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Evangelicalism: the State of Scholarship and the Question of Identity

Richard Turnbull addresses the question of evangelical identity: what are the distinctive features of belief and self-understanding? He reviews several approaches which attempt to take account of the breadth and diversity within the evangelical movement. He rejects simple theological or sociological definitions, suggesting four centres of evangelical spiritual identity which can be used to describe Evangelicals historically and in the present.

Evangelicals have increased in prominence and influence over the last 30 years or so.¹ This has been evident both within and without the established Church of England. Nevertheless, that sort of statement requires careful assessment. Thus, the membership of the Evangelical Alliance has grown from some 900 in 1980 to 50,000 at the end of 1996.² However, effective organisation and leadership may account for a significant proportion of this growth. Within the Church of England, excluding Bishops, Archdeacons and Deans and Provosts, 31% of the House of Clergy of the General Synod are members of the Evangelical Group on General Synod. This Group also contains 39% of the House of Laity.³ If ordination candidates at the six evangelical theological colleges can at least serve as a guide to trends, the percentage of residential ordinands at these colleges has grown from 48% of the total in 1986/87 to 61% in 1997/98.⁴ However, this does ignore something of a shift away from residential training as well as increasing diversity in some colleges. Evangelical representation among the hierarchy has also undoubtedly increased.⁵ Measurement may be difficult, but both perception and the accumulation of evidence at least suggest that Evangelicals feature increasingly significantly in the life of the Church.

1 There is never a straight-forward resolution to the question of the date from which to measure a phenomenon; the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967, particularly given the diverse views within the constituency on the propriety of the strategies then adopted, at least provides a significant marker.

2 Evangelical Alliance, Membership Department.

3 Evangelical Group on General Synod, June 1997.

4 Extracted from *Church Statistics 1987*, Central Board of Finance of the Church of England and *Statistics of Licensed Ministers 1997*, Advisory Board of Ministry of the Church of England.

5 C. O. Buchanan, 'Evangelicalism: the Latest State of the Party', *Anvil* 11, (1994), pp 103-110.

However, this paper is not a review of the state of evangelical witness within or beyond the boundaries of the Church of England. It is not an examination of the 'state of the party'. It is not intended to be an assessment of the organisational strategies adopted by Evangelicals in general nor an evaluation of the strategy of institutional involvement in the structures of the Church of England adopted at National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967 in particular. Neither is it an analysis of the increasing contribution to the Church and to Christian witness of evangelical scholarship across the range of academic specialities, theology and otherwise.

The growth of the evangelical constituency has also demonstrated the increasing diversity and complexity of the evangelical movement as a whole. Influences have ebbed and flowed. The questions of identity and the relationship of the movement to contemporary culture have become recurrent points of debate. Issues of ecclesiology have featured significantly both within the movement, in relation to more radical models of the Church, from church planting to cell church, as well as from the outside, in criticism of evangelical ecclesiological assumptions.

The purpose of this article is to place such issues in a wider context of the theological and scholarly investigation of the very phenomenon of Evangelicalism itself. A number of important issues come to the fore. There is the question of the relative influence of the dominant cultural and philosophical setting upon evangelical understanding and vice versa – in other words to what extent is Evangelicalism culturally determined or culture shaping? Specific consideration of that particular point will require another occasion, but as a starting point it is essential to address the issue of how to define an Evangelical. What approaches can be taken to the question of evangelical identity and can new definitions be offered that are both academically rigorous and practically applicable?

The scholarship of Evangelicalism

Scholarly analysis requires a dynamic balance of knowledge and understanding as well as longer-term perspective and critical evaluation. Writers who stand within the movement may fail in that wider task of assessment, while those who observe from the outside may not have the level of understanding of the evangelical heart and mind that comes from faith and commitment. In 1908 G. R. Balleine published *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*. This was the first comprehensive account of the emergence and development of Evangelicalism from the time of the Revival of the eighteenth century. It remains an important source. However, its date of publication, barely after the turn of the century, is illustrative of both the strengths and weaknesses of what it contained. Coverage was wide but description general, with all of the minutiae of evangelical activity included. The principal weakness was lack of critical evaluation. It was, in essence, a house history, recording the players, the groups and the activities, eulogising rather than assessing and failing to engage with the nature of the very Evangelicalism that it was so comprehensively describing.

Although scholarly input continued in the twentieth century, with a range of articles, reviews, biographies and some early exploration into the question of

evangelical social concern, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that a more extensive literature on Evangelicalism began to be published. More attention was given and in greater depth to matters of the content of evangelical belief and the nature of the movement itself within a longer-term historical perspective and indeed with the wider lens of academic critique. Indeed, there was something of a renaissance of academic interest from both within and without the evangelical tradition. This has contributed to something of a recovery of understanding within contemporary Evangelicalism of a proper appreciation of the movement's heritage and development. This somewhat more analytical approach was taken by Ian Bradley in *The Call to Seriousness*, published in 1976, though he may well have been too dependent on the literary representation of Evangelicalism among Victorian novelists. The penetrating critical analysis still lacking was provided in 1982 by David Bebbington in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, a magisterial volume of incisive, detailed and analytical scholarship. This book rather overshadowed an earlier and more specific study by Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England*, which rather remained in the character of the older descriptive histories, lacking that broader analytical perspective.

Indeed, the often populist nature of Evangelicalism rather tends still to the encouragement of enthusiastic exaltation, even adulation, in writing about the movement, of historical description, rather than scholarly appraisal and interpretation. This has been seen recently with Roger Steer's *Church on Fire – The Story of Anglican Evangelicals*, published in 1998. Little new was added to knowledge, although the inclusion of some historical background on Evangelicalism within the Episcopal Church of the United States of America may not have been familiar to many readers. The description was light, the attempt to locate Evangelicalism within the Reformed Protestant tradition, though a legitimate aim, lacked insight and fell into anachronism. As interest in evangelical heritage continues, discernment is still needed. A more interesting contribution, indeed, one with greater perception, though still suffering from a lack of interpretative insight has come with Oliver Barclay's personal sketch of the last 60 years. In *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935-1995*, Barclay makes quite clear that his contribution is written self-consciously as the offering of someone who was at the core of the movement for over 40 of those years. It is, therefore, admittedly restricted in its scope. Its house history style is demonstrated by the proliferation of abbreviations throughout the book, some well known within evangelical culture, others adopted by Barclay more particularly. He classifies streams within the evangelical movement into two broad categories, classical evangelical and liberal evangelical, without appreciating the nuances or assessing the determining influences. Most significant in Barclay's study is his recognition of the crucial importance of lay leadership to the evangelical movement, a factor that has indeed been an important one throughout the history of Evangelicalism.

It is, however, Bebbington's book, which, from the scholarly perspective, has been the most widely acclaimed, and it remains the standard critical history of the movement. Its authoritative and proficient scholarship placed Evangelicalism into a broader context, sought to define its characteristics and its place in the

prevailing and changing philosophical cultures of the last 200 years. Nevertheless, the fact that a significant comprehensive history, likely to serve the movement for many years, has been published should not prevent us from seeking to engage critically with the insights offered there, and there have been scholars since then who have sought to qualify some aspects of Bebbington's determining themes.

Evangelical identity

One of the conclusions of the most reputable scholarship of Evangelicalism has been that the movement is not monolithic and, indeed, never has been, but rather is a complex mosaic of influences and beliefs. Such conclusions are rarely attractive to evangelical ideologists.

Central to the matter of identity is the problem of definition. What are the distinctive features of evangelical self-understanding? The difficulty of this question is highlighted by the recognition of the diverse ways in which the evangelical tradition has expressed itself. Some strands of the movement have placed the stress upon doctrinal formulation, whereas others have given greater weight to the cohesive nature of belonging to evangelical organisations, often across denominational boundaries. A wider group prefers to be associated with the common history, but avoid a narrow identification. Different formulations in the approach to evangelical identity may emphasise one or more of these understandings, but in order to achieve a more general appreciation of the issue, the objective should be to achieve a framework of reference that allows for the interplay of these various elements.

The broadest approach has been that offered by David Bebbington, who adopted an inclusive understanding of evangelical definition and identity that sought to explain the essential characteristics of all those who, historically, utilised that designation. Bebbington referred to 'a quadrilateral of priorities',⁶ namely, conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism.

The need for conversion has been central to evangelical belief. This action of God in the life and heart of an individual was a demonstration of God's unmerited grace towards humanity and an indication of the presence of the living God. The point of conversion was often one of crisis. Indeed, the recognition of guilt and sin together with the need for repentance and new birth meant that conversion was often accompanied by deep emotional stirrings. The mighty miners of Kingswood, wailing and crying under the preaching of the gospel by George Whitefield, were symptomatic of both the crisis of conversion and its deep effect.⁷ The ordained were not exempt. A cleric was no more likely to be a Christian than any other and Bebbington notes one example of a parson being converted by his own sermon.⁸

The second characteristic denoted by Bebbington was activism. The conversion of the believer was foundational and transformational. The consequences were life

6 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, Unwin Hyman, London 1989, p 3.

7 G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*, Longmans, London 1908, pp 25f.

8 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p 6.

changing. New believers would be expected not only to change their moral lifestyle, but also to devote themselves to the cause, not least the sharing of the gospel message with others. Evangelical ministry also came to be distinguished by this activism, the indefatigable discharge of parish duties and visitation in an age when parish ministry was frequently notable for non-residence and simony. Social welfare missions were also the beneficiaries of this evangelical activism, especially under the influence of Lord Shaftesbury and after the repeated visits to England of revivalist preachers such as D. L. Moody.⁹

The third of Bebbington's features of evangelical identity was biblicism, devotion to the content and place of Holy Scripture. Sermons were based upon the Scriptures and long – Bebbington refers to one lasting an hour and eighteen minutes. The Bible was clearly seen as inspired by God, although there was limited debate in the period before 1820 of the nature of that inspiration and some attachment to the ideas of inerrancy and infallibility. Such claims were reasserted with some force in the period after 1833 with the rise of the Anglo-Catholic claims for the place of tradition in the determination of Christian belief.

Finally, crucicentrism, a word that Bebbington seems to have invented, and which describes the central place in evangelical belief of the death of Jesus. It was through the atoning sacrifice of Christ that the individual was reconciled to God in peace. Critics, of course, deplored such obsession, as they saw it. Until the 1870s the evangelical understanding of the atonement was unambiguously expressed in terms of penal substitution, but attachment to the particulars of interpretation subsequently faded.

A major criticism of Bebbington's approach is that the emphasis is on generalities and yet Evangelicals were actually marked out by the specifics of their beliefs. This is easier to maintain in the period up to 1870 than thereafter. Bebbington's analysis is descriptive of Evangelicals, but at the cost of any deeper consideration of the content of belief. The problem, however, of precision of definition is that there is no guideline for how precise such definition should be. The Bebbington methodology seeks to avoid reductionism while remaining at the more general level of definition and analysis.

Theological conviction has always been a central tenet of evangelical expression, but it is the substance of those core axioms that is more difficult to delineate. This problem can be illustrated by examples from the history of the movement in both the twentieth century and previously, in the nineteenth. In the 1920s there was a division between liberal and conservative Evangelicals in the Church Missionary Society ('CMS') over the authority of Holy Scripture. The very characterisation of that division as between liberal and conservative Evangelicals, however, requires qualification as many Evangelicals of conservative theological beliefs remained with the CMS rather than departing for the more closely defined Bible Churchman's Missionary Society.¹⁰ Similarly, in the 1820s there had been a

9 See for example: K. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action*, London 1962; D. M. Lewis, *Lighten their Darkness: the Evangelical Mission to Working Class London, 1828-1860*, Connecticut 1986; R. D. Turnbull, *The place*

of the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury within the Evangelical tradition, with particular reference to his understanding of the relationship of evangelistic mission and social reform, University of Durham PhD (1997).

10 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p 218.

split within the British and Foreign Bible Society ('the Bible Society') concerning the place of the apocrypha in the Society's published materials in certain Roman Catholic countries. Although evangelical purists established the Trinitarian Bible Society, many of the more conservative Evangelicals either remained with the parent society, or supported both societies. The Bible Society was considered to be one of the central organisations of the evangelical faith in the nineteenth century. The CMS has been a long-standing influence upon the Evangelical movement. Although it was not the first missionary society, it was established in 1799 on firmly evangelical principles to be the flagship missionary agency of the evangelical movement within the Church of England. The holding power of these two bodies on many conservative Evangelicals demonstrates the importance of such organisations for evangelical identity, a point subsequently developed by David Wells, and tends to lend support to Bebbington's thesis of remaining at the more general descriptive level.

An example of a more doctrinally specific approach to the matter of evangelical identity can be seen in a series of addresses given by the prominent post-war non-conformist Evangelical, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, to the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in 1971. These talks were reprinted in 1992 by the Banner of Truth Trust under the title, *What is an Evangelical?* The centrality of Scripture, evangelism and the need for conversion or new birth were all features of the discussion that have been reflected by other scholars painting a broader canvass. However, Lloyd-Jones also asserted opposition to ecumenism, the doctrine of the church, the centrality of preaching, doctrinal certainty, distrust of reason, a low view of the sacraments, and even creation over evolution as all defining characteristics of an Evangelical.¹¹ While each of these items may have a greater or lesser role to play in describing various facets of the diverse evangelical movement, such precision cannot serve as a working definition for the historical investigation of Evangelicalism.

Attempts have been made to steer a middle course between the more inclusive and the more exclusive approaches to the question. This has proved particularly attractive to Anglican Evangelicals – and indeed to teachers in the seminaries that serve the evangelical constituency. This via media has sought to maintain the insights of Bebbington and avoid the perils of an excessively tight definition, but which has recognised that for practitioners of the evangelical faith, more precision is required. It was formulated by James Packer and restated more recently by Alister McGrath. Packer offers six Evangelical fundamentals: the supremacy of Holy Scripture, the majesty of Jesus Christ, the lordship of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of conversion, the priority of evangelism and the importance of fellowship.¹² This set of characteristics adds to Bebbington's quadrilateral, but whether or not it provides the sought after cohesive framework is open to question. The majesty of Jesus Christ may, as a descriptive summary, be less helpful than Bebbington's

11 D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *What is an Evangelical?*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh 1992.

12 J. I. Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem*, Latimer Studies 1, Latimer House, Oxford 1978, pp 20-23, restated by Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1994, p 51.

crucicentrism in understanding the nature of the death of Jesus, yet succeeds in focusing some explicit attention upon the second person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, both Packer and McGrath do link the overall description to some key doctrinal emphases on justification and faith and the nature of the atonement in their own exposition of the matter.¹³ The lordship of the Holy Spirit may be more inclusive given the range of the evangelical movement, but whether that emphasis, and in particular whether the inclusion of fellowship, can be seen as essential to *evangelical* identity is doubtful.

David Wells has adopted a somewhat different approach to the problem of definition, which perhaps takes more account of the breadth of the evangelical movement and its diverse nature. He has suggested three centres around which Evangelicals congregate: a confessional stream, a transconfessional strand and a charismatic grouping.¹⁴ The first of these represents the more traditional understanding of evangelical identity based upon the delineation of certain, essential, core doctrinal beliefs. Increasingly, however, drawing here on transatlantic perspectives, Wells argues that Evangelicals are defined by their growing organisational and bureaucratic commitments and by their style and managerial approach within such an organisational framework. This could be criticised as an essentially sociological approach; i.e. an Evangelical is defined by the organisational network to which a person belongs, rather than the beliefs held. However, to the extent that belonging to an organisation is actually determined by belief, then the two aspects inter-relate and hence can form a useful framework. In terms of style, the evidence is clearer from the United States than from the United Kingdom, though perhaps the church growth movement is an example of this which has transcended national as well as denominational boundaries. Thirdly, Wells sees an epicentre around the charismatic emphasis on experience; a point of unity which not only transcends national boundaries but which, in extremis, also transcends doctrinal belief; hence part of the reason for the antagonism within Evangelicalism between those two emphases. The weakness in this analysis is not in the description, but in the relationship between the various elements.

Assessing the options

An over-reliance on either theological or sociological definitions is likely to distort the proper assessment of the phenomenon of Evangelicalism. It is difficult to escape from the conclusion that a doctrinal core forms an essential element in the definition of an Evangelical, but the difficulties of precise characterisation do allow for some interplay with a broader framework of interpretation in which the sociological can certainly play a part. Indeed, as hinted at above in describing David Wells' work, there is scholarly opinion that maintains that belonging to an evangelical group can be determined by theological conviction.¹⁵ This is rather against the modern trend of an analysis that subverts the theological to the sociological, evident in

13 Packer, *Evangelical Anglican*, pp 20f.

McGrath, *Evangelicalism*, pp 60-63.

14 D. F. Wells, 'On Being Evangelical: Some Theological Differences and Similarities' in M. A. Noll, D.W. Bebbington & G.A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994, pp 389-410.

15 J. C. Soper, *Evangelical Christianity in the United States and Great Britain*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1994.

some reports from the General Synod of the Church of England, though the conclusion is unlikely to be surprising to anyone with knowledge, insight and experience of the evangelical movement.¹⁶ That is not to deny the complexity, rather to point out that simplicity of analysis is not only the preserve of the theological rigorists.

Methodologically, most of the approaches to identity thus far discussed proceed on the basis of propositional description. Bebbington, Packer and Lloyd-Jones seek to establish characteristics of belief. The problem with this approach will always be one of boundaries. Decisions have to be made as to the extent of prescription. A more general description may be inclusive, but can result in the specifics of identity and belief being subsumed within the overall description thus masking important differences and emphases. For example, an emphasis on the cross could be seen as a mark of Western Christianity rather than simply Evangelicalism. It does rather beg the question of *what* Evangelicals believe about the cross. There is also the problem of the specifics of belief changing over time. John Wolfe is undoubtedly accurate when he asserts that anti-Catholicism formed part of evangelical identity in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Indeed it became part of evangelical activism, but whereas a case can certainly be made for the centrality of Protestant doctrine, it is difficult to maintain anti-Catholicism as such as a continuing central feature of Evangelicalism. Wells successfully extends the framework wider than the doctrinal, but suffers also from the problem of inclusiveness; encompassing the breadth of the movement, but not so much evaluating the inter-relationships.

The nature of evangelical identity extends deeper than a series of statements of belief or even points of emphasis. The spiritual disposition of an Evangelical encompasses much more than either general description or even precise doctrinal formulations can encompass. What the descriptive approach misses is the spiritual heart of the tradition.

Long-term perspective is needed. The formative years of the evangelical tradition, in the period say from 1740-1820, displayed significant diversity within the evangelical movement that is often not recognised. In the ferment of the 1820s, the movement came face to face with the reality that the hoped for conversion of the world through the CMS and other missionary agencies had not taken place. The evangelical tradition had to adapt in the light of criticism of an over-dependence on human means. The late 1820s and 1830s were marked by further definition of the boundaries of the movement, especially in response to the challenges of Tractarianism.¹⁸ All of this contributed to the mosaic of Evangelicalism. Undoubtedly, organisations and groups, such as the CMS, the Bible Society, the Church Pastoral Aid Society, and interdenominational agencies such as the London City Mission and later the Evangelical Alliance did give an institutional cohesion to the movement. Hence as the complexity of the variety of evangelical belief continued, and perhaps, into the twentieth century, even widened,

16 For example, *Something To Celebrate*, Church House Publishing, London 1995; *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church*, Church House Publishing, London 1996.

17 J. Wolfe, 'Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical Identity in Britain and the United States', in Noll, Bebbington & Rawlyk, *Evangelicalism*.

18 See for example, P. Toon, *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856*, Marshall Morgan & Scott, London 1979.

there would be a certain attractiveness to a definition based upon sociological adherence to certain groups. However, all of these societies and groups were formed and based upon the clear principles of evangelical and Protestant belief. It was the common faith confessed that determined the theological foundations of the evangelical constituency. Differences were largely those of ecclesiology, particularly with regard to the place of the establishment principle within evangelical belief. Thus, the transconfessional understanding of Evangelicalism can provide cohesive boundaries, but cannot in itself define the nature of Evangelicalism. To put it another way, the sociological expression is dependent upon prior theological conviction.

The charismatic challenge is of particular interest, not only because of the relevance in the modern evangelical movement of the pentecostalist strand, but also because of the whole emphasis on experience. Evangelicalism has always been an essentially experiential expression of the Christian faith. Evangelicals in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries were often accused of 'enthusiasm'. What has changed over time is the content of the experience. When George Whitefield preached the need for new birth, it was the experience of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of the heart that was central. This experience of the heart, which included an assurance of faith, reflected Wesley's encounter with the German pietistic communities of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf. But the question has to be raised, of conversion to *what*? There was a central core of doctrinal beliefs, derived from the Reformation and distilled primarily through the Puritan tradition, that formed the basis of Evangelicalism. At the heart was faith in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. The consequences of this for the question of definition are instructive. Bebbington is unable to extend his defining characteristics in that specific direction because, he claims, the liberal Evangelicalism of the 1920s did not accept the principle of justification by faith and hence it cannot be used as a defining characteristic of Evangelicalism. Closely defined doctrinal definitions will fail – their exclusivity has the tendency to exclude all apart from those that define them. However, the fact that a group claims the name of evangelical at one point in history, although a proper constraint, does not in itself demand a central and core definition that has to include such a group.

However, to return to the question of experience. A significant feature of the 1820s was the influence of premillennialism within Evangelicalism and it was from these groups that the criticism of the evangelical mainstream emerged. Human agency was being trusted in preference to divine. Hope was being placed in CMS rather than God. One part of this movement sought expression in the return of the ecstatic pentecostal gifts, which occurred in a number of places, but especially in the London congregation of the Scottish Presbyterian minister, Edward Irving. Although the mainstream of the evangelical movement, represented perhaps by the Church of England Evangelicals and the main evangelical missionary societies, did not embrace such emphases in their entirety, many of the criticisms were potent and hence the major points of critique were adopted into the mainstream. Hence the premillennial movement acted as an influence for renewal upon Evangelicalism. However, what can be observed here is a shift in the evangelical understanding of

experience. The experience of God in conversion, in providence and in giving assurance of salvation moved towards a sort of constant seeking of dependence upon the God, indeed almost a surrender to the Spirit. This has come to find expression in the modern charismatic movement's emphasis upon the individual and continuing experience of the Spirit in the heart of the believer. Thus a person is brought into a sort of intimacy with God that does not need evangelical institutions and, possibly, also does not need Protestant doctrine. So, the question of charismatic experience needs to be taken seriously, but also cannot function in any defining sort of way in the matter of evangelical identity. Irving himself, of course, fell into Christological heresy.

A new framework for evangelical identity

Can a new framework of definition be offered that takes seriously the work already undertaken but which takes account of these criticisms? Is it possible to develop an understanding that allows for an element of clarity in the Protestant doctrine confessed to be included without reducing experience to a propositional statement? Are we able to formulate a framework for evangelical identity that explains diversity without having to encompass a breadth of definition that is meaningless?

I would offer four centres of evangelical spiritual identity: authority, doctrine, spirituality and practical commitment. I would see these centres operating together rather like the four chambers of the heart. After all, the heart represents both the seat of the emotions and, of course, the essential pumping mechanism for life. These centres combine a theological understanding based upon divine revelation, a confessional belief, spiritual experience and practical commitment. The point is that for the heart to operate effectively all four chambers must be working. So, for a more dynamic understanding of evangelical identity all four centres need to be taken into account together and related to each other.

Firstly, then, authority. For the Evangelical the Bible remains the centre of authority. The Bible has featured in all of the approaches considered. For the propositional methodology the question is whether evangelical identity depends upon simply the high place of the Bible in preaching and the Christian life or upon more specific acceptance of doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility. However, the key for the evangelical understanding of Scripture is surely the acceptance of the Bible as the supreme authority in matters of life and faith. It is the place of the Bible as revelation alongside the claims of tradition and reason that marks out evangelical piety and belief. This can be seen in the early evangelical movement. The early Evangelicals met under the auspices of the Eclectic Society. There was debate and variety of opinion upon the nature of the inspiration of the Bible, but unity over its authority. Thus whereas Richard Cecil, an early prominent London evangelical clergyman, advocated a general superintendence to prevent the writer uttering anything inconsistent with the truth,¹⁹ Henry Foster maintained a plenary view of inspiration such that 'the writers were influenced not only as to *matter*, but as to *words*'.²⁰ Charles Simeon summarised the nature of biblical authority, that

19 J. H. Pratt, *Eclectic Notes: or Notes of Discussions on Religious topics At The Meetings of the Eclectic Society, London, during the years 1798-1814*, London 1858, p 153.

20 Pratt, *Eclectic Notes*, p 153.

of deference to the Word, submission to its maxims and avoiding the imposition of human systems upon the Scriptures.²¹ The Eclectic Society gave much emphasis to debates upon the nature of the interpretation of Scripture, although later in response to the challenge of Tractarianism, greater weight came to be given within the evangelical movement to the fact of biblical inspiration rather than its nature. However, the point of unity was in acceptance of the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Secondly, the doctrinal centre: the main failing of the Bebbington thesis is that the generality of approach obscures the very specific nature of the doctrinal beliefs of Evangelicals. Hence there must be a proper place within any framework for a doctrinal element to the matter of identity. It is here perhaps that continuity with the Reformation as mediated via the Puritan tradition is the strongest. Evangelicalism was marked out by the specific Protestant doctrines of sin, the substitutionary atonement of Christ and justification by faith. It is neither possible nor reasonable for doctrinal specifics to be reduced to simply the place of the cross and the need for new birth. If conversion was to have any meaning then conversion had to be from one thing to another. It was not just the place of the cross that marked out the Evangelical, but the specific understanding of the nature of justification. William Wilberforce's doctrinal treatise, *A Practical View*, noted that man was 'tainted with sin, not slightly and superficially, but radically and to the very core.'²² This understanding of sin was closely related to how Evangelicals understood the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Indeed, according to Wesley, there was nothing of greater consequence in Christianity than the atonement.²³ Although the early decades of the evangelical revival were marred by disputation between Calvinist and Armenian understandings of the nature of salvation, as Evangelicalism matured, the movement sought to avoid overestimation of both free will and determinism. More importantly, though, the movement was united in understanding the atonement as substitutionary. Not only substitutionary, but also penal. The ground of hope lay in the specific application of the substitution of Christ, taking the penalty of death to satisfy the needs of divine justice. To assert such a specific doctrinal content to evangelical belief carries with it the dangers of a self-perpetuating definition that fails to take account of the range of historical claims to be evangelical. But to fail to recognise the place of Protestant doctrine, and specific doctrines at that, within the identity of the Evangelical is to deny an essential defining characteristic. In recent times this emphasis on the substitutionary atonement has been reasserted with force by John Stott in *The Cross of Christ*, albeit in the context of an analysis which accepts the dangers inherent in misunderstanding the nature of the substitutionary atonement.

The confessional approach to evangelical identity would tend to stop or stutter at this point. However, a third centre of evangelical identity that I would stress is the spiritual mark. In other words, what is it about the identity of the Evangelical

21 M. Hennell & A. Pollard, eds., *Charles Simeon, 1759-1836*, SPCK, London 1959, pp 31-34.

22 W. Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*, London 1797, chapter II, pp 26f.

23 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p 14.

which describes the nature of the relationship between Christ and the believer? For the Evangelical this relationship is best described as a personal one between Jesus as Lord and Saviour and the individual believer. Thus, although linked to doctrine, and also to the need for conversion and new birth, the spiritual relationship with God is understood in these very personal and specific, even intimate terms. It is this aspect of this framework of identity that gives weight to the pietistic and pentecostalist heritage referred to and which, more than anything else, distinguishes the evangelical from the Puritan tradition that preceded it. And for the Evangelical, a personal relationship with God extends into an understanding and acceptance of God's continuing providential action in the life of the believer.

The final aspect of the framework is practical commitment. Essentially this is linked to Bebbington's characteristic of activism. How does the evangelical Christian express their commitment in a positive fashion to the outside world? The answer to this lies primarily in evangelism, but is broad enough to encompass the wider resurgence of evangelical social concern. Indeed part of the rationale for the formation of so many interconnected groups within the movement is largely to give force to this commitment to evangelism.

Conclusion

The diversity of the evangelical movement should not be a reason to avoid an engagement with the crucial matter of self-understanding that revolves around evangelical identity and other related issues. Indeed, an appreciation of the heritage of the tradition helps us to understand the nature and origins of such breadth. For the evangelical expression of the Christian faith to move forward it must obtain and retain a critical appreciation of its heritage. However, as the modern evangelical movement reflects upon its calling, its relationship with the Church of England, wider questions related to ecclesiology and looks forward to serving Christ in the new millennium, the question of identity remains important. The final words have not been spoken or written. Certainly for the future international aspects of evangelical identity are likely to feature more prominently. There are also issues which face the evangelical tradition within the Church of England in wrestling with the Anglican Church's own questions of identity and purpose. Any framework of reference must be such as to recognise the breadth of the evangelical tradition, but not avoid the hard decisions as to what forms the core and what remains peripheral or particular to only one expression of the evangelical faith. The attraction of the sort of framework offered in this paper is that it recognises the spiritual heart of the tradition that draws in both confessional belief and an experiential relationship with Christ. The matter of identity is an aspect of self-understanding that helps the evangelical movement understand itself in all its diversity and helps the movement look outwards and forwards with renewed vigour in the gospel; for Evangelicals are essentially gospel people.

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