

Being Clearly and Positively Evangelical

Churchman 111/2 1997

Mark D Thompson

This article was given as a paper at the REFORM Bishopsgate Conference on 29 June 1996.

Introduction

I wonder whether you have ever played 'The Dictionary Game'. On holiday earlier this year I was reintroduced to this very simple, amusing, and brain-stretching pastime. All you need are a good number of participants, some paper and pens, and, of course, a dictionary. One player looks through the dictionary to find a word which is unknown to the others. Each player is then invited to write a dictionary-style definition for that word. The definitions are collected; the dictionary's answer is added to them; they are all shuffled and read out loud. Then everyone guesses which is the correct definition. It is not a game I expect would be popular amongst post-modernists or deconstructionists.

When we played the game with friends earlier this year, there were moments of near hysterical laughter – some of the definitions were bizarre, some outrageous. It was all good fun. Of course it is even more fun when one or more of the players give up trying to guess the dictionary's answer and just go for the laughs.

But sometimes in real life I get the feeling people are still playing 'The Dictionary Game'. Some very important words are being stretched beyond the bounds of all credibility. You have recognized the same thing, no doubt. Sometimes, of course, it does not matter that a word is being redefined. After all, ours is a living, developing language. None of us really wants to go back to Elizabethan English. But at other times much, much more is involved; the redefinition matters.

If I am not mistaken there is a concerted attempt being made at present to redefine what it means to be an evangelical Christian. A number of prominent people around the world are trying to broaden the term, to encompass a variety of perspectives which were once quite alien to evangelical thought and practice.

Twenty years ago John Stott was able to define 'Evangelicalism' as authentic biblical Christianity, where thought and practice are shaped by God's revelation of himself in a verbally inspired, infallible Scripture. Today a number of leading evangelical thinkers consider such a definition to be too narrow, too divisive, too doctrinaire. We are repeatedly warned of the danger of division and disintegration, and the need to be more inclusive in our ideas, our attitudes, and our practice.

Old fashioned 'liberal Evangelicalism' is trying to hijack the middle ground, and sadly the attempt is succeeding in many quarters. One of the fascinating experiences of my time in England has been to hear my friends, those whom I have always known simply as 'Evangelicals', described first as 'conservative Evangelicals', and most recently as 'the highly conservative'. I should not have been surprised. The only way 'liberal Evangelicals' can capture the middle ground is by pushing us out to the periphery and making us sound extreme. I

have recently heard one leading English theologian describe those who would define Evangelicalism in terms of its theology as ‘fascists’.

My analysis of the current situation might be completely wrong. Perhaps you will be in a better position than I to judge just what is the state of Evangelicalism in this country. But then again, my analysis could actually be right. Familiarity has this uncanny, blinding effect. The danger that worried us when we first took an honest, hard look at Evangelicalism in Britain might not look so dangerous now. But if that is the case, it is we who have changed, not the danger! How are we to explain those who call themselves ‘evangelical’ refusing to take a stand on the Bible’s teaching about sexual sin, especially homosexual sin? How are we to explain the embrace of such slogans as ‘Scripture contains the Word of God’? How are we to explain the exegetical back-flips done in the face of the Bible’s teaching on gender differences or the priesthood of all believers? How are we to explain the reluctance of so many to examine critically the theology of a movement that first brought us ‘speaking in tongues’, then gave us ‘words of knowledge’, has recently given us Toronto with all its absurdities, and now, in some parts of the world, commends to us, ‘vomiting in the Spirit’?

More important than all these questions is ‘How can we respond to the challenges we face?’

I want to encourage us to be clearly evangelical and to be positively evangelical. I am convinced that the answer to the challenges to which I have alluded lies, not in pointing the finger at the bad guys or even trying to identify them, but in speaking the truth clearly, simply, and without compromise, and exercising a bold confidence in the God who is sovereign in his world.

1 On Being Clear

May I suggest that if we are to be clear about the message we have to proclaim in the world there are at least five things we need to do.

1.1 Recommit ourselves to the careful study and preaching of the Bible as the Word of God

It would be all too easy to dismiss this as something which is already the leading characteristic of our lives and ministries. But is it? Even in evangelical circles, good strong expository preaching is not common. The pressure is on, from a number of quarters, to replace exposition with entertainment, or biblical teaching with the more attractive elements of the wisdom of our age. It seems to me that underlying so many of our most pressing dilemmas at the present time is an erosion of our confidence in God and his Word. And that erosion of confidence shows itself in evangelical preaching when the passage is merely a launching pad for the things *I* think we need to hear, when the stories swamp the text, or when our sermon is full of good biblical truth, but not necessarily the good biblical truth that comes from this passage. Is that really biblical preaching? Or again, how many of our sermons are actually shaped by the text on which we are preaching? Have we fallen into the trap of squeezing every biblical text into the same time-honoured formula, perhaps the one we learnt at camp, or heard from some great one, or read in some recommended textbook? Is that really biblical preaching?

The Bible is the Word of God to us. God – the God who knows much more about effective communication than the gurus of our day – God has spoken. And we, as those rescued by God’s incredible mercy, need to hear and to heed what God has to say. As members of evangelical congregations, do we have an appetite for the Word of God? Do we encourage those who minister to us to keep working hard at bringing that Word of God to us? Do we refuse to be satisfied with anything less? Are we taking every opportunity possible to put ourselves under that Word, to be shaped by that Word, so that our lives might be a more appropriate response to all that God has done for us and said to us? And as preachers in evangelical congregations, are we still putting in the hard work of wrestling with the Word of God in our own lives as well as in sermon preparation? Do we still have confidence that God changes people through *his* Word? Do we still believe that this Word is ‘the sword of the Spirit’, the instrument that is able to cut to the heart and effect the only kind of change that will last? Or have we succumbed to the subtle pressure to fill our sermons with pop psychology, clever illustrations, and ungrounded exhortations? What do our sermons teach our people about how they can and should use the Bible? Are we still willing to learn how to do it better?

Today and every day we need to recommit ourselves to the careful study and preaching of the Bible as the Word of God.

1.2 Aim at clarity and simplicity

Surely it was James Denney who said it was impossible to draw attention to your own cleverness and Christ’s power to save in the same sermon? Perhaps this is a lesson we need to relearn in our present circumstances. Some modern evangelical writing and some modern evangelical preaching have let the liberal academy set the agenda. And it is too clever by half.

I am not suggesting that we should abandon the academic defence and exposition of the truth. I am not suggesting that we can afford to ignore the rival world-views and philosophical systems

which are influencing people both inside and outside our churches. I am not saying there is no place for serious, rigorous, biblical, theological and apologetic thinking. In fact, I am convinced we need to be more serious about all of these things. Some of our present problems stem from the fact that precious few evangelical people have been engaged in the academic world of theology and biblical studies. What future can we expect if we abandon our universities and theological colleges to others who might be interested in teaching in them while we simply get on with the more important grass-roots ministries? What future can we expect when we tell our young men that working hard at getting the best theological education does not matter – just do as much ministry as you can while you are at college and learn on the job. Do you really expect to build forty years of ministry on three years of student work? Nevertheless, the aim of the game at either the academic or the popular level must be the clear communication of God's truth, not a demonstration of our own erudition.

And that must mean not fudging when it comes to the difficult issues. It is amazing, once you realize it, at how many points our confidence is being attacked by those who claim to be evangelical. Agnosticism has never been an evangelical virtue, but there are people today who are trying to tell us that it is, or at least that it should be. It is almost as if we have allowed ourselves to become embarrassed about some of the things God has said to us. We blush at the thought of Jesus as the only way of salvation and all those who do not trust him being lost. We get all nervous about the Bible's forthright declaration that the only legitimate sexual activity is that between a man and a woman within the covenant of marriage. We look around sheepishly when people point to the way the Bible marks out different functions for men and women either within marriage or within the Christian congregation.

And so we fudge. We hide behind the scholarly uncertainty about this passage, or the vagaries of modern hermeneutical theory, or long-standing Christian differences on the particular issue. Have you noticed how the expression 'well we can't really be sure' is being heard more and more frequently in evangelical circles? Could you imagine it on the lips of Billy Graham? Instead of 'the Bible says' we would have 'well maybe it's possible that it means...'. What about Martin Luther? 'I'm pretty sure this is where I stand...' or 'Here I stand, I can do no other'?

Clarity is tied to confidence, and confidence is tied to clarity. If God has spoken clearly, we can be confident in the message we have to proclaim and the life we ought to live in response to God's mercy. When we are confident we can speak and live clearly without fudging even on the difficult issues. And it is right and godly because the confidence we have is not confidence in ourselves but confidence in God, the clearly speaking God.

We need to get back to clarity and simplicity when it comes to the proclamation of the Word of God.

1.3 Recognize the pressures that are on us to be unclear

We ought to be honest with ourselves, and with each other, about the pressures which we feel to be more accommodating, to fudge on the difficult issues, to cloud evangelical theology, well just a little. Some of those pressures are applied from outside, others from within us; some come from legitimate concerns while others are far more dubious.

In a number of recent books we have been warned from our own history. We have been reminded how division has undone us in the past. Sometimes we are told that at critical points in the past, when Evangelicalism had been on the verge of conquering the world, its effectiveness

was almost totally erased by an over-critical spirit and a tendency to ever narrowing definitions of orthodoxy or biblical truth. And we are warned about letting that happen again. Avoid all argument or debate, we are told, especially over doctrinal and ethical issues. Affirm a variety of opinions and not just one.

This is a concern which is not totally without foundation. Undoubtedly there have been some destructive and unnecessary arguments in the history of Evangelicalism. Often they have been about things on which the Bible has little, or in some cases nothing, to say. 'Baptism' seems to be one of those, as, I think, is the question of which method of church government is best. But I am not persuaded that the analysis is entirely correct. Were the definitions really narrowed? Was it really the reaffirmation of what the Bible teaches which undid us in the past? Perhaps we should read our history differently. Nevertheless, even if what we are told is 100% true, the answer cannot be to avoid debate and argument, but rather to be scrupulously honest and godly in the midst of debate and argument, being prepared to speak where the Bible speaks, to refrain from speaking where the Bible is silent, and always to treat our conversation partners with courtesy and love.

Another concern is that over intellectualism. We have been bombarded with the caricature of Evangelicalism as excessively cerebral and unconcerned with the practicalities of life. Bad experiences of theological education sometimes give us an automatic aversion to even the suggestion of theological debate. And so we back off as quickly as possible from anything even remotely like a controversy with doctrinal questions at its heart.

Perhaps you have felt that pressure. It is real. However, the answer is not to avoid theology, theological definition or theological debate. No, the answer lies rather with the recognition that theology can never remain isolated from life. What you really think about God *will* shape the way you respond to him. What you really think about the Bible *will* show itself in the way you use it. What you really think about God's purposes in the world *will* shape your priorities. You cannot help it actually. Sometimes the differences in practice betray a much more significant difference in theology than that which we are prepared to admit. You cannot avoid the theological questions if you want to tackle the practical ones properly. None of us operates without a theology. The real question is whether it is the Bible's theology or whether it is a lie of Satan.

There are other pressures of course. A concern for love leads some people to suggest that we must not exclude anyone. A concern for power leads some to suggest that a broader definition of Evangelicalism might have more influence than one where the teaching of Scripture determines the definition. We are in a much healthier position when we identify these concerns, and the pressure which they generate to revise our understanding of what it means to be an Evangelical, than if we pretend there is no pressure on us at all.

1.4 Identify the points at which evangelical truth is under attack today

Martin Luther once said that you were not defending the truth unless you were defending it at the point at which it was currently being attacked. Our problem is that the truth is being attacked at so many different points at the moment it is hard to know quite where to start.

I have picked just some; you no doubt could provide many more.

Of course, the evangelical understanding of Scripture is under attack. Modern treatments of the subject by those who still want to claim the title 'Evangelical' have dismissed any suggestion of verbal inspiration. We are constantly being told that the traditional emphasis on the divinity of the Scriptures was always at the expense of their humanity. We have ended up with a docetic view of the Bible, we are told. However, the alternative such writers present could be described as an adoptionist view of the Bible. These words do not really come from God. God just chooses to use them, warts and all.

The clarity of Scripture is also under attack. So much of what goes for the discipline of hermeneutics is little more than an exercise in unbelief. I remember a great old saint of the past remarking that 'no one ever even spoke about hermeneutics until we stopped believing the Bible as God's Word'. According to some modern writers, *we* might be able to communicate effectively with one another but God is handicapped in this regard. To all this could be added the quite fundamental (yet also blatantly ludicrous) attacks of post-modernism and deconstructionism.

The biblical understanding of salvation is under attack, not least from the Church of England Doctrine Commission report *The Mystery of Salvation*.¹ That report not only denigrates Christ by promoting an inclusive view of salvation (Christ can and does save under the guise of other faiths),² it minimises the reality of hell (annihilation a truer picture than eternal torment),³ and is weak on the second coming (when God remakes the whole world, as he has promised, Jesus Christ will be personally present as the living heart and focus of all).⁴ Yet the attack also comes from quarters much closer to home. A recent book presents four views of Christ and salvation where prominent Evangelicals present two of the alternative views: view three – Christ is the only way of salvation but we have to remain agnostic about the fate of those outside Christ; and view four – Christ is the only way of salvation and those outside Christ are without God and without hope in the world.⁵ What is down-played, here as in other places, is that view three, with its reluctance to use the biblical imagery of 'the lost' outside Christ, has devastating repercussions for the significance of Jesus' death, the character of God, and the practice of evangelism.

'Justification by faith' is under attack. The great heart of Reformation theology is being stolen from us by those who would redefine justification in terms of our corporate identity, or restrict it to the Jew-Gentile debate of the first century. We are being told that Luther, Calvin and their heirs have got the New Testament all wrong. They were wrong to think Paul was talking about the great end-time judgment of God, brought into the present by the work of Christ and applied to individual Christians by the Holy Spirit who gives us faith in Christ. Instead, we are told, justification by faith is simply an indication that the barriers have been broken down, that Jews and Gentiles are welcome at the same table. It is the new covenant marker, not the bold declaration that 'there is, therefore, now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Thank God for that growing band of scholars (and, I must say, not just evangelical scholars) who are showing that so much modern writing on this subject misunderstands both Luther and Paul.

Other battle fronts include the doctrine of the church and the doctrine of humanity. On the church, some recent writing, even by evangelicals, seems more intent on preserving institutional structures and authority than on an honest investigation of the teaching of the New Testament on the subject. There seems to be some reluctance to provide us with a thoroughgoing critique of denominationalism in the light of the New Testament's statements about the nature and function of God's people when they gather.

I could list many more. I have picked out just a few of the ones I am up against at the moment. We need to identify the points at which evangelical truth is under attack today. To stand up for truth where it is not under attack is safer to be sure. But Luther was right. To defend the truth anywhere except where it is under attack is not to defend the truth.

1.5 Shun the false antitheses others try to thrust upon us

You will have noticed them, I am sure. Are you a Spirit-filled Christian or simply a Word Christian? As if the Spirit and the Word could be separated let alone opposed to one another! I have heard one writer proclaim a distinction between ‘earnestly contend for the gospel’ Evangelicals and ‘you must be born again’ Evangelicals. As if a concern for evangelism must be in opposition to a concern for the truth of the gospel we proclaim! Or perhaps you have heard this one: ‘Yes, you have a Word-centred ministry, but I have a Christ-centred ministry.’ It is just patently absurd. As if you could honour Christ without taking the Scriptures seriously; as if you could take the Scriptures seriously without honouring Christ! And there are many others.

Believe it or not, some people are being distracted by slick contrasts like these. They sound good unless you listen carefully. We all recognize that the Bible is not God, that evangelism is the primary task in these last days, that the centre of all Christian life and ministry is the person and work of Jesus himself. But the way these contrasts are drawn up distorts the Word of God and ends up distorting Christian life and ministry.

Here then are five suggestions for being more clearly evangelical. They are only a beginning but, given the current challenges we face, each is important. However, I am convinced we can be more than just clear. We can and should be more *positively* evangelical.

2 On Being Positive

I must say that there is a lot that can and should be said for being negative. The Apostle Paul not only teaches the truth, he opposes, and exposes, error (classic examples being the letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians). What made many of the credal formulations of the church so effective was that they defined orthodoxy both positively *and* negatively: ‘We believe *x* and we do not believe *y*’; ‘one substance *without* separation or confusion’. Clearly there are times when a positive statement of the truth is not enough. We do not have to be embarrassed about our rejection of error and heresy.

However, just at the moment there is a real danger that we are only ever heard in negative mode. Perhaps it is almost inevitable when the press, even the Christian press, is not particularly sympathetic. Perhaps, too, the wide range of contemporary attacks upon the teaching of Scripture distort the picture somewhat. Nevertheless, there are serious dangers attached to *only* ever being heard in negative mode. One such danger is that others are making the running with a ‘positive picture of the future’, one, I must say, which distorts both the past and the present.

2.1 Our heritage

Yet we, of all people, have much to be positive about. God has been powerfully at work right through our history. Our evangelical heritage is enviable. Actually, it is one of the reasons why so many want to keep the label 'Evangelical' long after they have abandoned evangelical truth. Our proclamation and defence of the gospel of Jesus Christ stands in continuity with many of the great servants of God who have gone before. We can legitimately claim Wycliffe and Hus; Luther and Calvin; Tyndale, Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer; as well as the Puritans, Wesley, Whitefield, Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Ryle. If you were to make a list of influential Evangelicals in England alone, that list would have to be extensive.

With such an inheritance we can afford to think big. No matter what those outside might say, and no matter what some evangelical revisionists might say, with Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, Hooker and Grindal on our side, evangelical theology is the authentic expression of the theology of the Church of England. The suggestion by George Carey that Evangelicalism is one legitimate expression of what it means to be Anglican – one but not the only one - is not true to history and it is not true to the foundation documents of the Church of England. Yes, it is a fact that the attempt to marginalize us has been going on since the time of Elizabeth I herself, but it is an attempt which is ultimately suicidal. The *Articles*, *The Book of Common Prayer* (especially in its 1552 form), and *The Book of Homilies*, are full of evangelical theology.

It is worth reminding ourselves of these things in the midst of our present struggle. We can be worn down and actually start believing the rhetoric that is thrown at us. Let them say we are an aberrant minority which has recently emerged and is trying to take over what has always been a more catholic and liberal institution. An honest evaluation of the facts shows that is far from the case. The Church of England was born out of that struggle for the truth which we call the Reformation. Its founders were among the first Reformation martyrs in this country. What is more, the Reformers' appeal to the Fathers was on the basis that we are the true Catholics!

It is also worth remembering that this struggle for gospel truth is itself nothing new. It goes back beyond the Reformation to the pages of the New Testament. Jesus spoke about the division which he came to bring about on the earth (Luke 12:51), while Paul spoke about the necessity of division in order to prove who would remain true to the Word of God (1 Cor 11: 19). Paul warned the Ephesian elders that after his departure fierce wolves would come in among them, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:29). A struggle to preserve the truth of the gospel, a struggle even amongst Christians, is something envisaged by the Bible itself (Jude 3). That struggle might well wear us down, but in itself it ought to encourage us. We are engaged in something big, something we share with Christians across the world and through the centuries. And it has not caught God by surprise. The struggle is itself part of our heritage.

Evangelicals in Britain have not been ineffectual in this struggle. Their impact has been felt throughout the world. Whitefield and Wesley both had a profound impact in America. Shaftesbury and others set the evangelical roots of the Diocese of Sydney in Australia. In this century, writers such as F F Bruce, J I Packer, John Stott, and others have encouraged Bible-believing Christians all over the world. Institutions such as the UCCF, Tyndale House, Latimer House and the Proclamation Trust continue to make a vital contribution to the advance of the gospel far beyond these shores.

We have much to be grateful about in our past and in the heritage which has been passed on to us. We can afford to think big. We can afford to be positive. We have every reason to resist the caricatures that are drawn of us and the ridicule that is thrown at us.

2.2 Our hope

Nevertheless, our confidence cannot lie in our heritage, nor even in an institutional recognition of our heritage. We have a much better reason to *be positively* evangelical.

That reason is, of course, *not* our denominational structures. Some people I know are still talking as if the cause of the gospel were really dependent upon our ability to secure a few more evangelical bishops, or even better to convince the hierarchy to provide us with a couple of ‘flying’ ones. But are we fooling ourselves? After all, we are supposed to have more evangelical bishops in the House of Bishops than ever before, and yet the episcopal attack upon Evangelicalism continues unabated. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves all over again of the biblical injunction ‘Do not put your trust in princes’ (Ps 146:3).

Surely the same goes for committees, or voluntary associations such as REFORM, or even our theological colleges. A brief examination of our history will show all kinds of institutions which started out evangelical, were perhaps even set up to defend gospel truth, but have ended up compromised, or worse still, attacking the truth they were intended to defend. It is almost as if the shelf-life of evangelical institutions is rather limited. We have to keep starting again every generation or so.

It would be just as foolish to put our trust in the bright young things coming out of our universities and theological colleges. True, there are some outstanding young ministers of the gospel who are just starting out in their ministries (and that despite the generally dubious state of theological education in this country). Yet we all know of people who have begun in the gospel and left it behind. You could make a list of bishops of the Church of England for whom this is true.

No, our hope for the future advance of the gospel of Christ rests in God and in God alone. The gospel is after all God’s gospel (Rom 1: 1), embodying God’s purposes which have stood unchanged since before the foundation of the world. That gospel reflects the character of God: his love, his power, his faithfulness. It is Christ who builds his church, *and the gates of hell will not overcome it* (Matt 16:18). The kingdom of this world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and *he will reign* for ever and ever (Rev 11:15). And even the faithlessness of his people is not able to thwart his purposes.

Our God is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. No challenge that faces us changes that reality one bit, nor can any challenge undo his plan. And we need to keep in our minds that the advance of his gospel is not, and never has been, identical with the survival of the Church of England, or even the distant hope of an Evangelical in Lambeth Palace. Keeping this in mind, it is clear that pure negative thinking is a symptom of unbelief. It is certainly possible that the Church of England might disintegrate and that its bishops might continue down the path of apostasy so that it becomes impossible for Evangelicals to remain within it; nevertheless, the cause of the gospel will continue and God will have a people for himself. John Stott put it this way recently:

[We] are not Utopians. We cannot build the kingdom of God on earth. We are waiting for the new heaven and the new earth, which will be the home of righteousness and peace. But meanwhile, I’m an optimist, because I don’t think pessimism and faith are easy bedfellows. I believe that God is at work in the world; I believe that the gospel is the

power of God unto salvation to every believer; and I believe that the church can be salt and light in the community.⁶

It is so easy to despair when we look at what is happening around us, what is happening in our culture, what is happening in the Church of England, even at points what is happening within modern evangelicalism. But trust in Christ commits us to a much bigger vision. Christ Jesus laid down his life to secure our salvation and the salvation of all who will put their trust in him. He sits at the right hand of the Father as Lord of all. And nothing can dethrone him. We have the one great message that the whole world needs to hear. Forgiveness is offered and heaven awaits. We cannot but be positive in the long run.

Conclusion

This paper is essentially a plea to stay clear and stay positive. We do not have to jettison clarity for the sake of being positive, nor do we have to abandon all hope for the sake of clarity. Do not fall into the twin dangers which face us: the danger of fudging on what it actually means to be an Evangelical and the danger of falling into a pit of despair and negativity. God has spoken. He has not left us in the dark, nor has he revealed his mind in faltering, obscure tones. And God will triumph. His purposes will be fulfilled. The day is coming when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So let us be clear about the task that lies before us. Let us be clear about what we believe. Let us be clear about what we do not believe as well. And above all, let us renew our confidence in the one who loves us and will one day return to take us home.

MARK THOMPSON lectures at Wycliffe Hall Oxford, where he is engaged in doctoral research.

Endnotes

- 1) London: Church House Publishing 1995
- 2) P 181
- 3) P 199
- 4) P 193
- 5) *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* Dennis L Oekholm and Timothy R Phillips edd (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1995)
- 6) Roy McCloughry 'Basic Stott' *Christianity Today* 8 January 1996 p 32