

# Editorial

## Is there a new evangelicalism?

David Samuel has catalogued what he considers to be the baneful effects of the Keele Congress of 1967 on evangelicalism within the Church of England. It has led, he contends, to 'a steady decline in the distinctive doctrinal position of Evangelical Anglicanism'—which merits the term, with all its historical connotations, of 'downgrade' (David N. Samuel, *The New Evangelicalism in the Church of England*, PRS, Barnet, n.d., preface). He draws attention to evangelical involvement in liturgical change, to *Growing into Union*, which provided 'the spectacle of Anglican Evangelicals standing on their heads and receiving applause from many of their own constituency for doing so' (p.28), to the ARCIC statement on the eucharist, and to evangelical episcopal support for 'Mariolatry' through involvement in the pilgrimage to Walsingham (p.30). He argues that the fundamental mistake was 'to assume that commitment to the Church of England meant commitment to what was going on at present, rather than commitment to an ideal—to the Catholic faith. How such a profound change in how Evangelicals understood themselves and their role in the Church of England was so quickly and easily accomplished will remain perhaps one of the great mysteries of church history, but it is unquestionably a fact' (p.31). The term evangelical has consequently become 'a nose of wax which may be moulded to suit the fancy of the wearer' (p.30).

We draw attention to this analysis because, though made some years ago and presumably therefore needing to be updated with more contemporary evidence, it well represents the sense of division within Anglican evangelicalism which has been reflected in public controversy relating to this journal in recent months. It is entirely right and proper that vigorous debate should be conducted when there is any danger that matters of fundamental doctrinal, liturgical and ecclesiological importance are under review. Evangelicalism owes a debt of gratitude to David Samuel, and to the particular tradition within evangelicalism which he represents, for sharpening the issues, and this has undoubtedly led to clarification and perhaps to modification. (Many at any rate would see the theological movement from the 1967 Series II Holy Communion service to the *ASB* as reflecting something of this.) Evangelicals should not fear such debate, nor regard it as in any sense less than Christian but as a necessary part of the process of listening to what the Spirit is saying to the church today.

The problem lies not with the issues raised, but both with the spirit in which they are raised and with the assessment which lies behind it of the nature of the evangelical tradition. The issues seem seldom to be discussed in their own right, and with a purely scholarly concern to see what

## Churchman

Scripture and the particular traditions in which we stand have to say. Virtually always there is added an implicit or explicit charge that those who see things differently are being unfaithful to Scripture, to the Reformation, and to the evangelical tradition. Those who differ on a particular issue are unfaithful to the tradition. They are 'new evangelicals', or 'so-called evangelicals', or 'post-Keele evangelicals'. At best they may be accused, as J. I. Packer has been, of making all the signals to turn right and then turning left (p.46). At worst they are 'whizz-kids' blinded by 'the ephemeral movements and changes in the church' (p.31). The spirit is confrontationist and carries within it the danger, as Packer warns in a response to Samuel, of 'sectarian bitterness'—of biting and devouring one another so that we are consumed by one another (p.41).

It is not, however, only the spirit that is wrong; it is the assumption that the traditions of evangelicalism have always been much more monochrome than they are today. Packer lists six essential ingredients of evangelicalism ('the authority of the Word of God', 'the finality of the Gospel of Christ', 'the priesthood of all believers', 'the primacy of evangelism', 'the necessity of conversion', 'the lordship of the Holy Spirit' [pp.33–4]) and contends that these define an evangelical in a positive way. It is not appropriate, he argues, further to define the word in terms of what an evangelical is against. 'What a man is or is not against may show him to be a muddled or negligent or inconsistent Evangelical', but it does 'not deny his right to call himself an Evangelical while he maintains these principles as the basis of his Christian position' (p.34). I would maintain that Packer is profoundly right, and that this has been the most prevalent understanding amongst those who stand within the Reformed and evangelical tradition. The consequence is, of course, that both theoretically and as a matter of historical fact, that tradition is infinitely more varied and less monochrome than those who attack the 'new evangelicalism' would admit.

There is really no evidence that post-Keele evangelicals want to deny the Reformation. The idea that some do may be connected with the suspicion that there is a tendency to give the early church and its formulations an undue authority (cf. p.26). The Reformers were of course themselves very learned in the traditions of the church, particularly that of the early church, and would be puzzled indeed by the implicit suggestion that any interest in what the Fathers said or did was somehow to undermine their own authority. A significant part of their argument was to establish continuity between their teaching and that of great patristic figures such as Augustine, and, though they did not slavishly follow them, their use of the Fathers is an implicit criticism of a later tendency within some post-tractarian evangelicalism to take a low view of the Fathers and of the usefulness of tradition (cf. Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology, 1833-1856*, MMS, London 1979, p.205).

The Reformers would equally have been puzzled at references to the

'Reformed view' as if it represented a unanimous consensus from which there was no deviation. That the Reformers reached an agreement on matters of fundamental importance should not allow the fact to be obscured that they remained divided over at least one basic issue, that they or their followers often fiercely disagreed about whether or not issues came within the category of 'things indifferent', and that it can convincingly be argued that those who most claim the title 'Reformed' seriously misunderstood the teaching of the one in whose tradition they claimed to stand. Thus Luther and Zwingli were most bitterly divided about the nature of Christ's presence in the eucharist, to the degree that Luther felt a greater affinity at this point with Roman Catholicism than Zwinglianism. Thus strong Protestants constantly disagreed about the implications of their teaching for liturgical and ecclesiological practice—as the dispute between Ridley and Hooper, as the most unpleasant disputation in Frankfurt, and as the increasingly bitter divide between the Elizabethan episcopate and the early Puritans, all reveal. Perhaps most ironically of all, recent scholarship has postulated an important discontinuity between the teaching of Calvin and the Calvinism of the Puritans (cf. R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, OUP, Oxford 1979). There is then a far greater variety in 'Reformed views' than is implied by some who claim to hold them.

Anglican evangelicalism has not thrown up the giants to stand beside the Reformers. Since, however, Anglican evangelicals claim to stand within the tradition of the Reformers, and since those who attack 'the new evangelicals' claim a special continuity with Anglican evangelicalism, it is worth examining the degree of consensus that existed within it. It is, of course, always possible to take a particular figure and claim to stand where he stood, but the claim is to stand in continuity with a movement. The simple, undeniable fact is that this movement has been extremely varied. If Victorian evangelicalism is examined in any depth, it will be found that—on a whole host of issues which were regarded as basic—there was division. These divisions resembled our own in that they related to the degree to which compromise could be accepted within a Church of England which, whatever its formularies might say, was not uniformly evangelical in its practice. It is the argument of Anne Bentley, in a significant thesis, that the period after 1870 saw a particular recognition by evangelicals 'that the policy of boycott and isolation, of refusing to recognize those with whom they disagreed, while preserving intact the purity of their principles, threatened to deny them any influence, and to reduce them to irrelevancy' (Anne Bentley, 'The Transformation of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England in the Late Nineteenth Century', University of Durham PhD, 1971, p.500). Greater involvement within the Church of England brought the inevitable charges of compromise. J. C. Ryle was much criticized for recommending the wearing of surplices, for attendance at Church Congresses, and for his generally positive attitude to

## Churchman

the Church of England. 'The haze of church idolatry', the *Rock* announced in 1879, 'is gathering more densely around him' (ibid., p.214). There was intense debate between those who were prepared to become involved in missions with non-evangelicals and those who were not. The CMS was frequently criticized for being too compliant towards bishops.

Broadly speaking, Victorian evangelicalism had three elements. There were, firstly, those who continued the Clapham Sect tradition of working within the Church of England and were anxious to emphasize points of agreement and underplay the more controversial areas. There were, secondly, those who were most anxious to underscore the discontinuity between themselves and contemporary Anglicanism, and were forever, and sometimes with more than a little accuracy, finding evidence of its decline and the importance of standing by 'the truth'. There were, thirdly, those who were much more interested in spiritual development than institutional matters, and were much involved in premillennialism, holiness, Keswick, and a host of attendant enthusiasms. It is, of course, possible to argue that one of these elements was more right, in the sense of perceiving where the issues lay and what the policy for the church should have been. It is not possible, however, to argue that one strand was more or less evangelical, either in the sense that it gave a greater or less commitment to evangelical fundamentals, or in the sense that historically it was regarded as more or less evangelical than any other strand.

It is, of course, true that the tensions within evangelicalism did make it an uneasy coalition and did lead to the split in the 1920s between liberal and conservative evangelicals. This conflict still awaits a definitive study but it was certainly perceived to be a divide about an evangelical fundamental—'the authority of the Word of God'. Such a split had inevitable consequences in weakening evangelicalism as an effective force within the Church of England and, because of the necessary defensiveness which survival demanded, evangelicalism assumed in the period between 1922 and 1967 an uncharacteristically monochrome appearance.

What 1967 heralded was not a 'downgrade' process but the beginnings of a movement away from the defensiveness of the preceding decades. This inevitably brought a greater variety of viewpoints, and challenged the quite unusual consensus which the numerical and institutional weaknesses of post-1922 evangelicalism demanded. This variety does not mean that the word evangelical is 'evacuated of any significance at all' (Samuel, *op. cit.*, p.30). Its significance relates both to its positive commitment to evangelical fundamentals and to its openness to rethink its attitudes and policies in a way that is consistent with these. The process of rethinking and advancing more boldly into the Church of England, as their forefathers had done in the early and late decades of the nineteenth century, has, as it did then, brought

disagreement. It is most healthy that disagreements should be frankly expressed, and that the different viewpoints should be debated with rigorous honesty and Christian love. It is most disturbing if the disagreements become a cause either for denying the liberty which the definition of evangelical allows, or for obscuring the variety of convictions which have always characterized evangelicalism. Adherence to evangelical principles defines an evangelical, but it does not, and can scarcely be expected to—given the varied traditions of Anglican evangelicalism and the complex of other traditions to which it relates—produce uniformity.

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