

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Sola Scriptura

Recent controversies in the Anglican Communion have made it clear that there is a great divide between the Evangelical wing of the church and much of the rest of it. Evangelicals have been subjected to severe criticism from many quarters, including some highly-placed ones, much of which has been strident and ill-informed. But above the noise of strife it is sometimes possible to detect a few small voices of relative calm, which point out that beyond differences of style and approach there lies the irreducible heart of the matter, which is the controversy over the proper authority and interpretation of Holy Scripture. At one level, the Bible is the common inheritance of all Christians and no branch of the church can claim exclusive possession of it. There have certainly been instances where the Bible has been abused or wrongly interpreted, but it has always been there at the centre of the church's worship, and at key moments in Christian history it has sparked off important reform movements which have brought at least some Christians back to a closer walk with the God whom the Scriptures reveal to us. What we now call Evangelicalism began as one of these movements, and it has to be said that in modern Anglicanism it is mainly (though not exclusively) among Evangelicals that faithfulness to the Bible and its teaching will be found.

Evangelicals do not see themselves as eccentric in their Biblicism, because they stand in a tradition which goes back to the early church, and was all but universal in the Protestant world until the early eighteenth century. In this tradition, the Bible has always been read and revered as the inspired Word of God, given by him for the upbuilding and preservation of the church. It is the source of our teaching (doctrine) and the judge of our practice (discipline), so that whatever cannot be proved on the basis of what it says cannot be made compulsory for Christian belief. That is the assertion of Article VI, to which Evangelicals would add that whatever goes against the teaching of Scripture must be rejected, because it is incompatible with the orthodox Christianity which the Anglican Communion is sworn to uphold.

To this, modernist liberals frequently object that the Bible is so full of contradictions, and so susceptible to diverse interpretations, that it cannot be appealed to as the sole authority for Christian belief. At most, it can be a witness, or a series of witnesses, to particular insights into the world of the divine as this was perceived in ancient times, but any application of this to today's circumstances must be carefully filtered through a whole series of social, cultural and even political reflections which may render the original text virtually unrecognizable. A few general principles can perhaps be salvaged and touched up for modern consumption, but the classical inheritance of orthodox doctrine and ethics which has come down to us over the centuries, and which Evangelicals generally accept as valid, is simply untenable in the modern world. To disagree with this is to be a 'fundamentalist', out of touch with current reality and unable to dialogue responsibly with modern people, especially if they happen to be educated modern people.

Evangelicals do not accept this analysis of the Bible or of their own beliefs. Instead, they insist that the Bible contains a single, coherent message of salvation and new life in Christ, which is valid for all times and places and for every human being. They agree that some of its teachings can no longer be applied today, but the reasons for this are theological, not sociological or cultural. For example, the coming of Jesus Christ into the world fulfilled the Old Testament, making many of its precepts redundant because they have been fulfilled in his life and work. These teachings, which include most of the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, have to be read today in the context of the covenant which God has made with his people, and which is valid for all time. Once they are placed in the covenant context, they can be interpreted as witnesses to the character of God's relationship to his people, which in its fundamentals remains the same today as it always was.

Evangelicals are well aware that there are many difficult passages in the Bible which need to be interpreted very carefully, and they generally refuse to base their own doctrinal teaching on passages which are doubtful or uncertain in meaning. The ancient belief that the clearer parts of Scripture must be used to interpret the harder ones is fully accepted by Evangelical scholars and theologians, but this acceptance rests on the belief that the canon as a whole contains a coherent message within which these difficult passages can and must be understood. Scholarship is a necessary tool for understanding the true

meaning of Scripture, and Evangelicals are in the forefront of biblical studies today. In fact, more often than not, it is Evangelical writers and printing houses which turn out volumes dealing with the Greek and Hebrew text of the Bible, and Evangelical colleges which insist on the need for their students to gain some kind of mastery over them if they are ever going to be able to preach and teach that text effectively. To claim, as some liberals do, that Evangelicals are anti-intellectual almost by definition, is completely false. There are certainly some simple-minded believers who might fit this description, but on the whole, Evangelicals demonstrate a greater dedication to biblical learning than any other branch of the church. It is no accident, for example, that of the eleven remaining residential training colleges in England, six stand in the Evangelical tradition, nor is it surprising that Evangelical ordinands are usually the most determined to get a solid theological education as preparation for their future ministry—which to them means adequate training in the meaning and use of the Bible.

When it comes to the question of ‘cultural conditioning’ which is another favourite of the liberals, who use this concept as a means to discredit the direct application of biblical teaching to our modern lives, Evangelicals recognize that the Bible speaks primarily to the context in which its various parts were written, but they do not agree that this allows us to relativise the text or declare it inapplicable to our own time. Evangelicals believe that a distinction must be made between the underlying theological principles which govern the form which a particular Biblical passage takes and that form itself. For example, we may agree that women no longer have to cover their heads in church out of respect for the angels, as they did in ancient times, but we believe that this practice was recommended as an appropriate means of exhibiting female modesty and submission—both of which are still valid concepts today. Modern women are expected to demonstrate these qualities in ways which are appropriate and meaningful to people today. This may mean changing the form found in the Bible, but not the underlying substance, which remains a gospel imperative for the church in every age.

On matters such as slavery, Evangelicals have always insisted that the Bible’s theology makes slavery an untenable economic system, since all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and none can be reduced to the status of a mere possession. At the same time, we also agree that Scripture

originally addressed a society in which slavery was a normal part of life, and so it formulated precepts for dealing with this reality. The early Christians were not in a position to be able to abolish the peculiar institution (as it was later called), but they were called upon to act as Christians in dealing with it. Over time, this produced an attitude of heart and mind which, when pursued to its logical conclusion, led to the abolition of slavery altogether. In the context of current debates about this, we need to remember that it was Bible-believing Evangelicals, not liberal-minded deists, who led the abolitionist fight in nineteenth-century Britain and America precisely because they understood what the implications of biblical theology were.

In this connection, it is equally important to remember that those same Evangelicals were not moved to link the slavery question to that of women's rights, and still less to the problem of homosexuality. To their minds, the status of women was rooted in the laws of creation and had no connection with slavery, and they regarded homosexuality as a moral, not as an economic issue. The reason for their attitude to these other things is that they were being faithful to the Bible, which also sees these things that way. Modern activists who try to draw a direct line from slavery to feminism to gay rights are wrong to do so, and Evangelicals are not being inconsistent in refusing to go along with this analysis. The Bible treats these things in quite different ways, because in fact they are quite different things. If accusations of inconsistency are to be levelled at anyone, it is the liberals in the church who are guilty here, not the Evangelicals, whose teaching and practice rest on the consistent message of God's Word.

Moreover, it needs to be stressed that the heart of Evangelical hermeneutics is spiritual, not philosophical. To claim, as some do, that Evangelical 'fundamentalism' is a holdover from eighteenth-century rationalism is false. Eighteenth-century Evangelicals fought against rationalists precisely because they regarded them as unspiritual in their approach to the Bible. Readers of the early church fathers will soon see that, in this respect, those Evangelicals were simply following in their ancient footsteps. By 'spiritual interpretation' we do not mean allegorical fantasies, but rather an interpretation which conforms to the revealed will of God, interpreted within the context of his covenant relationship with his people, and which commands their obedience.

Evangelicals do not have an infallible teaching authority to dictate to them in this matter, but it is remarkable how broad the consensus usually is. Differences of opinion which exist generally concern matters of church government and the like; they seldom (if ever) affect the basic moral and spiritual principles which govern the Christian life. The main reason for this is that Evangelicals approach the Bible in a spirit of humble obedience, seeking to find in it God's will for their lives. This approach, which springs from the heart of every individual believer, has produced a very high level of agreement, something which is a remarkable testimony to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Evangelicals derive great comfort from knowing that when it comes to the essentials, they are one with the saints of every age and place.

This is quite obviously not the case with our opponents in the church today. Indeed, many of our adversaries rejoice in the fact that they are different from—and, of course, superior to—Christians of earlier ages, or of other (less developed) cultures. The extraordinary attitudes of liberals towards Christians of the third world, which have surfaced in recent debates, are a clear indication of this. African Christians who read the Bible and seek to follow its teachings are being held in open contempt by sophisticated Western liberals, some of whom have even gone to the point of suggesting that the Africans have only recently come down from the trees. The arrogance which such attitudes reveal would be shocking in any context, but within the Christian church it is intolerable. A person filled with the Spirit of God knows the mind of Christ, whatever cultural or social background he or she may come from, and that mind is quite capable of discerning how Christ's teaching should be applied today. As Evangelicals, we feel no sense of alienation, cultural or otherwise, when we meet Bible-believing Christians from the third world, because whatever our differences may be, we are at one with them on this and usually come to the same conclusions as they do.

Things are very different however, when we have to deal with members of our own church who do not share our basic approach to Scripture. This is particularly obvious when we encounter highly-placed churchmen who are called to exercise some kind of ecclesiastical authority over us but who do not submit themselves in humble obedience to the Word of God. It is sadly all too possible to be canonically consecrated to the episcopate and yet be totally ignorant of the ways of God with men, and it has to be said that Evangelicals

fell no sense of kinship with such people. Our doctrine of *sola Scriptura* means that only the Bible is ultimately authoritative for us, and the pronouncements of bishops and synods must be read and understood in that light. When the latter are faithful to that Word we listen to them and accept their authority, but when that is not the case, we feel no sense of allegiance to them or to what they have to say. The attacks which have recently been levelled against Evangelicals (and our third-world brethren) are not so much attacks against us (as individuals) as against God's people, who are seeking to be faithful to the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives. That witness is consonant with God's self-revelation in his Word, and when these critics claim that the Bible is out-of-date or inapplicable today, a great chasm opens up between us and them, which mere church structures cannot overcome. This is a spiritual question, which cannot be understood except in spiritual terms, and which cannot be resolved other than by the conversion of these critics to a living faith in Christ.

Saying this is not a recipe for being popular in the church, and Evangelicals know that they will never be at peace with those who reject God's Word and show contempt for it by the things they teach and by the way they live. A bishop who denies the historicity of the resurrection is just as unacceptable to us as one who practises a homosexual lifestyle, because both things are contrary to the Word of God. We cannot be selective in our approach to this problem; *sola Scriptura* means that we must honour the Bible's injunctions in every dimension of our lives and in every part of the church. The crises though which we are now passing will test our faith in ways in which it has never been tested before, but we may be confident that if we seek to obey God's Word in our lives, he will bless us and vindicate us in the face of whatever opposition we encounter, so that the name of Jesus Christ may be glorified in his church, which is the faithful company of all believers and not a clique of modernist, God-denying theologians and ecclesiastical politicians.

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