

Evangelicals in the Church of England

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Introduction

Let me begin with a quotation: with some words written by Dr J I Packer in 1978, almost 20 years ago. In chapter 1 of his analysis of *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* he warns that: ‘Anyone who proposes to define the word “evangelical” must go carefully.’¹ I recognize, therefore, that in accepting the invitation to talk on this subject I was taking a risk. You took a risk in inviting me – why anyone would want to do that baffles me. But I, in addressing this topic, jeopardize my already fragile reputation. I am in danger of parading both my ignorance and my prejudices. The natural man within me wishes to do neither. Nonetheless I am convinced that this subject is of great importance and that at least one of us, therefore, had to be prepared to take the proverbial bull by the horns so as to facilitate debate among us this afternoon. I hope that what I offer will not just stimulate discussion but also encourage us to search our hearts, to review our lives and to question whether our respective ministries are as faithful to God’s Word written as they could be.

We shall address two questions. Before turning to the second and more practically focused question: *What should Evangelicals be doing in the Church of England?* we shall consider the first: *What is an Evangelical?*

Evangelicals and Evangelicalism

Back in 1977, during the Congress of Evangelical Anglicans at Nottingham, John King, one time editor of the *Church of England Newspaper*, wrote: ‘What is an Evangelical? Tell us, somebody, please!’² Many an Anglican has echoed that question in the last twenty years. But some have got to the point where they feel, simply because the word Evangelical has become what Hywel Jones calls a ‘spectrum term’,³ that there is little to be gained by either accepting or adopting it as descriptive of oneself. It would appear, then, that we have moved a long way since Jim Packer powerfully demonstrated almost forty years ago in *‘Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God*⁴ that those who embrace apostolic Christianity have no reason to be ashamed of the title Evangelical. However, we must not rush ahead. Before we endeavour to highlight the distinctive features of historic Evangelicalism we need to remind ourselves of the history of the term.

Packer informs us that: “‘Evangelical’ as a term of identification was first used by Lutherans in Reformation days.”⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, in his excellent biography of Thomas Cranmer, reveals an anxiety to exclude the more problematic terms ‘Protestant’ and ‘Lutheran’ when speaking of religious developments in the early years of the English Reformation. Hence he chooses to use ‘the word “evangelical” to describe the religious

reformism which developed in England during the 1520s and 1530s'.⁶ He then goes on to state that:

'Evangelicalism' is the religious outlook which makes the primary point of Christian reference the Good News of the *Evangelion*, or the text of Scripture generally; it is a conveniently vague catch-all term which can be applied across the board, except to the very small minority of English religious rebels who proceeded further towards Continental radicalism. In the nineteenth century the word was appropriated in the English-speaking world to describe a party within Protestantism and within the Church of England, but it can be liberated once more to perform a useful task for the religious history of Tudor England.⁷

Whether he is successful in his quest we shall have to wait and see. In the meantime, with regard to the nineteenth-century developments to which MacCulloch alludes, we do well to note that the term was:

... applied generally to any people or activities, both Anglican and nonconformist, that stood in line with the eighteenth-century awakening and its offshoots, the movement which by then was being called the Evangelical Revival.

Moreover, as Packer goes on to say:

The word 'Evangelicalism' was coined at that time to signify the style of Christianity which Evangelicals embraced, with its doctrine, experience and practical priorities – that is its theology, spirituality and policy.⁸

He then informs us that: 'For a century and more it has been understood that to be an Evangelical is to identify with all three.'⁹ But at this point we must sound a note of warning. Namely, to use Packer's words again: 'Evangelical theology, spirituality and policy have never been quite homogeneous.'¹⁰ According to his analysis this is because the evangelical identity is the product of two distinguishable streams of tradition which have flowed together without ever perfectly merging. One is the *Protestant* stream, with its emphasis on things confessional, doctrinal and anti-Roman Catholic. The other is the *Pietist* stream, with its emphasis on vital spiritual experience. Both streams see themselves as true heirs of the Reformation and within the Evangelicalism which together they have created we find individuals, groups and churches at different points along the continuum. Hence Hywel Jones is justified in saying that 'Evangelical is a spectrum term' today.

More recently Thomas Schmidt, a Professor of New Testament and Greek in California, has written that: 'Scholars cannot seem to agree on a definition of the word *Evangelical*.' He says that the term 'defies religious mapmakers' and that:

The phenomenon spans a bewildering diversity of opinions, denominations and social groups, and any attempt to explain or give examples leaves some insiders feeling poorly represented.

Since there is no governing body distinguishing insiders from outsiders Evangelicalism cannot be described as a system with clearly defined borders but must be understood in terms of central principles. In other words it is not so much about what is excluded as what is *affirmed*.¹¹

Whether he is right or wrong in what he says is open to debate, as no doubt are the central evangelical affirmations that he cites.

According to Schmidt Evangelicals affirm:

- 1 the centrality of Jesus, as the one and only Son of God who willingly suffered death and triumphed over it to set every person free from the consequences of human rebellion against God;
- 2 the primacy and finality of the Bible's authority for faith and practice;
- 3 that the primary task of Bible study is to seek the intended meaning of its authors;
- 4 the ongoing relevance of biblical morality;
- 5 that the Bible is a unity, in that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit;
- 6 that the world is both under God's care and under his judgement; and
- 7 that people matter, one at a time, as beings who are both spiritual and physical.¹²

Few would see much, if anything, controversial about this list. After all it starts with the person of Jesus Christ, accords a central place to the Bible, affirms providence and asserts that biblical morality is normative. But it is interesting to compare it with the list compiled by Packer a mere seventeen years earlier. Having argued that the differences between Evangelicals should not be overstressed, Packer then proclaims that: 'On fundamentals all Evangelicals are at one.' In fact he avers that all Evangelicalism is based on the following doctrines:

- 1 the Trinity;
- 2 the deity of Christ;
- 3 the correlation of grace and faith;
- 4 justification through Christ's substitutionary atonement;
- 5 Christ's physical resurrection and present reign;
- 6 the new birth and progressive sanctification through the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit;
- 7 the church as the fellowship of all believers;
- 8 the certainty of Christ's personal return;
- 9 the final authority of Scripture;
- 10 evangelism as a constant priority for the church; and
- 11 the importance of a Christ-centred spirituality in which fellowship with the risen Lord by faith is central.¹³

Packer does, of course, acknowledge that there are differences between Evangelicals. Some of those differences, he says, are of a doctrinal nature, such as Calvinism and Arminianism, paedobaptism and believer's baptism, and the varied millennial views. Other differences are more experience centred, for example the question of whether charismatic and second blessing experiences are the norm for the Christian life. And yet other differences may centre on practice, such as methods of evangelism, the style of worship adopted, and the extent of cultural and political involvement by Christians. Notwithstanding all this, Packer also argues that, although these differences may cause strain, evangelical unity is based on the biblical principles he enunciates and that 'Evangelicalism ought to be defined' in terms of them.¹⁴ I trust I do not do Schmidt a disservice but it occurs to me that Packer is somewhat tighter in his definition of Evangelical. Certainly he appears to lay more stress on salvation by faith in the atoning death of Christ. In doing this Packer seems to be more in tune with *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'Evangelical' which also informs us that the evangelical emphasis on faith denies any saving efficacy to good works and the sacraments.¹⁵ I am not saying that Schmidt does not believe in the doctrine of justification by the grace of God through faith alone. I merely highlight that he does not mention it in his list of 'central evangelical affirmations'.¹⁶ Many would regard this omission as serious, especially if it is the case that:

The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas: it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace. The doctrines of election, of effectual calling, regeneration, and repentance, of adoption, of prayer, of the church, the ministry, and the sacraments, have all to be interpreted and understood in the light of justification by faith...so that when justification falls, all true knowledge of the grace of God in human life falls with it, and then, as Luther said the church itself falls.¹⁷

Schmidt also appears to adopt a softer line than Packer with regard to Scripture. I must be careful here. I recognize that Packer in *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* addresses directly the question of what it means to be an Evangelical whereas Schmidt in *Straight and Narrow?* does not. Rather, the latter's reference to Evangelicalism is more by way of an explanation of himself to the reader listening to what he says on the subject of same-sex sexual relations. Schmidt wants his hearers to recognize that he is an individual who has an 'evangelical face'.¹⁸ However, that being said, it is difficult to gainsay those critics who think that the (uninitiated) reader is left with the impression that Schmidt's seven central affirmations are the core of Evangelicalism. If that is the case then such a reader could well fail to grasp (clearly enough) that, to use Packer's words: 'All Evangelicalism rests, from a formal and methodological standpoint, on the final authority of Holy Scripture.'¹⁹

It is true that Schmidt informs us that he chooses 'the words primacy and finality carefully. They mean that Scripture is the first place to look and the last place of appeal for guidance'. But he also says that the words 'primacy and finality'

allow for other voices to be heard in the process of interpretation and application... three other important voices. *Human experience...human traditions...and human reason...*To say that they have no place, that the Bible speaks alone, is simplistic and perhaps deceptive – there is always interpretation going on.²⁰

We see what he says and we have a great deal of sympathy with the sentiment expressed. But one wonders to what extent Schmidt embraces what MacCulloch calls the 'evangelical twist' to Bible reading championed by Cranmer in 1535. In the injunctions issued for the Worcester Cathedral Priory in February of that year, Cranmer

ordered that the Scripture should be expounded in English ‘according at least to the literal sense’: this clearly relegates to a secondary place the medieval interest in exposition of the supposed allegorical layers of Scripture, and is reminiscent of his recommendation to Latimer a year before to preach ‘according to the pure sense and meaning’ of the text.²¹

Additional justification for approaching Schmidt’s definition of Evangelicalism with caution rests on two further statements made by him. First, Schmidt avows that: ‘Today we struggle with no universally agreeable method to find truth.’²² And secondly, he contends (in his third affirmation) that: ‘The primary task of Bible study is to seek the intended meaning of its authors.’²³

It appears to be true, as Bray argues, that: ‘The contemporary scene... presents a pluralism of approaches in biblical studies which would have been inconceivable in 1945.’²⁴ It also seems to be the case, as Cocksworth asserts, that: ‘The breadth of contemporary Evangelicalism... spans Reformed rigorists on the one side and charismatic innovators on the other – with a good deal in between.’²⁵ Yet it also surely remains the case that the distinctive evangelical approach to the interpretation of Scripture entails the careful analysis and interaction of matters grammatical, historical and theological.²⁶

Moreover, we must beware of putting too much emphasis on the authors’ intended meaning. We are not saying that we should not ‘take a walk to Corinth or Ephesus’, as Dick Lucas somewhat quaintly puts it. On the contrary we affirm that we should do all that we can to discover as much as we can about the situation that the biblical writers address. But, because in the last analysis all Scripture is God-breathed, we also recognize that a right interpretation will be that which corresponds most closely, if not exactly, with the meaning intended by the Holy Spirit himself.

Did the Psalmist (David), for example, intend that verse 25 of Psalm 69 and verse 8 of Psalm 108 were to have specific reference to Judas? Probably not; yet God revealed to Peter that they do, and that fact interpreters of Scripture are obliged to recognize when they expound or comment on those passages. We are merely illustrating that matters theological, as well as grammatical and historical, are important when it comes to interpretation. And we stress this because of all people Evangelicals are those who take the Bible seriously. That is why John Stott in his closing address at the 1977 National Evangelical Anglican Congress in Nottingham described Evangelicals not just as ‘Gospel people’ but also as ‘Bible people’.²⁷

And thus we come, more briefly, to our second question.

Evangelical Action

What should Evangelicals be doing in the Church of England? The answer or answers we give to this question depend in part on how one views the inter-relationship between being an Evangelical and being an Anglican. Tom Wright posits five models in his Latimer Study *Evangelical Anglican Identity* published in 1980.

First, he speaks of *Dogmatic Exclusivists*. That is, those who feel that the worlds of Evangelicalism and Anglicanism do not intersect. Hence, the argument is ‘come out and be separate’. This, says Wright, is the position of the classic free-church Evangelical.²⁸

Secondly, he describes the *Establishment Inclusivists*. That is, those who see Evangelicalism as merely one emphasis within Anglicanism. In other words Anglicanism is not evangelical but it allows Evangelicals to exist within its fold. This view is not held by many Evangelicals because they feel ‘patronized’ by it.²⁹

Thirdly, there are the *Idealistic Constitutionalists*. That is, those who see the church of England as evangelical, as the Articles and Prayer Book of 1662 testify, and Anglicanism as a sub-class of Evangelicalism. The problem with this view is that there is a ‘gulf between the ideal Anglicanism envisaged... and the actual present state of the church’.³⁰

Fourthly, there are the *Contemporary Realists*. That is, those who recognize that you do not have to be an Evangelical to be an Anglican but that it probably helps as the Church of England appears to be the ‘best-boat-to-fish-from’.³¹ This then is a pragmatic as opposed to a principled approach.

And fifthly, there are the *Common Heritage Reformists* (my title, not Wright’s). That is, those who see a far larger degree of overlap between things evangelical and things Anglican than that accepted by the Contemporary Realists but less than that held by the Idealistic Constitutionalists. The aim of those who espouse this view is ‘to encourage our fellow-Anglicans to join us in continual reformation, so as to grow into the full truth of Bible, gospel, and church, in such a way’ that Evangelicalism and Anglicanism will in time become identical.³²

For what it is worth, my own opinion is that model five probably makes the most sense today, although I believe the situation has been exacerbated by the Durham Affair of 1984, the publication of *Issues in Human Sexuality* in 1991, and the General Synod vote on the ordination of women in 1992, to name but three major developments in recent years. The Church of England wants, it appears, to cut off its evangelical roots. Moreover, the impression is given to non-Anglican Evangelicals that it is content to run pell-mell down the track towards the goal of becoming a liberal Protestant sect. But, as far as one can humanly tell, it is not yet beyond reformation.

Thus we come to four responsibilities that Evangelicals would do well to embrace as they approach the new millennium some five hundred years after the Reformation, which shaped the Church of England and transformed the face of Europe and the culture of the Western world.

First, *Evangelicals must proclaim afresh the gospel in the church*. We say ‘in the church’ because, sadly, the evidence about us today appears to demonstrate that many clergymen, both in the parishes as well as in positions of leadership, either do not embrace or are not as clear as they should be of the fact that salvation is by grace through faith alone in the finished work of Christ, the only Redeemer of sinners. That may sound like a regurgitation of the language of Zion or the mere recitation of a traditional evangelical shibboleth. It is not intended to be. Rather it is a reflection of a fundamentally important conviction expressed by Bishop Ryle in his book *Knots Untied*. Speaking of religion, he says that if it is

to be really ‘evangelical’ and really good, [it] must be the gospel, the whole gospel, and nothing but the gospel as Christ prescribed it and expounded it to the apostles; – the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; – the terms, the whole terms, and nothing but the terms, – in all

their fullness, all their freeness, all their simplicity, all their presentness. Here, I am sorry to say, a vast quantity of so-called religion in the present day appears to break down. It does not come up to the high standard I have just given. Things are added to it, or things are taken away, or things are put in their wrong places, or things are set forth in their wrong proportions. And hence, painful as it is, I cannot avoid the conclusion that much of the religion in our own times does not deserve to be called evangelical.³³

Surely over one hundred years after these words were published it remains the case that ‘gospel’ and ‘Bible’ people still yearn to see the doctrines of grace and the glorious gospel of Christ owned, loved and proclaimed within a denomination that bears his name. Therefore Evangelicals cannot, and dare not, ignore the relentlessly pressing need to labour for the faithful proclamation of the gospel at every level and in every department of denominational life. Retreating to the parish will not do. What is going on elsewhere within the Church of England is their business. And if what is said and done is not faithful to, or a perversion of, gospel truth they should endeavour, patiently and prayerfully, to labour for reformation, renewal and revival.

May it never be said of Evangelicals that they failed to contend earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. At the end of the twentieth century this entails, for example, challenging and correcting those liturgical innovations and experiments that undermine or vitiate the biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. It also means demonstrating that religious pluralism and liberalism are different gospels that are not *the* gospel. And it will mean establishing that collegial and consensual church politics, especially in the hands of those who pervert or reject the biblical gospel, are dishonouring to Christ, not conducive to the promotion of godly living, and destructive of evangelistic ardour.

Secondly, *Evangelicals must be exemplary in evangelistic zeal*. Cocksworth reminds us that ‘the reality at the heart of the faith’ is ‘the encounter between Christ and the individual’ and that, above all other things, what Evangelicals want to see within individuals is ‘the existential grasp of God’s absolute salvific grace’.³⁴ But, as we know, faith comes by hearing, and such hearing presupposes preaching. And here, we hasten to add, we understand preaching in its broadest sense. In other words, it includes gossiping the gospel as well as faithful pulpit ministry, and much else in between.

Cocksworth also informs us that: ‘The hallmark of evangelical spirituality is often seen to lie in its emphasis on conversion.’³⁵ This being so, it is imperative that Evangelicals demonstrate to the church at large not just a passion for the regeneration and conversion of people, but also good practice in matters evangelistic. Their evangelistic endeavour must be God-centred and God-honouring. It must be an evangelism that enunciates in scriptural proportion certain ‘rudimentary theological insights’. Namely that:

We are incapable of saving ourselves [utter helplessness of man] but Christ has achieved our salvation for us [sole sufficiency of Christ’s work], leaving our part as only the recognition of his part [justification by faith] and full participation in the life of the Church [priesthood of all believers].³⁶

Thirdly, *Evangelicals must demonstrate the relevance and authority of the Bible in the contemporary world*. The Canada-based theologian I S Rennie reminds us that ‘in the late nineteenth century, as the pressure of theological liberalism continued to intensify and Evangelicalism weakened’ a ‘defensive evangelical theology arose’ that gave the impression that ‘Christianity had nothing to say to the issues of the “now”, it was all in the “not yet”’.³⁷

This serves as a warning to us, for it illustrates what may happen to those who, like Ryle, assert that: 'The first leading feature of Evangelical Religion is the absolute supremacy it assigns to Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice, the only test of truth, the only judge of controversy.'³⁸ The need, according to Schaeffer, is not to conform 'to the world spirit of autonomous freedom in our age' but to obey God's Word. This means, he says,

living in obedience to the full inerrant authority of the Bible in the crucial moral and social issues of the day just as much as in the area of doctrine. Obedience to God's Word is the watershed.

But,

Evangelicalism is already divided at the point of the watershed. And the two halves will end up miles apart. If truth is indeed truth, it stands in antithesis to non-truth. This must be practised in both teaching and practical action. A line must be drawn.³⁹

Why? Because, according to Schaeffer, 'the Bible *is* objective, absolute truth in all the areas it touches upon'.⁴⁰

And fourthly, *Evangelicals must develop a strategy to reform the Church of England*. If it is the case, as Packer asserts, that Evangelicalism is 'the oldest version of Christianity; theologically regarded, it is just apostolic Christianity itself',⁴¹ and if it is the case, as Ryle states, 'that impartial enquiry will always show that Evangelical Religion is the religion of Scripture and of the Church of England',⁴² then it follows that Evangelicals will be eager to see all additions or subtractions made good. For, in the last analysis, Evangelicalism affirms:

...man is required to believe nothing as necessary for salvation, which is not read in God's Word written, or can be proved thereby. It totally denies that there is any other guide for man's soul, co-equal or co-ordinate with the Bible. It refuses to listen to such arguments as 'the Church says so,' – 'the Fathers say so,' – 'primitive antiquity says so,' – 'Catholic tradition says so,' – 'the Councils say so.' – 'the ancient liturgies say so,' – 'the Prayer Book says so,' – 'the universal conscience of mankind says so,' – 'the verifying light within says so,' – unless it can be shown that what is said is in harmony with Scripture.⁴³

And a church in harmony with Scripture is what Evangelicals want. Together, therefore, they must work out how to reform the denomination and, under God, become its leaders and opinion-formers.

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Endnotes:

- 1) J I Packer *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: Latimer House 1978) p 5
- 2) N T Wright *Evangelical Anglican Identity* (Oxford: Latimer House 1980) p 3
- 3) He described Evangelicalism in this way at a Christian Institute meeting that he addressed on *Is Christ the Only Way?* in Newcastle upon Tyne on 21 January 1997.

- 4) J I Packer *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (London: IVF 1958)
- 5) J I Packer *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: Latimer House 1978) p 5
- 6) D MacCulloch *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1996) p 2
- 7) MacCulloch p 2
- 8) J I Packer *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: Latimer House 1978) pp 5f
- 9) Packer p 6
- 10) Packer p 6
- 11) T E Schmidt *Straight and Narrow?* (Leicester: IVP 1995) p 17
- 12) T E Schmidt *Straight and Narrow?* (Leicester: IVP 1995) pp 17-22
- 13) J I Packer *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: Latimer House 1978) p 6
- 14) J I Packer *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: Latimer House 1978) p 7
- 15) *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP 1993)
- 16) T E Schmidt *Straight and Narrow?* (Leicester: IVP 1995) p 17
- 17) J I Packer *Introductory Essay* in J Buchanan *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1984) pp viiif
- 18) T E Schmidt *Straight and Narrow?* (Leicester: IVP 1995) p 16
- 19) J I Packer *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: Latimer House 1978) p 6
- 20) T E Schmidt *Straight and Narrow?* (Leicester: IVP 1995) p 18
- 21) D MacCulloch *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1996) p 128
- 22) T E Schmidt *Straight and Narrow?* (Leicester: IVP 1995) p 19
- 23) Schmidt p 19
- 24) G Bray *Biblical Interpretation* (Leicester: Apollos 1996) p 465
- 25) C Cocksworth *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England* (Cambridge: CUP 1993) p 3
- 26) See e.g. L Berkhof *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London: EP 1973).
- 27) See C Cocksworth *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England* (Cambridge: CUP 1993) p 4.
- 28) N T Wright *Evangelical Anglican Identity* (Oxford: Latimer House 1980) p 5
- 29) N T Wright *Evangelical Anglican Identity* (Oxford: Latimer House 1980) p 6

- 30) Wright p 6
- 31) Wright p7
- 32) N T Wright *Evangelical Anglican Identity* (Oxford: Latimer House 1980) pp 35f
- 33) J C Ryle *Knots Untied* (London: Charles Murray 1896) pp 22f
- 34) C Cocksworth *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England* (Cambridge: CUP 1993) p 5
- 35) Cocksworth p 6
- 36) C Cocksworth *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England* (Cambridge: CUP 1993) p 5
- 37) I S Rennie 'Evangelical Theology' *New Dictionary of Theology* S B Ferguson and D F Wright edd (Leicester: IVP 1988) p 240
- 38) J C Ryle *Knots Untied* (London: Charles Murray 1896) p 4
- 39) F A Schaeffer *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester: Crossway Books 1984) p 143
- 40) F A Schaeffer *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester: Crossway Books 1984) p 55
- 41) J I Packer 'Fundamentalism' *and the Word of God* (London: IVF 1958) p 38
- 42) J C Ryle *Knots Untied* (London: Charles Murray 1896) p 10
- 43) Ryle p 4