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Evangelical Approaches to Theological Dialogue¹

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Introduction

If we are Evangelical, Gospel Christians our concern must be that the whole church (including our own lives and the congregations where we serve) should be under the whole of God's Word in the power of the Spirit—to the glory of God, for the health of the church, and for the salvation of individuals. We believe Scripture to be 'God's Word written' (Art. XX). We believe Scripture to be sufficient for salvation and our supreme authority (Arts. VI, VII, XX). It is in Scripture that we come to know the mind of God, that we see into the heart of God, and where today we hear the voice of God as the Spirit who gave it speaks it afresh. It is here we meet with the Lord Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. Therefore to be an Evangelical Christian should mean, not concern with a party point of view, but with all God's Word and all God's church. It is important that not only Evangelicals who serve on commissions and councils are clear on both the negative dangers and the positive principles involved in their work, but that the great majority of Evangelicals working in local deanery, diocesan and a variety of ecumenical situations know what is involved. I hope that this paper may have something to say to all such.

Dangers

The dangers to which we need to be constantly alert include at least the following.

The dangers of:

(i) . . . *dead or simply dull orthodoxy*: dead orthodoxy never commends the Evangelical Gospel to the rest of the church, for it sounds harsh and legalistic, quite the opposite of the abundant life through the free grace of God in Christ in which the Evangelical claims to rejoice. Dull orthodoxy, through keeping the Gospel and church life clothed in the outmoded cultural or linguistic garments of another age or of a different land, seems to deny the relevance of the Gospel: 'Enculturation' is Lovelace's word in *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. (Perhaps the opposite is a greater danger at the moment: that we are so obsessively relevant that we are in danger of forgetting our historical roots).

(ii) . . . *of thinking we have nothing to learn* from Christians who are not Evangelical, or of failing to show all such the love and courtesy of Christ. We must never fail to recognize the sovereign

grace of God in Christ in some who are not Evangelical; we should be humbled by the realization that they may be putting to better use all that they have received of the Word and Spirit of God than we who may make higher claims but fall sadly behind in practice. So also we must be appreciative of every move that is made in a more Biblical direction.

(iii) . . . of assuming that congregations or denominations or representatives on commissions are always thoroughbred from their particular stable. The true position may be much more complex. Even congregations that have been on the receiving end of pronounced Catholic or Liberal ministries are not necessarily uniformly Catholic or Liberal in theology or outlook. At that level certainly they are often simply confused and only the steady ministry of God's Word will help to sort them out. In the Church of England, Anglo-Catholicism, let alone Liberalism, has always been more clerical than congregational, for church members find in those traditions a lot that simply does not work from Monday to Saturday.

(iv) . . . of thinking we are more Biblical than we are, and of allowing our own temperament or mindset to make us more selective than we imagine in our outworking of God's truth ourselves and in our presentation of it to other parts of the church. To take two obvious examples: Scripture teaches both the social responsibility of Christians (principally through Old Testament prophets) and it also teaches the reality of judgment and hell (principally through our Lord's own ministry). Yet it seems rare to find appropriate emphasis on both areas from the same evangelical quarters.

(v) . . . of over-systematizing the Word of God, which means that we are less able to hear what God is actually saying to us from it, unduly rigid in our presentation of the truth of God to the rest of the church (let alone to those outside), and in fact less able to receive what others may be saying to us. I am a firm believer in systematic theology, which reverently seeks to piece together the jigsaw of God's truth in Scripture; but systematic theology can become systematizing theology where pieces that do not quite fit are forced together and from where sometimes the centrepiece, the Person of Christ Himself, is sadly missing.

(vi) . . . of claiming to be Biblical Evangelicals, but of accepting a less Biblical view of Scripture than Scripture does of itself. This is likely to affect dialogue with and practice in the wider church, for then the debate is likely to be pressed with less Scriptural rigour. I do not think that the inerrancy debate has been irrelevant or unimportant. While acknowledging that there are problems where more light is needed, we need to assert vigorously that all Scripture is true. Yet I also believe that those who do so assert and those who take a 'limited inerrancy' position should as far as possible work together and testify to the rest of the church the uniqueness and power and authority of

God's Word written. It is doubtless right, as John Stott said in a recent paper, that we should not call limited inerrantists 'false evangelicals', rather 'inconsistent evangelicals'. Nevertheless, the issue remains a serious one.

Principles

Having faced the dangers, we turn to the principles that need to guide us.

(i) *We must constantly face the whole church with the truth and claims of Scripture.* Scripture itself speaks of the revealed truth of God as 'the truth'—something definable, recognizable, which can be summarized, and which is to be adhered to, trusted and obeyed in a spirit of loving response and submission if we are to be in healthy communion with our Creator and Saviour—see 2 & 3 John; cf. 3 Tim. 1. 13–14; 2.1–2; 3.14–4.5 There is repeated emphasis on the truth being proclaimed and practised. The church is 'built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets [i.e. Scripture, the written word], with Jesus Christ Himself [the living Word] as the chief cornerstone' (Eph. 2.20). The Evangelical Christian, part of whose hallmark is his submission to Scripture, can therefore never think of, imply, or be thought to imply, that Evangelicalism is simply a point of view, one of a number of equally valid traditions part of the 'many-sided splendour' of Anglicanism—more or less a personal preference, with simply a 'contribution to make'. While we must constantly put ourselves under Scripture afresh and rely on the Spirit afresh, our responsibility is consistently to proclaim the whole counsel of God and to call and challenge the church to face the fact that if we submit to Christ as Lord, we submit to Scripture as God's Word written and therefore as our supreme authority. If there is true submission to Scripture, much else will follow in terms of doctrinal conviction and practice. Until there is that submission, agreement is likely to be partial, variable, ultimately hit-or-miss, sometimes more encouraging, sometimes less, over a whole range of issues, such as those covered by A.R.C.I.C. and B.E.M.

(ii) *We must therefore recognize that the inspiration and authority of Scripture remains the key issue in debate.* Of course after 2,000 years' church history, issues are in a sense more complex than in the New Testament days: we would not want to call all non-evangelicals (for example, to take two notable twentieth-century leaders, William Temple or Basil Hume) heretics! True too that Scripture itself draws a distinction between those who are confused ('You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?' Gal. 3.1) and one who is actively preaching another Gospel ('Let him be eternally condemned!' Gal. 1.8). But when all is said and done, there remains a 'great gulf fixed' between those with teaching and ruling authority in the church who bow to Scripture and those who do not. That is a divide we dare not gloss over.

John Stott in the paper referred to earlier spoke of 'the worldwide slippage from Scripture': it is still there and continuing, the ongoing fruit of the Enlightenment, which surely involved a satanic response to the Reformation and the revivals which accompanied and followed it, especially the Great Awakening. So this must be combatted ultimately not only with scholarly but with spiritual weapons.

To the Roman Church we must constantly say that historically in the relationship of tradition and scripture, they have made mistakes. There must therefore be repentance: remember this was our Lord's one call to the five of the Seven Churches in Revelation 2-3 which had wandered. This the Roman Church does not find easy to contemplate, certainly at an official level.

Remember that anyone born again of the Spirit of God has to be *taught* to doubt or disbelieve Scripture or to dethrone it from its place of supreme authority. For it is the Spirit-given instinct of the spiritual man to believe Scripture as the Word of God. Although his 'technical grasp' of the doctrine of Scripture, particularly as a new believer, may be very limited, he knows that this is where God meets him and where he hears God's voice ('The Bible became a new book to me' is a delightfully common testimony). See 1 Cor 2.6-16 and Stott's chapter on this in *The Bible: Book for Today*, in particular the sections on 'The Inspiring Spirit' and 'The Enlightening Spirit'. The most sinister (I use the word advisedly) achievement of many theology faculties and theological colleges is that they have consistently taught men and women to doubt or reject at least parts of the Word of God. Jesus did not say that such teachers could not be in the Kingdom, but that they would be least in the Kingdom: 'Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others shall be called least in the Kingdom of God; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5.19 N.A.S.V.).

(iii) *We must be teachable and repentant ourselves*, remembering what our Lord taught about the speck and the log. When we see elements of belief or spirituality or practice ('insights'), which are from or in accordance with Scripture, but which Anglican Evangelicals have been neglecting, we must be ready to learn. This is not the same as saying 'Evangelicals are always going to contribute x, Catholics are always going to emphasize y, even not-too-liberal central churchmen can feed-in z.' If we knew our Evangelical history better, we would know that at times when Evangelicalism has run deeply, such neglected elements have probably been present. We have reclaimed social responsibility from the social gospellers; we have reclaimed the need for some worship to be perhaps less structured and more expressive from the Pentecostals via the Charismatics (although the Pentecostals are of course themselves mainstream Evangelicals). It is a tragedy if we are reconciled to saying 'To learn what it means to worship God in the beauty of holiness or to understand what

meditation is all about, I must always go to the “Catholic tradition”’: let us relearn these things for ourselves, ultimately from God’s Word, at the feet of the God of grace who is yet ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord’.

(iv) *We must be more ready to argue confessionally*, and with Luther to say ‘Here I stand’. This point is linked inevitably with the first in this section. If Scripture itself recognizes that there can be accurate encapsulations of ‘the truth’, then we must recover our confidence in the appropriateness of confessions of faith to which ministers should be expected to subscribe honestly, a confidence which our Evangelical brothers in the Church of Scotland never seem to have lost.

For us, the foundations are the historic creeds, the Articles and the doctrine of the Prayer Book. We do not put these beyond Scripture, but see them as always subject to further reformation or addition in the light of Scripture and current debates. But we must take our stand on them, for this is both Biblical and honest, and a testimony to the whole church. However the Form of Assent may have been modified, ultimately one either assents with a clear conscience, or speaks tongue-in-cheek before God, the church and the world. Canon A2 says unambiguously: ‘The 39 Articles are agreeable to the Word of God and may be assented unto with a good conscience by all members of the Church of England.’

If I am asked why I am an Anglican, high on my list of answers is the fact that I assent to its formularies with a clear conscience. If the Articles were removed or entirely relegated, I do not say I would immediately leave the Church of England (there are other reasons why I am an Anglican), but it would certainly alter and weaken my allegiance. We must therefore constantly point out the tragedy of the wrong sort of comprehensiveness for which the Church of England is thought to stand. Its present width of comprehensiveness is not its glory but its shame. It is a theological and historical nonsense to say that it is a bridge church between Rome and Geneva, though I believe some modern charismatics would be ready to say this.

The *via media* was never, as is sometimes suggested, a tight-rope walk between Rome and the Reformation, nor between Romanism and Anabaptistry, but a pastorally-minded balancing of the claims of traditional faith and practice against the need to change for edification.

J. I. Packer, *A Kind of Noah's Ark* (Latimer Study 10, p. 20).

Oliver O’Donovan, in the Introduction to his book *On The Thirty-Nine Articles* (a Latimer Monograph), admits that when teaching Anglican students in Canada who lacked an identity, he himself found it necessary to give a course on the Articles. For further discussion of this neglected subject see Latimer Study 9 *Confessing the Faith in the Church of England today* (Roger Beckwith) and Latimer Study 20/21

The 39 Articles: Their Place and Use Today (Packer & Beckwith), in which Jim Packer rightly sums it all up when he says 'Neglecting the Articles creates a problem of Anglican integrity.'

(v) *We must realize that the truth of God is not negotiable.* It is here that I fear that we are in danger of being hoodwinked. Two strands must be disentangled, both reflecting contemporary relativism and not Biblical absolutes.

(a) *The notion of studied ambiguity in report or liturgy.* It is no principle at all. It is rank dishonesty. Would it not have been preferable to have 2 or even 3 service books than to have had one made of wallpaper because it is designed to cover the cracks? Arguably, when there are controversies in the church, we need language that speaks more clearly and is used more tightly, and structure that is less capable of misinterpretation: such was a Reformation principle. All of us who use the A.S.B., believing culture change makes modern and more flexible forms of service essential, must make sure we use it in a Biblical way.

(b) *The need to appear to agree on everything all the time.* This means that history is in danger of being simplified or rewritten and real areas of continuing dispute are fudged. The special tragedy of this approach is that it then becomes less clear where true progress has been made: and true progress may well have been made, particularly in A.R.C.I.C. II. I do not think it is permissible to say, as Andrew Kirk is summarized as saying of the *Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry Report*:

The group tried to produce a document which everyone in the church would find acceptable. It was a hard-won compromise and it would be irresponsible to reject it out of hand. (*Church of England Newspaper* 7 Nov. 1986).

It is hard to see how presenting things simply in terms of convergence or consensus, in case ripples or even storms are produced, is anything other than compromise. What is at stake so very often is not a personal whim or an Evangelical prejudice, but God's truth on which depends His honour and the health of His church. When an Evangelical incumbent at the Rochester Diocesan Synod said words to the effect that if his Roman Catholic brother chose to view the bread and wine differently, what did that matter? the enthusiastic applause had a hollow ring in terms of truth. It is a fact that so many in Anglo or Roman Catholic churches remain spiritually starved (or maybe unconverted) because Communion is presented as a more or less complete spiritual diet, to the at least partial neglect of the Word of God.

Most of us do not find it easy to stand out as a minority even where necessary in local ecumenical situations, particularly when personal

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relationships are good, as they need to be. How much greater must be the pressures on those involved in various commissions. As Roger Beckwith wrote of B.E.M. and A.R.C.I.C. I:

In a period when relations with other denominations are so much more friendly than they have often been in the past, it may seem churlish (it certainly feels churlish) to be so critical of the reports. But establishing agreement is a matter in which there can be no cutting of corners. If we pretend now that we are more agreed than we are, it will only lead to recriminations later, and to relations becoming more distant rather than closer (Latimer Memoranda 12).

So we must be ready to stick out, whether in local situations (I speak as Vicar of the only church in central Beckenham not in an ecumenical grouping, although we as a staff support the separate Fraternal), or on commissions; more ready to author and sign minority reports; indeed, more ready to respect others (e.g. convinced traditional Roman Catholics) who also stand out.

In showing that truth is not negotiable our aim is not to withdraw into a grim fortress and show nothing but a bleak exterior, but to demonstrate that every ounce of God's truth is too precious to barter or dilute, and so to commend the Biblical Gospel in its fulness, praying that there will be a fundamental shift by others to a clear evangelical theological position. It may not happen very often at the moment—but it does and did happen (e.g. the late Prof. Tasker, and, of course, the Reformers themselves).

(vi) *We must realize our great responsibility (but greatly neglected for the past twenty years or so) to demonstrate to the whole church what true unity under the Word, in the Gospel and by the Spirit is all about: our essential and practical unity with Evangelicals of all denominations or of none. Sometimes we can be almost embarrassed to own them as Gospel brothers (shame on us!), especially when we are with those who seem to mean by 'the church' only the Roman, Orthodox and Anglican Communions. (What an impertinence!). But by our co-operation in worship, prayer, evangelism, and discussion we must demonstrate a true unity, and how we cope (and maybe live with) remaining areas of difference (e.g. baptism, church polity, and spiritual gifts). To my mind there is a strong case for every Evangelical Church of England church or organization being affiliated to the Evangelical Alliance. When in parish ministry in Bristol, some of the choicest times were twice yearly prayer meetings between three Evangelical churches in the same area: Open Brethren, Assemblies of God, and Anglican. When we recollect that others in the Church of England are ready to run off and be rashly ecumenical (or even inter-faith) at the drop of a stole, we should show such unity unreservedly. As Philip Hacking says in *The Spirit Is Among Us*, writing of the 1966 National Assembly of Evangelicals*

I believe we were right not to seek to bring all evangelical Christians together in one structure . . . and I believe that it is still the purpose of God that we should go on seeking to infiltrate denominations or indeed to remind them of the scriptural basis which most of them still profess. What we dare not do is to become more Anglican or Methodist or Baptist than evangelical. I have no hesitation in saying that I am closer in fellowship to non-Anglican evangelicals because we hold on to the same truths and our areas of disagreements are in matters that are not central to the gospel. But many would not share my conviction, and I believe that here is the battleground for the future (p. 52).

Philip may be right: I share his conviction and his concern.

Practice

How have we been managing these past twenty years in our debating and dialoguing, in the appointments that Evangelicals have filled, in the local activities in which we have been involved? In terms of proposals and reports, the scene has clearly been very mixed.

(i) Even in *Growing Into Union* (1970), for all its strengths, the desire of the Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic authors to present something positive after the Anglican-Methodist collapse led to some odd statements—for example, on tradition (see page 38, lines 15–20) and even more on episcopacy (pp. 76–77), culminating in the statement: ‘The monepiscopal idea exhibits the ministry of Christ with special fullness.’

(ii) *BEM & A.R.C.I.C. I*: The majority of Evangelicals were surely right in voting against one or both of them. While recognizing moves forward, the *C.E.E.C. Assessment & Critique* correctly pointed out that in crucial areas, crucial differences remained. George Carey and Colin Craston wrote:

As representatives of our dioceses let us note that we are being invited to consider whether these documents are ‘consonant’ and ‘convergent’ with the face [surely a misprint for ‘faith’] of the Church of England—not merely our tradition. (*Church of England Newspaper* 7 Nov. 1986).

But where do we find the ‘face’ (or indeed the ‘faith’) of the Church of England? You do not have to be very sharp in sight or hearing to find most views in the Church of England. On that basis we could unite with the sects! No, it must be in Scripture and our Anglican formularies. It’s not a question of ‘our tradition’ (or anybody else’s), but of God’s truth.

Recently we have had the worst and the best.

(iii) *The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry* is the worst, which in its desire to ascribe to the ordained ministry a priesthood in some way more representative and more specialized than that enjoyed through the priesthood of all believers (so clear in the New Testament), and

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despite the eloquent silence of the latter, finally decides on pp. 101–2 that it knows better than Scripture. While crude sacerdotalism is not present (for which we may be thankful), this representative notion rises phoenix-like and is bound to have similarly unfortunate consequences in the life of the church.

(iv) *A.R.C.I.C. II, Salvation and the Church*, is very much better, and in some ways remarkable. The definition in Paragraph 18 is already famous:

The term justification speaks of a divine declaration of acquittal, of the love of God manifested to an alienated and lost humanity, prior to any entitlement on our part. Through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God declares that we are forgiven, accepted and reconciled to him. Instead of our own strivings to make ourselves acceptable to God, Christ's perfect righteousness is reckoned to our account.

Immensely encouraging as this is, even this statement might have its wording sharpened still further (as at other points), and an Evangelical minority report on what Protestants believed happened historically would not have been out of place. Did the Reformation really happen mainly because of misunderstandings? I think not. We need the cautious optimism of Roger Beckwith's *Latimer Comment 20* and the cautious pessimism of George Curry's article in *Churchman* (1987/2) before we go overboard ('This is the one we have been waiting for'—George Carey, *Church of England Newspaper* 23 January 1987). The issue now will be whether the message of justification by faith alone through grace alone (George Curry argues that this is still not explicitly stated in the Report) actually begins to sound clearly from Roman Catholic prelate and pulpit. At the same time, it is worth asking how clearly it is sounding from *our* pulpits. We must trust that what happened in A.R.C.I.C. II's first report, with its fairer evangelical representation, will happen increasingly often and with greater clarity—including a readiness for minority reports where necessary.

Questions

I end with six questions.

(1) Are we sufficiently careful to honour the Gospel in all our day-to-day contacts with churchmen of other views or denominations—as well as being alert to the danger of compromise in theological dialogue? Good Evangelicals can suddenly go 'woolly and churchy' in the way they speak (though there is no need to use evangelical jargon!), in the way they pray (suddenly stiff and formal), even in dress: can we really be sure stoles and other vestments are effectively neutralized doctrinally, or that cope and mitre are suitable garb (especially in the 1980s) for the followers of the Carpenter of Galilee? I doubt it. There is on the other hand no need by contrast to be rude or abrasive.

(ii) Are the churches where we serve effectively expressing in worship, life, even the reordering of buildings, what we truly believe? Fellowship areas are a good thing, stopping a chancel from appearing as a holy of holies is excellent—but what of the removal of pulpits, and having central Tables that still do not look quite like Tables?

(iii) Are we sometimes walking so carefully ecclesiastically to 'get somewhere' (hopefully for the sake of the Gospel) that if we get there, we stop walking at all?

(iv) Are we guarding against the assumption that to plant evangelicals into the positions—on to commissions or into the ecclesiastical civil service—is a necessary guarantee of more spiritual life, especially in the local church where (the New Testament makes clear) the work of the Gospel most effectively takes place?

(v) Are we confronting the whole church with a coherent theology and spirituality? I suspect not. Why do we read from time to time of various notables becoming Roman Catholics, but seldom if ever of their becoming Evangelical Christians? Roman Catholicism (of the traditional kind) and Conservative Evangelicalism are (it is said) the only two coherent theological and spiritual options in Christianity. What makes men like Chesterton or Muggeridge choose the one and not the other?

(vi) Are we thoroughly convinced that finally, whatever we seek to do in the Lord's strength in all the areas that we have been discussing, only a thoroughly supernatural reformation and revival can really sort out the Church of England, the churches in Britain, and our nation itself? And are we praying for it?

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NOTES

- 1 A paper read at a Church of England Evangelical Council residential conference in 1987.