THE NEED FOR EVANGELICAL COURAGE
By Pete Myers

For young evangelical ministers in the Church of England like myself, who have perhaps four decades of ministry ahead of us, the situation we're inheriting is mixed.

We have much to thank those in the generations above us, who have passed on the essentials of the gospel and instilled in us the vital need for faithful expository Word ministry. However, every generation brings a new context and a new set of challenges. What are the trials we must face before we in turn hand the baton on to those who, at present, are still working out how to use the potty?

The matters we are called to tackle are not simple. They are both a part of who we are, and a part of the context into which we are entering. Yet at the same time many of the issues we are facing share a common root.

Some of the challenges we face are a lack of self-awareness about how others perceive us; an ambivalence to important secondary distinctives such as baptism or episcopacy; a theological confusion about the vital role of the 39 Articles; and the fact that we are simply unaware of what we have already lost within the Church of England.

Common to all of these is the need for *courage*. To effect real change for the better, we need *evangelical courage*.

But while some may interpret this by thinking we need to shout "Truth!" and "Repent!" and "That's wrong!" louder and at a shriller pitch than we have done before, such a response is the exact opposite of exercising courage. It is, in fact, mere cowardice; a retreat from the front line under the volley of cannon-fire, and a maneuver worthy of the promotion of Lord Raglan. And with no actual tangible *gains* to show for such clamour, one even wonders whether Pyrrhus himself would have shirked from claiming it as a victory.

Simply shouting critical remarks into the air is mere cowardice. Why? Because it is nothing more than an unintelligent retreat from the frontline. In contrast, courage requires us to stand and defend the name of Jesus.

We need courage not to retreat into those habits that feel so comfortable, but are so ineffective. The following is an example of three such ways that we need courage not to retreat.

1. Courage not to retreat from the CofE

The most obvious retreat is to leave the CofE. This is so often justified as a 'noble act of conscience'; a refusal to be tainted by all that nasty liberalness the CofE hierarchy is now full of. That's the faithful thing to do surely, isn't it? After all, we shouldn't associate with evil doers in the church.[1] We shouldn't taint ourselves. It's a no brainer…

…or is it?

The problem is, that reasoning is very… *individualistic*. Integrity in ministry isn't about keeping

myself free of impure associations. It's about the people I minister to. I am an undershepherd, and Jesus has charged me to care for his flock until he returns.

There are 1.7 million people who attend CofE services every week. When I meet Jesus, and he asks why I left those sheep, what will I say? "Well, I was in the fold watching the flock, and then loads of these wolves came in. They looked really dangerous! I got out of there as fast as I could."

"But what…" replies Jesus "…about the sheep you left behind?"

"Well, I didn't think you'd want me to get my shirt dirty," I answer "I mean there was sheep blood flying everywhere. I thought you'd want me to clearly disassociate myself from that in case I got confused for being a wolf."

Aren't shepherds supposed to *protect* the flock? Isn't it our *job* to fight wolves? *If* I think the Church of England is full of false teachers, then isn't that *precisely why* I should **stay**?!

And what about the CofE's other assets: the buildings, the money, the investments, the infrastructure, the cultural capital, the history, the international connections, the political influence—are none of these worth at least *trying* to retain for the name of Christ?

This is the legacy of the work and giving of faithful women and men over *centuries*. They prayed that people like us would ensure it got used properly for the name of Christ.

To retreat from the CofE is cowardly, not noble. It is to abandon our responsibility to the sheep and to abandon the incredible kingdom assets passed down to us by those who came before, and which we owe to the next generation.

2. Courage not to retreat from CofE structures

Many stay within the CofE for a variety of reasons. For those who do, the next level of retreat is the "live and let live" attitude. Put my head down, do ministry in my patch, and ignore the rest of the church.

This also sounds very noble. I have the cure of souls in my area, and I'm going to faithfully preach the word without getting distracted by all that church politics stuff. The Synods for example: Deanery, Diocesan, and General are just a distraction from word ministry. They are administrative, and administration is not my responsibility.

I can be polite about others who do this "valuable work" which "isn't my calling"; or I can look down on them, with a supercilious superiority that (unlike them) I truly have my priorities straight: *nothing* can distract *me* from obeying Paul's charge to "preach the word."[2]

However… this kind of logic is neither Pauline, biblical, or even that pastoral.

Paul was concerned with ministry *everywhere.* He returned to churches he had already established in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.[3] He wrote to churches he knew in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonika, and to a church leader on Crete.[4] And depending on the situation in each place, this sometimes meant writing collectively to a *group* of churches, rather than just a single congregation.[5] He even wrote to churches he'd *never* visited in Rome and Colossae, and kept tabs on how the churches were doing all over Asia.[6] At least some of his letters were deliberately written to be shared around.[7]

Paul's catholic concern wasn't just because he was an apostle.[8] Paul sent men such as Timothy, Titus, Tychicus, Epaphroditus, Onesimus, and probably Artemas to check, encourage, and repair other churches.[9] He included Sosthenes, Timothy, and Silvanus in his letter writing.[10] And he encouraged churches to communicate and pray for one another, as well as share their finances.[11]

The concern for the wider church goes beyond merely Paul. The writer to the Hebrews was clearly concerned about Christians elsewhere.[12] James and Peter wrote cyclical letters, and Jude was probably cyclical too.[13] John's letter to the seven churches demonstrates both a clear concern for the gospel everywhere, and a desire that each church see what he's written to other churches also.[14]

The biblical case for church networking is overwhelming: and that is precisely why the denominational structures exist. Scripture compels us to engage with the wider church both in our dioceses and nationally.

But also from a pragmatic perspective, getting your head down and just focusing on your patch is not good even for your own congregation.

Your congregation see on their tv what the CofE says in public. Your youth and children will one day go to a church in another parish. When you move on or die, your bishop and diocese will influence the pcc choosing who takes over. And if you don't get involved, then one day your diocese will appoint a bishop you simply cannot submit to, which may force you and (some of) your congregation out of your building.

Putting your head down and "getting on with ministry" sounds very noble—but it's not. It's a retreat, and it's unfaithful to scripture. It's to retreat from working to promote the gospel all over the country, and to protect the future of the gospel in your own parish.

3. Courage not to retreat from reality

Both of the tendencies we've examined so far are given noble gospel-centred justifications, yet in fact neither of them truly defend the gospel but are retreats from the front line. However, no matter whether someone is in the CofE or out of the CofE; whether they never venture beyond their church walls or they are in the upper eschelons of Synodical government… the third retreat is the most schismatic, foolish, and requires the most bravery to avoid: this is the ostrich syndrome.

Generally speaking this form of retreat neither helps the cause of Christ, nor protects the sheep in my care: it *simply makes me feel better*, and that is why it is so tempting.

There are a number of ways to retreat from reality, one is **to be so scared of doing something wrong that I never positively suggest a realistic way forwards.**

The current wrangling over women bishops is a prime example of this problem. It is simply too tempting to devote all our energy to criticising the working group, or lamenting about the fact that we're in this situation in the first place, without actually suggesting a workable solution.

To shout loudly that I'm a faithful, confessional Anglican, and that women bishops are wrong, sure does make me *feel* a lot better: but it neither *prevents* women bishops happening, nor ensures *provision* for us who disagree. In fact, simply shouting critically about how its wrong will merely strengthen the hand of those who are trying to bring in women bishops by a single clause measure—by just being negative we're simply hastening the demise of classical Anglicanism.

Bearing in mind that there is a vast majority in the church who want to make women bishops, we must offer constructive and realistic solutions for how they can do that in a way that creates provision for us. To simply criticise *every* suggestion for what provision might look like is nothing but a retreat from reality.

This requires courage in the face of fear. A fear of getting it wrong. A fear of suggesting something that might possibly display a sign of weakness.

As tempting as it is, cowardice simply will not do. It won't protect the gospel, just hasten our demise. Such action is not faithful: it just makes me feel better.

A second type of retreat from reality is **to fearfully retreat from the task of winning over those we disagree with.**

The task Jesus has given our generation is to win over the people who are really here, not to play to the imaginary audience in our heads cheering our resolute faithfulness as we plunge *kamikaze* style into the nearest cathedral.

We must try and winsomely win women clergy over. That means praying for them and with them; encouraging them; loving them; eating with them; laughing with them and crying with them.

The simple fact of the matter is that a large number of those who disagree with us in the CofE think we're bigots. If we are to persuade them to submit to scripture, then we must fight a spiritual battle. Spiritual battles are fought by loving winsomeness: only when many of our opponents truly feel that we love them will they actually listen to what we say.

However, this also requires courage. It makes me feel a lot better to lament and shout about how people must repent and submit to the Bible. If you want to feel better—go ahead and do that. But if you want to make a difference—we must *befriend* our opponents in order to faithfully win people over for Christ.

Of course there will always be an extremist contingent who oppose us no matter what. Thanks to my political work with Together4ward, I get hate mail, and have been unfairly labelled as "Taliban." I have even written a standard email response I send out when I get yet another email accusing me of being a Nazi.

But this extremist contingent does *not* justify lacking winsomeness in the way I engage. Only when we have gained people's trust will we see people seriously engage with the Biblical case we present them with.

I'm afraid I'm not charismatic enough to believe that revival is something that magically drops from the sky.

A final retreat from reality is driven from an intellectual fear **to avoid the real battle for the sake of fighting a simpler one.**

Our situation in the CofE is complex. There are a huge range of issues upon which we have to contend, and there's no one-size-fits-all approach. This is intellectually daunting.

So, why not just declare a blanket anathema down on everyone? Every error is a denial of the Bible… so every error deserves equal rejection and disassociation. Being faithful means declaring as loudly as I can where everyone else is wrong: how would the church survive without me here to

police it?

Or, why not move the debate onto safer territory? I could shout loudly about Gen 1 or eschatology or obscure rules about liturgy, and persuade myself that faithfulness in these matters is the secret *gnosis* to unlocking revival in the church.

But both of these approaches are merely a retreat from reality. Instead, we should follow the examples of the Reformers, and particularly Thomas Cranmer.

Cranmer was a scholar at heart, beginning his career as a lecturer in Cambridge. He applied his great mind as Archbishop of Canterbury and as such chose his battles exceptionally carefully. While working under Henry VIII, there are many confrontations he chose not to have. He got ordained in full mass vestments despite at that stage already being a Lutheran. He didn't shout "heresy" at the publishing of the catholic 10 Articles. He didn't openly refute the catholics under Henry. He never tried to force anyone out of post directly. He kept his wife a secret.

Instead, Cranmer was judicious and subtle. When incumbencies came up, he placed good evangelical men in key positions. He surrounded young Edward with Protestant teachers. He winsomely stayed on good terms with king Henry—a man with essentially Roman Catholic convictions, and a quick temper who fell out with others often—and gently kept pointing him to salvation in faith alone. Cranmer refused to get drawn into the many disputes he could have had. Instead he deliberately concentrated on making the method of salvation clear, and on tackling the major area of confusion in his day: the Lord's Supper.

We all know the result of Cranmer's work. Under Edward the Protestant Reformation was able to finally flourish, and the changes established then substantially shaped the Protestantism of the Elizabethan settlement.

Cranmer was exceptionally effective and faithful: a faithfulness expressed through being wise. He chose his fights, and he kept the main thing the main thing.

But if Cranmer were here today, how many conservative evangelicals would disavow him and his methods?

Choosing to fight everything in the same way, or to fight irrelevant battles to the problems of the moment, may make us *feel* like brave faithful heroes: but in reality this is a cowardly unfaithful retreat.

If we care about the gospel: we will learn to put things in perspective. If we care about people's souls: we will learn to be winsome. If we care about the future: we will learn how to choose our battles wisely.

We must shed ourselves of the view that standing firm in the faith means clearly disassociating from error by telling everyone where they're wrong. Such a view is *ineffective*. The Bible doesn't support it. Church history doesn't support it.

If we want to see revival in our country, we need to follow Cranmer's example. We need *evangelical courage*:

Courage to stick it out in the CofE. Courage to engage with the CofE structures. Courage to face reality: to be positive, befriend our opponents, and choose our battles judiciously while fighting them wisely.

We young evangelical ministers now have forty years ahead of us to prepare what we're going to hand on to the next generation. Will we live those forty years with courage, or retreat to the safety of just shouting loudly about where everyone is wrong?

Here's the baton. Now run.

Pete Myers is an ordinand at Oak Hill and a Church Society Council member.

Endnotes:

1)   1 Cor 5:9-13.

2)   2 Tim 4:1-2.

3)   Acts 14:21-22.

4)   1-2 Cor; Gal; Eph; Phil; 1-2 Thess; and Titus.

5)   E.g. the plural "churches" in Gal 1:2.

6)   Rom 15:22-24; Col 1:4; cf. 1 Thess 1:7-8 and 2 Tim 1:15.

7)   See Col 4:16; Ephesians was also probably cyclical, see the footnote to 1:1 in most English translations.

8)   As in "universal."

9)   1 Cor 16:10-11; 2 Cor 12:18; Eph 6:21-22; Phil 2:19-30; Col 4:7-9; 1 Thess 3:1-6; Titus 3:12. Paul also urged Apollos to go to Corinth, but it wasn't possible, 1 Cor 16:12.

10)   1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Phm 1.

11)   Acts 11:30; 12:25; Rom 16:4, 16; 1 Cor 16:19-20; 2 Cor 13:13.

12)   Heb 13:22-25.

13)   Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1; Jude 1.

14)   Rev 1:4-3:22.