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EVANGELICAL DRIFT

By David Phillips

This is my 51st and final issue as editor of *Cross†Way*. The magazine, and those that preceded it in the Church Society family line, have been concerned to uphold Biblical teaching within the Church of England. We might prefer to only concentrate on good things, but we learn from Scripture, more or less from beginning to end, that teaching the truth means opposing what is false. From the beginning of Church Association this organisation has identified itself as evangelical. It is striking therefore to discover that many now consider that evangelicals are the dominant group in the Church of England and see this being demonstrated in senior appointments. If this is so then what passes as evangelical today is not what our forebears considered such.

About a decade ago I heard Brian Edwards (then with the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches) list the areas of ‘evangelical shift’ as he called it, in the wider movement. The list as I recorded it was as follows:

1. Inerrancy – that it is unimportant.
2. Eternal punishment – that it is unacceptable.
3. Justification by faith alone is not primarily forensic but has to do with covenant
4. The biblical role of women is unpopular
5. Knowledge of Christ for salvation is unfair
6. Condemnation of all homosexual behaviour is unnatural
7. The absolute omniscience of God is unscriptural
8. The Old Testament law of God is irrelevant

Brian gave examples of authors and books for each, or at least most, of these. Some of these have impinged more on the work Church Society during my time as General Secretary and featured more frequently in *Cross†Way* during my time as editor.

Inerrancy

Evangelicalism is most often characterised as the acceptance of the supreme authority of Scripture and the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The latter flows naturally from the former since it is what Scripture teaches. We accept that the Bible is the Word of God, and that as such it must be trustworthy and true and so as our Anglican Homilies assert we believe it to be the “infallible word of God”. Remember the distinction between inerrancy and infallibility was dreamt up long after the Homilies were written. For over a century there has been division about the extent to which we accept inerrancy particularly in the face of the assertions made by Biblical critics. Today the term “open evangelical” is often used and the explanation is that, amongst other things, open evangelicals do not see inerrancy as important. This is not the same as saying that the Bible contains the Word of God, but is not itself the Word, although some can veer in that direction.

One area where this distinction makes a real difference is that most, perhaps all, open evangelicals are in favour of the ordination of women. Clearly the Apostle Paul did not permit women to occupy certain roles and posts in the Church, and therefore there are aspects of the Apostle’s teaching which do not carry the same weight today – they are culturally conditioned. Whilst some might think this is similar to the reason we do not follow all the Old Testament law it is not. The Scripture itself tells us that the work of Christ has made a difference. But there is no Scriptural reason, nor any reason to do with salvation or revelation that makes us think that ordering of the church today should differ in this respect from that of the early churches. The open evangelical approach is a very slippery slope, once you have adopted this method of interpreting Scripture there is no reason why

you should not apply it in other areas such as sexual morality and the nature of the gospel.

Women's ordination

Edwards lists this and anyone reading *Cross†Way* for any length of time will know that it is an issue we have felt compelled to raise here repeatedly. Part of me is surprised that the consecration of women bishop has not yet gone through, 13 years ago I would have expected it to have happened by now and that gives some hope that it may not happen. But evangelicals of a generation or two ago were largely convinced that the Scriptures teach different roles for men and women in the home and in the Church. Over the last generation or two there has been a significant shift. Curiously in larger evangelical churches, even open evangelical ones, there are still hardly any women incumbents. Moreover, I cannot see any evidence that the innovation of ordaining women has strengthened the Church, arrested its decline or led to benefits in family life in our churches or communities. What it has done is foster division. The arguments put forward to justify the change from Scripture would have been laughed out of court by our forebears. Yet such arguments seem to prevail.

Homosexual practice

The same thing is now happening with regard to homosexual practice. When Brian Edwards gave his list the book he mentioned in relation to homosexual practice was that by Michael Vasey. Michael was my tutor at theological college and I was grateful for his help but saddened by what happened to him and by what felt like an attempt to cover up the fact that he was HIV positive when he died. It is hard to think of others who claimed to be evangelical who were publicly arguing as Michael did a decade ago, but now there are increasing numbers of people doing so. Again the arguments from Scripture are feeble and it is hard to understand why people are so taken in by them but we also see that for many when they have friends or family who claim to be homosexual this seems to cloud their judgement and their reading of Scripture.

Stumbling Blocks

A further area of evangelical drift has to do with the content of the gospel. A few years ago the controversy was around "The Lost Message of Jesus" by Steve Chalke. This year it is about the book "Love Wins" by Rob Bell a pastor from Michigan, USA.

Chalke seems to have found the gospel a stumbling block, he argued that modern people find what the Bible says about the cross difficult. He seems to have found the teaching of Tom Wright helpful in providing theological justification to change the gospel. It is astonishing that someone can do this when the Scriptures so clearly teach that the cross is a stumbling block.

Bell has a different problem – though I confess that one of the things that has irritated me in my role at Church Society is having to buy and read the latest nonsense and in this case I am reliant solely on what others have written. Bell seems to think that love is the most important thing and in his book he therefore seems to be pushing a universalist view – all will be saved in the end. When confronted with this he seems to have refused to say that he is a universalist, merely that he is exploring ideas. When pastors write books to share their ignorance you know the church is in trouble. But Bell, it seems to me, is an idolater.

Today we do not make idols out of wood and metal so much as out of ideas. We construct idols in our minds. People decide that there are certain things in the Bible which they like and certain things they do not like. God must be what we like and so we construct a picture of God not based on the fullness of what the Bible teaches, but on those bits that fit our thinking. This is idolatry, intellectual idolatry. It stems from a failure to accept that God has revealed His character to us in His Word and from human pride that is unwilling to shape our own thinking in accordance with His self-revelation. Evangelicalism has been characterised in the past by a humble sitting under the

Word and being shaped by it.

Hotbed of heresy

It seems to me that evangelicalism today has become the hotbed for error and heresy. There are two particular weaknesses which have contributed to this.

The first is our concern for others, and the fact that we have bought into a consumerist approach to faith. In the United States this has been documented and challenged by David Wells, Gary Gilley and others. People find the gospel a stumbling block. We want people to believe and our consumerist approach means we must remove the barriers to people believing. For some the reason is numbers, for others genuine compassion, but both water down the gospel to make it easier for people to believe.

Secondly evangelicals have made too much of private judgement. Our reformers rightly stressed that we should not be bound by the tyranny of the Church and must rely supremely on Scripture. But this has been turned into individualism and a license for novelty. We do not weigh our ideas against others and particularly against the inheritance of faith. The mainstream reformers were eager to show that their views on Scripture were not novel but consistent with what early Christians had held. Modern evangelicalism has to a large part detached itself from the inheritance of faith.

The drift in evangelicalism today is alarming not least because some of those drifting the fastest are quite virulent against their detractors. If we stand against them we will be accused of being stuck in the past and negative. But the Bible is the Word of God, it will endure whilst heaven and earth endures, we have a revealed faith. The way of faithfulness is not to be found in chasing after the latest ideas and errors but in contending for what has already been given.

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