. Scripture for him could not, as he put it, "be broken". When faced with demonic temptation, the phrase "It is written ..." carried all the authority necessary to silence inner doubt. Well does John Bright comment in his book *The Authority of the Old Testament*: "I find it interesting and not a little odd that although the Old Testament on occasion offends our Christian feelings, it did not apparently offend Christ's 'Christian feeling. Could it really be that we are ethically and religiously more sensitive than he? Or is it perhaps that we do not view the Old Testament as he did?"

It is utterly inconsistent to couple a high view of Christ's perfection with a low view of the Bible's veracity.

The testimony of the Holy Spirit

There is a lovely story of how Spurgeon used to gather crowds for open-air sermons. He would have a hat and put it down on the ground as if there were a little animal underneath it. He would point a quivering finger at it and say, 'It's alive, it's alive!' Of course a crowd would gather, waiting to see what kind of animal

he had hidden underneath. Then he would pick up the hat and reveal a Bible, which he would then wave in the air announcing 'It's alive!', and start to preach.

I don't know whether such a tactic would work today. But what Spurgeon claimed, of course, was absolutely right. When we listen to or read from the Bible, we are placing ourselves in a most precarious place, because it is alive.

This final argument for the uniqueness of the Bible resonated powerfully with me as a young believer because, you recall, that is exactly how I was converted. I was reading the Bible to find out what these Christians thought in order to prove them all wrong. But then suddenly the tables were turned and the Word leapt up and grabbed me by the throat. The authority of the Bible always lies ultimately in its self-authenticating power. The Spirit of God acts through the Word establishing its authority in people's hearts. And for that reason, of course, Scripture doesn't really need to be defended by long-winded and dusty academic arguments about inspiration. The best way to defend it is to preach it. That was certainly my experience as a pastor to Cambridge university students. As Spurgeon said on another occasion: 'You don't need to defend a lion - you just let it out of the cage'.

As I say, I needed no convincing of this as a young Christian. Jesus had told me in the Gospel of John to "continue in his word" if I wanted to be a genuine disciple of his and know the liberating truth he had come to bring.

What did that mean in practice? Jesus had never written a book, so where was I to find "his word" so I could continue in it? The answer was self-evident – had he not been speaking to me all along? - through John's gospel. The vehicle of Jesus' word was the Bible. For me this was not initially a theological proposition, it was an indispensable part of my testimony. It was a spiritual experience.

I soon discovered quite a large company of students in my university who shared this experience. They worshipped in a wide range of different churches; some went to Anglican churches and some to non-conformist chapels; a sizeable number went to an obscure group I had never heard of before called "the Plymouth Brethren"; some held their hands in the air and spoke in tongues and others thought that kind of charismatic stuff was rather childish. But these differences of church affiliation and worship style didn't seem to bother them too much, because they all had one thing in common – a high regard for the Bible and a desire to study it. The word they used to distinguish themselves in this respect was "evangelical". Without any hesitation, I joined their number and began to call myself an evangelical Christian too.

And fifty years on, I still do.

This high view of Scripture, I suggest, is what primarily defines an evangelical. Not the Graham Kendrick worship songs and Charles Wesley hymns we sing, not the magazines we read, not the congregations we attend, not even organisations like the Evangelical Alliance that we belong to – whether you and I are right to call ourselves evangelicals hinges on the authority we ascribe to the Bible.

In giving such a high role to the Bible, evangelicals of course stand squarely in the tradition of reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin and their later disciples in English-speaking world, who are often called the puritans. In the 16th and 17th centuries these protestant believers challenged the spiritual decadence of the medieval church by a direct appeal to the authority of the Bible over heads of popes, kings and councils. Evangelicals see themselves as the spiritual heirs of these great reforming pioneers. And I too am proud to identify with that rich heritage.

But it must also be said that a high view of Scripture on its own is not enough.

Jehovah's Witnesses have a high view of scripture too, don't they? So do any number of other bizarre sects. Are they to be called "evangelicals" then? Certainly not! It is pointless to say you believe the Bible is the Word of God unless you go on to explain the principles that control your interpretation of the Bible.

2. Evangelicals seek to interpret the Bible in a responsible and scholarly manner.

Nothing undermines the authority of the Bible more than the abuse of the text to support fanatical or crazy ideas. We can see today how allegiance to a crude, irrational interpretation of the Koran is bringing Islam into global contempt among civilised peoples. Well, the Bible can be abused like that too, and often has been. As Shakespeare wisely observes: "The Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose"

However, once we raise the issue of biblical interpretation (or “hermeneutics” as it is technically called), we inevitably encounter a thorny theological debate about the tension between human reason and the Bible.

When faced by a doctrinal or moral difficulty, should a Christian base their opinion solely on the text of Scripture or should they also give weight to the rational conclusions of human logic and modern science? Evangelicals distinguish themselves from liberal Christians on the one hand and fundamentalist Christians on the other by their response to this longstanding controversy.

Evangelicals are, as we have already said, first and foremost “Bible people” - they confess the Bible to be the inspired Word of God – and, if it is to be consistently held, such a confession must invest the Bible’s teaching with supreme authority. You can hardly accuse God of lying, so if the Bible is the Word of God, it must be trustworthy, or that claim is vacuous.

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 angst or uncertainty.

A 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. 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. In fact, 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 obscurantism is not representative of true evangelicalism. Although the term is not ideal, I shall call such anti-intellectuals 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.

At the other extreme, of course, there are some Christians who experience no difficulty at all in embracing modern science because they see the Bible as simply a fallible witness to the human experience of God. If Moses or Paul or any of the other biblical authors say something which they find incompatible with modern thought, their solution is simple – the prophets were children of their time and sometimes they got it wrong. The label is not ideal, but I shall call this the point of view espoused by “liberals”. The characteristic of liberal Christians is that they are not prepared to submit their minds to the authority of the divine Word when it comes to knowing God. Instead they arrogate to themselves the right to pick and choose the bits of the Bible they are prepared to agree with, effectively deciding what God is like on the basis of their own opinion. This is of course precisely the kind of theological speculation that is forbidden in the second commandment. A “graven image” is the idol you get when you let your own imagination shape your idea of God.

Evangelicals, I say, occupy the middle ground between these fundamentalist and liberal extremes. They do not occupy it, let me hasten to add, by seeking some insipid compromise between reason and the Bible. 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.

A willingness to listen to the voice of reason as we interpret the Bible is, of course, particularly important when pastoral issues are at stake. Modern science has thrown new light on the “nature” of many things which were not properly understood in ancient times. Biblical interpretation must take into account the fact that divine inspiration accommodated itself to the pre-modern world-view of its original authors, even when their culture was ignorant or misinformed.

Demon possession is perhaps a good example of this. Ancient culture clearly had the wrong idea about mental illness, yet the Bible does not attempt to correct it. Whilst not arrogantly dismissing what the Bible says about this subject, therefore, we must not assume as some fundamentalists do that demon possession provides us with a complete and accurate explanation of the phenomenon of mental disorder.

In a not dissimilar way, we also now understand the phenomenon of homosexuality much better than we used to do. Its origin has not yet been discovered, but numerous possibilities have been discussed: a genetic predisposition; an abnormal hormone flux in the womb; remote or excessively intense relationships with one or both parents. The jury is still out on this debate, but the psychological evidence unambiguously indicates that sexual orientation is fixed at a very early age and is immutable. The most that the so-called ex-gay movement has ever been able to demonstrate is temporary modification of behaviour in a handful of cases, sustained by substantial social rewards. They have produced no evidence that anyone's underlying orientation can be permanently changed, and there are plenty of gay Christians around who can testify to the damage which the futile quest for "healing" through such groups has caused them.

This new psychological knowledge about homosexuality must inform our interpretation and application of the biblical text. To refuse to allow such a revision would be fundamentalist obscurantism of a particularly dangerous kind because, like the issue of mental illness, it has such serious pastoral implications.

Only a fundamentalist would argue that, since the Bible talks about demon-possession, modern psychiatric ideas about mental illness must be wrong, so the schizophrenic should throw away their medication and seek exorcism instead. Similarly, only a fundamentalist would suggest that, because the Bible has no idea of homosexual orientation, 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.

In my judgment, the refusal to take sides in that theological tug-of-war has been amply vindicated. As a result of it, an evangelical's confidence in the authority of Scripture never leads to 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 in the academic world. Evangelicals have served as professors in the theology departments of secular universities and continue to do so.

They are distinguished by what I would describe as a responsible and scholarly approach to all questions of biblical interpretation. I certainly would not wish to be known as an evangelical if that was not true.

But that kind of intellectual integrity brings with it an inescapable corollary.

3. Evangelicals respect personal conscience in regard to controversial issues

Once we acknowledge that biblical interpretation can sometimes be a tricky subject, we have to acknowledge that different people may well interpret the Bible in different ways. So the question arises, how do we seek to handle such potential for disunity?

One very early response to the emergence of theological disagreement was to invoke the authority of the institutional church. Thus, when faced with a doctrinal conflict, the individual believer was instructed to surrender their conscience to the dictates of church tradition.

For the sake of giving it a label, I want to call this the **conservative catholic** solution – though I hasten to say that I am using the word "catholic" here with a small "c", because, as I will stress a little later, although the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope remains the most extreme formulation of this attempt by the church to impose conformity on all Christians, such ecclesiastical authoritarianism has by no means been limited to the Vatican. There have been plenty of protestant bishops and ministers willing to claim infallibility for their particular interpretation of the biblical text and willing to persecute or excommunicate any who deny it.

In contrast to the conservative catholic view, on the other hand, there have been brave Christians throughout church history who have insisted on their individual right to follow their own private understanding of the Holy Spirit's leading on issues. I will call this the **radical protestant** view. Groups like the Anabaptists, the early Congregationalists and the Quakers faced appalling persecution in Europe during the 17th century because they dared to challenge the dictates of ecclesiastical authorities, and there is a clear historical link between those brave dissenters and modern evangelicals. In fact, the emergence of religious toleration at the very end of the 17th century in Britain was closely associated with the courageous principled stand of those who called themselves the "**non-conformists**".

Let me immediately make plain that this does not mean that evangelicalism is just a form of sanctified

individualism. Certainly not! Maverick Christians who show no sense of submission to the wider Christian community are most definitely not evangelicals. Evangelical Christians have always placed a great deal of theological emphasis on what Bible says about the church as the "the body of Christ" and the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit". If their non-conformity has sometimes led to schism, this has always been characterised by great reluctance and regret. The non-conformist chapels that we see in every town and city are evidence of the persecuting intolerance of ecclesiastical authoritarians rather than of the bolshie revolutionary sedition of their founding dissenters.

Nevertheless, it remains a fundamental tenet of evangelical understanding that the grace of God is mediated to the Christian through a personal 1:1 faith relationship with Christ: not through the priest or the sacraments. Evangelicals believe that every human individual is accountable directly to God and that church tradition is an unreliable guide to a right understanding of the Bible.

Jesus himself warned about the latter when he said to the Jewish leaders of his day: "You have made the Word of God void by your traditions" (Mark 7:13).

The trouble with tradition is that it obstructs change and sometimes change is necessary. Jesus himself brought change – and resistance to that change was one of the reasons he was crucified.

On many occasions, the church too has resisted change. Who can possibly deny that the church has made many grievous mistakes in its long history? It has used texts from the Bible to endorse serious theological error, to justify crazy military crusades and to retain unjust cultural prejudices against the Jews, against Muslims, against negroes, against women, and against gays.

Evangelicals believe the only way to correct those mistakes is by patiently attending to the word of Christ as it comes to us, not through the distorting lens of church tradition, but afresh through contemporary Bible study. That I believe is why Jesus told new believers to "continue in his word" – for discipleship is a continuing process – when it comes to understanding the truth as it is in Jesus we have never "arrived". Our understanding of the Bible advances by an iterative procedure of constantly improving approximations to the truth. We understand the Bible better today than we did 500 years ago because this is how the Holy Spirit chooses to work. As the apostle Paul admitted, at any particular moment in church history, "we understand in part", and will continue to do so until the final day arrives – only then will we know God as fully as he knows us (I Corinthians 13:8-12).

Such humility in regard to our current theological understanding must surely generate respect for other people's opinions. In that respect the influence of the radical protestants on the ideal of religious toleration in the English-speaking world has been enormously important. It was the need to accommodate the consciences of non-conformist Christians that taught the Western world the meaning of the word "toleration". I might add, it is the absence of a similar historical accommodation to dissent that is causing such barbarous intolerance in the Middle East at the moment.

As I stressed earlier, it is a mistake to think that the enemies of the protestant radicals were always based in Rome. Take the Pilgrim Fathers for example – they fled across the Atlantic not primarily from persecution by Catholics but by Lutherans and by Calvinists and, in this country by Anglican bishops. When they were about to set sail for America, their pastor John Robinson preached a sermon in which he bewailed the way that the reformed churches, just like Catholicism, had become stuck in the mire of tradition. To be a Christian is always to be constantly open to further light upon the truth as it is in Jesus, insisted Robinson. The church must never rest on the laurels of its earlier history, but always be open, not to new truth, but to a better understanding the truth that has been once and for all been given to us in the Bible.

Part of Robinson's Farewell speech reads as follows:

"I charge you before God and his blessed angels that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow Christ. If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth from my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.

The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw. Whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they (Lutherans) will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented. For though they were precious shining lights in their time, yet God has not revealed his whole will to them. And were they now living, they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light, as they had received."

His words later became the inspiration for a great non-conformist hymn.

*We limit not the truth of God
To our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect,
Crude, partial, and confined.
No, let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred:
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from His Word.*

Sadly, I fear the words of that hymn would stick in the throats of many so-called evangelicals today. For these days, they are stuck in their traditions every bit as much as were the Pharisees in Jesus' day and the Catholics in Luther's, and the reformed churches in the days of John Robinson. As a result, like the Pilgrim Fathers, some have felt compelled to "jump ship" and board the Mayflower, putting distance between themselves and the stick-in-the-mud version of Christian spirituality in which they were nurtured. It is sad – and in my view misjudged.

Because true evangelicals have always affirmed a radical non-conformist openness to new light from the Word, and for that reason they have always tolerated diversity on a wide range of issues which they accept should be regarded as matters of private opinion.

Baptism is a good example of this spirit of tolerance. The conservative catholic might well see such a sacrament as a necessary and even a "saving" rite on the grounds that this is what church tradition teaches. Evangelicals, on the other hand, while recognising the importance of baptism as a mark of church membership, are generally 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. Your view of baptism is a matter of individual conscience – not an evangelical essential.

Because of this intrinsic spirit of tolerance, in spite of all the early rhetoric of the ecumenical movement, evangelicalism actually bridges the gaps between Christian denominations at the grassroots level far more successfully than the World Council of Churches has ever done.

One revealing indicator of the reluctance of evangelicals to impose an unnecessary degree of conformity on their brothers and sisters is the observation that evangelical statements of faith have always been limited in scope. Like the classic creeds of the early centuries, and the confessions of the reformed churches, evangelical statements of faith have always affirmed the great central doctrines of the Christian faith regarding the person and work of Christ, but have deliberately sidestepped controversial areas out of respect for liberty of conscience.

Ethical controversies in particular have never been included in evangelical statements of faith. There are two reasons for this wise policy:

First: Many evangelicals would accept, as I certainly do, that the Bible only ever teaches morality indirectly, because its overall intention is not moralistic. Unlike the Koran, the Bible is primarily a book of faith not a book of law. The opposite of a saint is not a sinner but an unbeliever. The Bible's purpose is to give us a faith perspective on life in the broad sweep of its revelatory story; the concrete particulars of the morality it presents in its narration of this revelatory adventure cannot be ours without being passed through a hermeneutic filter involving an understanding of the difference of historical and cultural horizons.

In this respect it is arguable that many Christians make moral misjudgements because they use the Bible like Pharisees, wishing to define righteousness by a list of right and wrong acts (i.e. law), when Jesus actually rejected that kind of casuistry, urging his followers instead to work out how to act in any situation by applying his two golden rules: love God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself.

Second: In situations of ethical uncertainty, evangelicals have always recognised that sometimes it is necessary to make judgements based on the optimisation of consequences rather than simplistic ideas of right and wrong – this is what we often call "the lesser of two evils" argument. Jesus himself seems to have endorsed this ethical approach in his comment on divorce – it isn't God's ideal he said, but Moses allowed it because of the hardness of men's hearts – divorce is never "good", but sometimes in a fallen world there is no good choice available, only a choice between different degrees of bad – the lesser evil.

When you put these two considerations together, it is easy to see why wise evangelical theologians have decided to keep ethics out of their statements of faith – a moral verdict on an issue is not a timeless truth in the same way that the doctrine of the trinity is. There has to be room for consciences to differ as novel situations arise and new light on the biblical text is given.

Paul seems to me to be endorsing this morally flexible point of view very explicitly when he deals with the vexed question of eating meat that has been offered to idols. He insists that each believer should obey their own conscience on the matter and that the Christian community should not try to make a blanket rule to which everyone must conform.

The debate about abortion is perhaps a pertinent contemporary example to cite here. There are quite a number of evangelical gynaecologists and obstetricians who believe it is sometimes morally right, or at least the lesser of two evils, to terminate a pregnancy. On the other hand, there is also a very powerful Christian lobby that holds that abortion under any circumstances is a form of murder. The argument over this modern moral issue has at times been extremely heated, but as far as I'm aware, the debate has been contained within the circle of evangelical fellowship. Even over such an emotive issue as the sanctity of unborn life, the private conscience of mothers and doctors has been respected. Abortion is an immensely complex ethical issue – made even more complicated by modern medical advances in embryology. Our creeds and statements of faith, therefore, wisely do not try to adjudicate upon it. The same could be said for any number of other modern ethical debates – divorce, the role of women, nuclear weapons, capital punishment – ethical debates of this kind have never been made a defining issue for evangelicals, nor should they.

We are united by our high view of scripture and our commitment to interpret the Bible in a scholarly and responsible fashion. But we do not always agree with one another – on theological issues like baptism – on pastoral issues like demon possession – on ethical issues like divorce and abortion – we respect liberty of conscience. Toleration is a fundamental lesson that we have learned during our long and sometimes turbulent history.

Why then? – Why then, in the name of God – is the debate about homosexuality being turned into an evangelical shibboleth? – a defining issue about which dissent is not allowed?

Such intolerance is utterly out of line with our evangelical heritage of tolerance toward conscientious dissent on controversial issues.

There is in fact a painful irony in the way much of the press coverage of the gay debate has portrayed conservative Christians as blinkered and intolerant extremists. Given the moralising pontifications of some self-appointed evangelical spokespersons, such a negative image is hardly surprising. But it is completely unfair. For when they are true to their tradition, evangelicals are not extremists of that kind at all. On the contrary, a sweet and charitable reasonableness has always in the past characterised their internal disagreements.

I am reminded of the famous lines attributed to the puritan Richard Baxter and often quoted by John Stott:

On things that are essential – unity
On things that are not essential – liberty
In all things – charity.

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. A determined attempt is being made to relocate evangelicalism closer to the fundamentalist and conservative catholic extremes on the issue of homosexuality. Any kind of open-mindedness on this controversial issue is being portrayed as a compromising betrayal of biblical truth. The fact is, however, it is nothing of the kind. Tolerance of diversity of opinion is precisely where evangelicals should be on this matter.

Evangelicals know that the unity of the church must always be maintained without doing violence to the private consciences of individual believers. They know it is 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.

I have news for them – it isn't. It is a side issue – at least is for everyone except the gay community who are directly affected.

For homosexual Christians like I guess most of us here today, this uncharacteristic intolerance on the part of our evangelical brother and sisters is of course highly problematic - it generates a profound contradiction between faith and experience.

On the one hand, we are believers who have known the power of the Word and the Spirit of God in our lives. On the other hand, we long for fulfilment of our God-given potential for sexual intimacy. As in the case of heterosexuals, few of us are gifted with celibacy. So, as I said right at the start, sadly, for many the only way to resolve the cognitive dissonance to which evangelicalism has subjected them has been to move theologically in the direction of liberal churches, sometimes dubbing themselves "post-evangelicals". Worse still, some gay evangelicals feel so spiritually abandoned, they have given up their faith altogether. I suspect those evangelical leaders who are playing ecclesiastical power games no doubt consider this loss is 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.

I say again, there is no disastrous compromise in adopting a tolerant respect for different views on this matter of homosexuality. Evangelicals know from experience that, when reason seems to collide with Scripture, or the church's tradition with the individual's conscience, toleration not persecution is the godly response. The intellectual flexibility and political manoeuvrability that comes from such a stance of principled sufferance has, on many other issues, enabled evangelicals to find a position of positive biblical balance, over against the contentious extremism of fundamentalist literalism, liberal scepticism, and ecclesiastical authoritarianism.

Yet, for some unaccountable reason, evangelicals are not willing to keep either their minds or their options open over the question of homosexuality.

Last but not least

That intolerance is not only damaging the church internally. The credibility of the church's mission to the world is being undermined too.

Please allow me to say a few words about this in closing, for it is the consequence of the current situation that grieves me more than any other.

Although evangelicalism can trace its roots back to the reformers, the puritans and the non-conformists, the word "evangelical" is supremely associated with the great 18th century revivals. Preachers like Wesley and Whitfield in Britain and the great Jonathan Edwards in New England, preached the simple biblical message of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It was that "gospel preaching" that first gave rise to the term "evangelical". They told men and woman who were Christian in name but not in experience "you must be born again" - and, as a result, empty churches were filled and multitudes of new churches and chapels built. The Holy Spirit breathed new life into the Christian community – and the whole of society felt the impact of that spiritual renewal – preachers like Moody in the 19th century and Billy Graham in the 20th stand in that same tradition of "evangelical revival". The entire modern missionary movement has grown out of the zeal for evangelisation that it has engendered.

The greatest priority of any evangelical worthy of the name is to share the Christian message with others in obedience to Christ's final missionary mandate - go into all the world and preach the gospel." What is the use of an evangelical who cannot evangelise?

But today, hostility towards homophile relationships within the institutional church has, in my view, not only made the evangelisation of the gay community impossible, but has also grossly undermined the credibility of the Christian message for all people who live in the West under the age of 40.

This abdication of our missionary mandate for the sake of a moral crusade against homosexuality is all the more disastrous when it is viewed in a global context. We live in days when it is no longer communism that threatens the future of the church but a militant and barbaric form of islam. There is plenty of evidence that the secular world is drawing the conclusion that any religion that claims to be based on a divinely inspired text is dangerous and fanatical. Evangelicals are being tarred with the same brush as the Taliban, Al Qaeda and the warriors of the so-called Islamic State.

And what are the evangelicals doing in these critical days, when militarised islam once again threatens Christendom? – they are fighting internally about whether a gay man or woman can be a priest or not!

I am reminded of famous story about the fall of Constantinople in 15th century. That city had since the time of the Roman empire been the capital of the Byzantine Church, but in the year 1484 it was besieged by the forces of the Islamic Ottomans. It was a crucial moment in the history of the world, not so far removed from the confrontation that is taking place once again right now in Turkey. Do you know what the Christian monks in Constantinople are reputed to have been doing during that siege in 1484? They were debating how many angels could dance of the head of a pin!

A similar kind of suicidal blinkered mental block seems to be stultifying evangelicals today. I cannot express how much it grieves me – if Jesus wept over Jerusalem, how must he be weeping over the parlous state of the church today.

It is time to sum up:

Evangelicals disagree about many things – they always have – they disagree about war, abortion, divorce, the role of women, charismatic gifts, the second coming of Christ, and a hundred other issues. We work toward the resolution of those disagreements by studying the Bible together – this is what it means for us to “continue in Christ’s word” – our experience is that as we study the Bible together, according to his promise, the truth becomes clearer and previous mistakes are overcome – the Lord always has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.

There are absolutely no grounds for treating the controversy about homosexuality in a different way. On the contrary, excluding gay Christians risks incurring a frighteningly serious rebuke from the Master:

It would be better, Jesus said, to be drowned in the depths of the sea than to be a stumblingblock to one who believes in him; and a stumblingblock is precisely what many so-called evangelicals have become to those in the gay community that Christ wishes to call to faith in himself.

Personally, I refuse to dignify those who have become so spiritually effete with the honoured title of “evangelical”. In my view, it is they who have forfeited the right to that name.

I, on the other hand may be a gay man

- but I am also still a Christian and an evangelical Christian at that.