

Editorial

A number of recent publications and discussions have concentrated their attention on the theme of Evangelical involvement in the structures of the Church of England. In sharp contrast to the situation of only thirty years ago, there are now considerable numbers of Evangelical clergy and laity who are actively involved at all levels of Church administration. The continuing strength of the grass roots is even more apparent, with a solid majority of ordinands now coming from Evangelical parishes and going (or wanting to go) to Evangelical theological colleges.

Of course, there are still gaps, especially at the second layer of the Church hierarchy—the suffragan bishops, archdeacons, provosts and so on, who may be relied on to provide future episcopal material. There are also areas where Evangelicals are unwelcome, though this will probably be said less bluntly than it would have been in the 1950s. But as numbers and influence grow, so does the pressure to conform to the demands of the ‘wider Church’. Evangelicals in high places are still expected to defer to those of a different churchmanship in a way which has never been the case in reverse, and bishops in particular seem to be willing to do this even without explicit encouragement. At a humbler but no less important level, the chances that an Evangelical ordinand will be sent to a college of a different persuasion are infinitely greater than the reverse, as the relative absence of non-Evangelicals at Evangelical colleges will testify.

Even more serious, Evangelicals who thirty years ago would have been severe critics of the hierarchy are now to be found among its chief defenders; as one of them said to me recently, ‘now that we are in a position of strength and able to set the agenda for the Church as a whole, we must be generous to those of a different outlook’. In other words, principles must be sacrificed in order to keep everybody happy. It is a curious repetition of history, in that a century ago, something rather similar happened in the Church when Evangelical strength came to be recognized at the highest levels. The so-called Shaftesbury bishops, Evangelicals who were appointed under the influence of Lord Shaftesbury, represented the Church’s largest constituency, but their tenure of office was a disappointment and turned out to be the prelude to a marked decline in Evangelical influence. The men who were being turned out on the ground proved to be incapable of holding high office with distinction.

Is this same pattern being repeated today? Nobody would wish to question either the faith or the piety of our Evangelical leaders, though in some cases there may be rather a lot of sound and fury signifying very little. More significantly, there is an unwillingness,

even an inability to lead the Church in any noticeable way. Is it really true that Evangelicals are now in a position to set the agenda for the future? If it is, why are they not doing it? Where are Evangelical ideas; where is Evangelical theology? What are we to say when the best-selling Evangelical book of 1988 was *The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass*? Is that what we stand for?

These questions need to be faced squarely at a time when the lines between Evangelicals and the rest of the Church are becoming more blurred. As the late Francis Schaeffer said some years ago, 'it is no use Evangelicalism getting bigger and bigger, if it loses its sense of direction in the process'. To capture the Church requires more than numbers; it also demands a quality of thought and life which will attract those on the fringes and compel potential opponents to respect it. At the present time neither of these things is obvious in our internal life, and the dangers of a split from within are still very much with us. What a tragedy it would be if the 'serious' Evangelicals were to hive themselves off from the rest, or be rejected by them, whilst the more popular type went on to occupy high office, and in the process compromise the meaning of the word Evangelical in the eyes of the wider Church. But one does not need the gift of prophecy to see that this is all too likely to happen, and that by the early years of the next century we may be back in the position we were in in the 1920s. Perhaps the next cycle of Evangelical growth will finally learn to take ideas seriously, and develop them in a way which will command the influence numbers alone cannot produce. Or is it still not too late for the present generation to meet the challenge of the situation before us?

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