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The Concept of 'Evangelical'

COLIN BROWN

Recently it has become apparent that there has been a great deal of heart-searching among evangelicals within the Anglican Church as to their identity. The problem of the part evangelicals should play in the established church has been with us for a very long time, traditionally being expressed in questions relating to the extent of involvement with those whose practices and beliefs are unacceptable to the evangelical wing. Such questions have troubled evangelicals for long enough, but at least the issues were reasonably clear in that various positions were recognizable. Evangelicals were evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics were Anglo-Catholics, and so on.

However, the problems have grown more complex. For example, it has become apparent that what were supposedly irreconcilable groups now hold certain tenets in common as against other groups, so that a concern to maintain the objectivity of truth now makes it difficult to distinguish between some views originating from traditionally high and low church sources, and it is understandable if some people find it all extremely confusing, for in certain respects similarities have now become more important than differences.

Even more confusing, if we understand the cries of anguish correctly, is the way in which evangelicals now differ among themselves. Practices which earlier generations of evangelicals found abhorrent are now acceptable to some. Evangelicals moving into parishes which previously had a non-evangelical tradition, are now prepared to perform rites previously unthinkable for a true member of the evangelical wing of the church. Furthermore, there is a new generation of evangelicals who are not prepared to follow the lead of previously acceptable senior men in the way an earlier generation would have done. Leaders now have to earn respect from people no longer held together by membership of a despised minority. An increase in evangelical strength has bred the confidence that can result in independent thought, and this is a trend which many appear to find perplexing. Probably the ultimate concern is that men who formerly might be expected to describe themselves as evangelicals are now reluctant to accept the title.¹ If evangelicals are no longer to be characterized by such things as a common set of practices, a readiness to acknowledge a common leadership, or a willingness to

close ranks under the banner of 'evangelical', how are they to be characterized?

Obviously it is desirable that the question is answered, not only for the peace of mind of those disturbed by the changed situation, but in order that some statements about evangelicals might have meaning. Claims as to the strength or role of evangelicals within the church only have significance when we know who are being described.

It is important, then, that some sort of substantive account be given of evangelicals, but there is a prior question to be answered and that is how the word 'evangelical' works. Unless we are clear about this, we will certainly not be clear as to the identity of evangelicals. There is a widely held assumption that the word 'evangelical' should have a clearly defined single meaning, and of course it can have if stipulatively defined in this way. The point of this paper is to argue that to so define is to misunderstand the concept of 'evangelical'. It is of the nature of the concept that it is understood in different ways by different people. To say this is not merely to observe the current scene, but rather to draw attention to a basic characteristic of the term 'evangelical'. W. B. Gallie speaks of 'contested concepts', such as democracy and education,² which are characterized by debate and disagreement with regard to their fundamental nature. 'Evangelical' is an essentially contested concept in Gallie's sense.

Gallie makes the point that disputes about such concepts are not resolvable by argument, even though the dispute is sustained by argument and evidence. Such disputes are not simply the result of psychological tendencies on the part of the disputants, but exist because there are aspects of the concepts which prompt repeated disputes about their proper use. That 'evangelical' is such a concept can be seen by considering Gallie's suggested criteria for them.

First, it is characteristic of such concepts that they are evaluative in that they signify some kind of valued achievement. For example, arguments about whether someone is educated are arguments about whether or not a person has achieved a state which we consider desirable. In the same way, arguments about what is or is not an evangelical are evaluative. They involve appraising a person's standing as a Christian of a certain kind, and it is over this that disputes sometimes occur. It is only necessary to read some elements of the Christian press to realize how different the nonconformist view of an evangelical may be from that of Anglicans. At times one can only wonder if it is possible to be both an Anglican and an evangelical, or at least that is the question raised by some nonconformists. Even among Anglicans there may be doubts about the soundness of Calvinists or Arminians, of those who support certain societies, of those who engage in certain practices, of those who do not engage in those same practices. The standing of our ministers appears at times to be evaluated by criteria such as the names of their colleges, the

people they know, their participation in evangelical activities in their youth or in their holidays. Despite the absurdity of some of the criteria we apply, the fact remains that we appraise some churches and some individuals to see if we can give them the evangelical seal of approval. Certainly, 'evangelical' is a concept which expresses our appraisal.

Secondly, essentially contested concepts are complex in that not only can a number of criteria be applied to possible instances of the concept, but the importance to be attached to such criteria is unsettled and there are different orders of importance into which various aspects of the concept can be placed. What is meant by this can be illustrated by considering the concept of 'religion', and the difficulty—which Gallie points out—of deciding what is unique about it. It could be argued equally well that the unique element is redemption, sin or divinity. The concept of 'evangelical' presents a similar problem. There are certainly many aspects of 'evangelical', but which is unique? For some it is an emphasis on evangelism, for others an emphasis on the atonement, for others again it is personal piety. Some might describe it in terms of dedication, and others in terms of fidelity to the Bible. John Stott has a twofold emphasis on the Bible and the gospel.³ It is precisely because of this uncertainty that we have the current concern. Clearly what is at stake here is not a denial of the importance of any of these aspects of thought and life. The issue is that of defining the unique element of evangelicalism, and the complexity of the concept is such that there are a number of possible contenders but no agreed resolution. This is not to say that any individual evangelical will not be convinced about the aspect he sees as being essential to the concept. Obviously most of us have a very clear idea of what an evangelical is and might even claim that our idea is the correct one, or that it is what 'evangelical' ought to mean. The difficulty is that we cannot agree on what constitutes the correct account.

Thirdly, an essentially contested concept is one which is vague in that it changes according to circumstances, and there are numerous instances which can be cited of the way in which the concept of 'evangelical' meets such a criterion. The first National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967 has been described as 'signalling an end to the isolation of earlier generations and marking a commitment to the present and future of the Church of England.'⁴ This commitment represents a shift from a previous assumption that evangelical Anglicans were firstly evangelicals and only secondarily Anglicans, and this is attributed by Colin Buchanan to the increase in the numerical strength of evangelicals.⁵

Another change in the concept can be seen in the way in which the Lausanne Congress placed a new emphasis on the social responsibility of evangelicals; an emphasis which, Athol Gill has claimed,

made that particular congress quite different from its predecessors. It is this 'renewed emphasis upon socio-political involvement . . . [and] social action as an integral component of the life of discipleship' that constitutes, in part, the new face of evangelicalism.⁶ It matters little for present purposes that evangelicalism had always entailed social responsibility to some degree. In assuming a new face, the concept of 'evangelical' changed. Just as an extended involvement in the church can be attributed to the new status of evangelicals as a 'major force' in the church,⁷ so too can an extended involvement in society.

The point that a change in circumstances leads to a changed concept can again be made by considering the way in which evangelicals view evangelistic crusades. In the 1950s, when Billy Graham was conducting large meetings in this country, support for his work was almost obligatory for evangelicals. Among Christians, a person's standing as an evangelical could almost be measured by the amount of support given. It was a time in the history of the church in this country when evangelicals generally felt weak, misunderstood and beleaguered, and when the chance came to make an impact on a nationwide scale, it was seized with enthusiasm. Circumstances have changed in the past twenty years. Evangelicals now have a greater confidence in their standing in the church and, for a variety of reasons, there is no longer the same sense of commitment to support large meetings. What was seen in the 1950s as an integral element in being an evangelical is no longer regarded in that way. In other words, the concept is vague and open, and may change according to circumstances.

Additional criteria are a) awareness, by those who hold certain views about the correct use of the concept, that their particular views are contested by others; and b) that the disputants have at least some idea of the grounds on which others hold their position. Once again the concept of 'evangelical' meets such criteria. It is this awareness of differences that has brought concern about the matter into the open.

Gallie presents two final criteria which, he claims, raise these concepts above the level of mere confusion and reveal their essential contestedness. The first is that such a concept can be traced back to an original exemplar. Any number of exemplars could be given for the concept of 'evangelical', but there would be broad agreement that the original is Christ. Linked with this is the criterion that it is plausible that dispute over the concept aids the achievement of the exemplar's aims. If we ask what are Christ's aims, we are faced with a variety of possible accounts: for example, to reveal the truth about the Father, to draw men to himself, and to effect the redemption of his people. For our present purposes we do not have to debate any hierarchy of such aims, but only need to recognize that the different interpretations of 'evangelical' are concerned to either give a better understanding of such aims or to produce more effective practices

which are true to the nature and mind of Christ.

On the basis of this analysis, if some groups support the view that being an evangelical entails developing an active involvement in society's problems, then they are claiming that social involvement is one of the aims of their exemplar, Christ. In the same way, a rejection of this view entails that social involvement is not one of Christ's aims for his people. Given that 'evangelical' is an essentially contested concept and that different views of the concept highlight different aims, one of the implications is that the major task facing evangelicals at present is to determine what is the mind of Christ. What Jesus Christ requires of his people becomes a more fundamental and more important question than those asked about doctrinal bases or church practices, though this in no way means that the latter are *not* important.

One of the virtues of identifying 'evangelical' as an essentially contested concept is that it enables us to understand why some people are unwilling to accept the leadership of certain men and why some will not accept the label of 'evangelical'. The reason is simply that they are unwilling to accept the implications of being associated with leadership and practices which reflect an unacceptable account of evangelicalism. If 'evangelical' is an essentially contested concept, we should expect such divergent views. The reason so many people are surprised by the current unwillingness to conform to an unspecified party position, is that there has grown up a false belief that all evangelicals believe and do the same things. A moment's reflection shows that they do not and have not for centuries. To take only one example, the distinction between Calvinist and Arminian evangelicals is long-standing, and the tendency of the past forty years or so to close our eyes to our differences does not mean that they have not existed. Nor does it mean that such differences are not deep-seated.

If we grant that there are essentially contested concepts in the sense that Gallie describes them, then it has been pointed out that 'evangelical' is such a concept. It has certain implications for the present debate about the identity of evangelicals.

First, far from wanting a common acceptance of what constitutes an evangelical, there is a case for welcoming the diversity of views that exist. As we have seen, it is by such diversity that our knowledge of the truth about Christ and the desirability of our practices are continually being brought under review. Not only do we recognize that other views as to the nature of an 'evangelical' are logically possible, but they are of positive value in sharpening our own case. If there was agreement among evangelicals over what constitutes an evangelical, then it would be likely that they had become an isolated group stagnating into obscurity.

Secondly, to recognize the nature of the concept will remove much anxiety from among us. It will free energies and concern from the shackles of an inward-looking parochialism, to the more important task of determining and communicating God's truth. If the argument which has been presented is valid, then we should expect there to be differences among evangelicals both in practice and in identification criteria and a recognition of this fact will surely ease the concern caused because we do not all follow a single line. The reported preference of certain men to be identified with an evangelical 'tradition',⁸ with its hint of possible differences, is more in harmony with the argument that 'evangelical' is an essentially contested concept, than is talk of an evangelical 'party'.

Finally, it needs to be stated that it is not to be implied that we should simply accept each and every account of evangelicalism. If it is correct to identify 'evangelical' as an essentially contested concept, then one of our expectations is that there will be assertions and counter-assertions as to the characteristics of evangelicalism. The debate will, however, be with the recognition that there is nothing extraordinary about this situation.⁹

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NOTES

- 1 N. T. Wright, *Evangelical Anglican Identity: The Connection between Bible, Gospel and Church* (Latimer House, Oxford 1980) p.9f.
- 2 W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding* (Chatto and Windus, London 1964) ch.8. For a discussion of Gallie's ideas, see E. Gellner, *Contemporary Thought and Politics* (RKP, London 1974) ch.8.
- 3 J. R. W. Stott, *What is an Evangelical?* (CPAS, London 1977).
- 4 J. Capon, *Evangelicals Tomorrow* (Fount Paperbacks, Glasgow 1977) p.15.
- 5 C. Buchanan, 'The Role and Calling of an Evangelical Theological College' in *Churchman*, vol.94, no.1, 1980, p.28.
- 6 A. Gill, 'Christian Social Responsibility' in *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, ed. C. R. Padilla (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1976) p.92.
- 7 C. Buchanan, op. cit. p.26.
- 8 J. Capon, op. cit. p.181.
- 9 I am grateful to Harold Harland and James Packer for comments on an earlier version of this paper.