

# **RED HERRINGS AND HOT POTATOES: THE REAL ISSUES FOR EVANGELICALS TODAY\***

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I would like to begin by completely disavowing any involvement with the selection of the title 'Red Herrings and Hot Potatoes'. The responsibility for that goes entirely to the staff here at London Bible College. It has three difficulties to it. Firstly, it's very hard to be biblical, because to my knowledge neither of those two particular dishes are mentioned in the pages of Scripture! Secondly, it's difficult to include every aspect and concern that one would wish to mention under those two headings. Thirdly, the danger, therefore, comes of trivialising some things while making others more serious than they should be. It becomes even more difficult when one accepts that futurologists are always on a hiding to nothing, and nowhere is this more evident than in the life of the church where God constantly intervenes to mess things up just when we've got them nicely programmed. Having a God who brings surprises makes it very difficult to assess clearly what is going to happen in the life of the church in the next ten years. Therefore, I want to predict confidently that some of the things mentioned here won't happen.

Nevertheless, I do want to be faithful to the title, and therefore offer some thoughts under these two themes of 'Red Herrings and Hot Potatoes'. But I want to do so against the background of society as a whole. A friend of mine who is a government minister has a nasty habit of sitting in meetings of evangelical leaders, and just when he is getting bored at hearing what one church does and another denomination does and another society does, he will interject and say: 'well in the real world . . .'. Now I think it's a cheek to suggest the Palace of Westminster is any more a 'real world' than the world of denominational politics. But he is making a valid point when he suggests that sometimes we closet ourselves in a privatised sub-cultural existence that we regard as being the church, and which is often far removed from the world in which the church was placed to be salt and light.

The question, 'What is man?' asked by the Psalmist (Ps. 8:4) has reverberated across the centuries of human history. There is a funda-

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mental article of belief in the common person that he or she is a real personality—each of us is an existence itself separate and distinct from the rest of the world, and every individual remains essentially the same through the changing experiences of life. At the end of all the feelings of success and failure, hope and despair, fear and faith, I remain the same person. We live in a world where people are desperately seeking to determine the nature of their own self existence. I believe it is critical to realise that while we worship a changeless Word we worship him in a *changing world*, and too often we seem to expect that people in our world will remain the same, as this world is supposed to remain the same. You have only to look at the changes in technology, mass communications, and so many other aspects of life in the latter decade of the twentieth century to realise that this changing world involves people who are themselves changing. Chesterton's concept of the 'universal man' could perhaps be looked at historically through the twentieth century to see how we have changed. It might be put like this:

In the 1900s I was optimistic. A new century had dawned; man was a success, self-assured, and I anticipated a rosy future. In the 1910s I was betrayed. The trenches of the Somme introduced me to man's inhumanity to man. I entered a no-man's land of devastation and shattered dreams. In the 1920s I was an escapist. The images of Hollywood and the roaring twenties introduced me to a world of illusions where I could escape from my poverty and pain. In the 1930s I was depressed, living in fear of the future and frustration at the present economic distress. In the 1940s I was a hero. A patriot prepared to die for my country, to suffer for my friends, to build a brave new world. In the 1950s I was reconstructed. Introduced to freedom, prosperity and rock and roll, convinced that I'd never had it so good. In the 1960s I was a rebel, part of a new youth culture which rejected materialism, war, oppression, suburbia and middle age. In the 1970s I was lost. Sold on consumerism, lacking purpose and direction, introverted, stagnant and bored. In the 1980s I was a materialist. My new purpose was to get all I could as fast as possible, achieving by whatever means were necessary. In the 1990s I was a technocrat. Less phrenetic, more caring, but obsessed by my desktop computer and Walkman.

Through all the changing scenes of life one heart cry remains the same. I must be me. But which me is the real one? During the '60s it was popularly believed that humankind was just the result of a vast cosmic accident. As molecules collided life emerged. The result was the belief that each of us was just a vast collection of atoms, an intelligent machine.

This pessimistic view may be being largely replaced nowadays. But the only reality that is emerging for most thinkers is that of the individual, and the solid, concrete world in which we live. Transcendence and meaning, we are told, is found only in ourselves. This idea

has been fostered in a climate of general disenchantment with organised religion, while faith in God dependent on the revelation of himself, is now largely rejected. Instead of an outward search away from ourselves for the ultimate, humankind has turned to an inward journey of self-realisation. Instead of believing in a God who has independent existence beyond ourselves, the only reality now is what lies within us. As Carl Sagan has said, 'The cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be'.

Now the argument is: if we discover ourselves we find the ultimate; if God exists at all then he is only what we find in ourselves. And so different methods of self-discovery have emerged—meditation, psycho-analysis, therapy, New Age and self-help all offer their own complementary ideologies. Many evangelicals think that New Age is just Occultism re-wrapped, but New Age is the worship of self; it's making a new god. It's the religion of the late 20th century. And it's giving the various ideologies some form of synthesised existence in order to demonstrate how we can find ourselves. Few people consider the implications of their responses or the reasons for rejecting traditional values. Most simply follow the lead of contemporary opinion. The danger behind all of this is that we live in a church which still thinks that people are looking for transcendence *beyond* themselves, when most people are now looking in the wrong direction:

Derek Tidball wrote in his excellent book, *A world without windows*:

In our secular society the focus of man's attention has shifted from Heaven to Earth, from God to Man. In doing so man has created a world where God has been squeezed out and where it is not only increasingly difficult to believe in God but also increasingly unnecessary to do so.

Conversely, during the Reformation, John Calvin wrote:

Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face and then descends from contemplating Him to scrutinise himself.

And so I believe that the basic problem the church faces today is that it is now living in a world that most of its leaders do not understand, are not trying to understand, and hope would go away to be replaced by one that now is no more. The crucial lesson of history is that when things change we need to change in our approach to how we put over our understanding of truth. I'm not suggesting that the truth changes. But I am suggesting that Paul in Athens gave a very vivid demonstration of what it means to speak in terms that are *culturally relevant to our world*, instead of hoping that people will manage to unpack our language, understanding and our thinking, and correctly interpret the truth we are putting over.

## I. RED HERRINGS

So, we'll take the theme of 'Red Herrings and Hot Potatoes', and I'll give the menu in two sections. I've taken five issues as 'Red Herrings' not because I do not have a measure of sympathy with them; some of them I wholeheartedly believe in. But because I believe that if they are treated as being the *key issues* for the next decade, evangelicals will have lost their way and failed to communicate with the real world. The five are these:

### Worship

First, the preoccupation that individual evangelicals seem to have with worship. By this I do not mean our encounter with the transcendent God, which is clearly exactly the focus we ought to address. But it is with the *mechanics* of how we communicate with our Lord through worship—the concentration on new songs and new style, on new instruments and new forms of music. I do believe that the days are now gone when we felt that by using guitars in church the world would suddenly realise it was wrong and return to our fold. When Graham Kendrick and I started working together at the start of the 70s I think we actually did have lurking in the back of our minds the hope that that might happen! But clearly it hasn't happened, and we are now faced with a tremendous emphasis on worship. It's a booming business. The test of time should ensure that the best of the new songs that are being offered to the church, the new vocabulary of worship, is maintained; yet hopefully we will not cling to the idea that because something is *new* it is automatically *better*, and we will want to say that Wesley and Watts still have a part to play in modern church worship. In fact, we may one day get to the point when we judge all offerings on the basis of their theological content and their musical integrity. And then, perhaps, we'll get the best of the old and the best of the new. I'm sure that in 10 years time, *Songs of Fellowship Volume 15* will be upon us, but hopefully with increased orchestration and better musicianship, and perhaps with more liturgical content. We can hope that worship will not be the big all-embracing key issue for the church. By then, we may have discovered that our worship may bless God more if we work harder at it, but it is hardly likely to bridge the awesome gap which exists between the church and society.

### Major Evangelistic Missions

Second, I sincerely hope that the red herring of major evangelistic missions will have passed beyond the other part of the cosmos. In 1981 Gavin Reid, Eddie Gibbs and I worked together on what came to be known as 'Mission England'. We had a meeting with Dr Billy Graham in

Nice in 1981, where we talked with him about a vision we had of a mission that would challenge people in this country to start to take God seriously again. We were thinking not particularly of the non-Christians but more of the Christians. We wanted to see a mission that would encourage and stimulate people to talk about their faith. We believed that the day of the big mission was gone, and Billy Graham himself said he wanted to come as a snowball to start at the top of the hill, to roll downwards and pick up more snow and grow bigger. His real desire was to set the people of God on fire with their love and desire for Jesus. I feel that for too long we have been employing professionals to be the evangelists for us in our society when God has called *us* to be salt and light, to be the true witnesses in our world.

A re-emphasis on the gifting and involvement of every individual Christian is long overdue; the breaking down of the concepts of 'secular' and 'spiritual' callings to life needs to be dismissed. God calls some of us to be full-time Christian housewives, full-time Christian teachers, full-time Christian journalists, full-time Christian businessmen, full-time Christian technicians, and those he can't find anything else for, he makes full-time Christian preachers! For too long we have worked it the other way round. We have held to a concept of professionalism that reduces the task of evangelism to one or two special chosen vessels. The history of the church points to people movements, to vast armies of ordinary people set on fire with their love for Jesus. What we've got to do in our generation is teach and help and equip our people to realise that *they* are the answer, not us. There's a nation to be won for Jesus and it's got to be won by his people, not by those of us who are paid by them.

I am sure that national schemes will continue to proliferate. Last decade was the Evangelical Alliance's decade of evangelism. This decade is the Archbishop of Canterbury's decade of evangelism. Probably the General Secretary of the Baptist Union will think it's his turn next decade. We will have a decade of evangelism every decade hopefully, but let's get it away from the few specialists and put it over to the 'army of ordinary people'.

### Individualism

The third red herring is individualism. This is a difficult one because I run the risk of being misunderstood. I want to distinguish between *individualism* and *individuality*. God has called us to be gloriously different to one another. He made one Peter Cotterell and he threw away the mould. Two Peter Cotterells might get in the way of each other. And one is a glorious contribution from a creator God—that's *individuality*.

We need to be very careful about individualism, the spirit of the world

which needs to find its self-awareness, its self-esteem, its self-transcendence: 'The answer to life lies in me. It is in the core of my being that I discover the revelation of the ultimate.' That's the spirit of the age which is infecting the church. It makes people concentrate on the 'I' rather than the 'We'. It makes Christians believe that the evangelical commitment to personal conversion then gets transposed into personal relationship with Christ through the rest of my life, and no-one else comes into focus. Jesus came to redeem the *church*. One day he's coming back for a bride and she is a *many-membered corporate body*. So, while my conversion is individual, I should also discover that I've got hundreds of thousands of brothers and sisters in Christ. He has called us not to struggle on alone, but to struggle to get where he wants us to get, together.

Sometimes, instead of being the church in the world, we've let the world into the church. There are many ways in which the spirit of the world has infected the church: the concentration on me being blessed and fulfilled, the massive obsession with 'superstars' who have made it in some form or other, and perhaps also (now please remember earlier I noted there are many of these things that I have more than a partial sympathy for) the chronic over-emphasis in certain parts of the church on signs and wonders. I know at Spring Harvest that if I advertise a seminar on signs and wonders I'll get a thousand people to it; if I advertise one on how to help the unemployed I'll get twelve, because evangelicals are self-obsessed as much as the world is—because we've soaked in the emphasis that we have a right to expect to be fulfilled.

I like the saying: 'The church is the only society on earth which exists solely for the benefit of its non-members.' Christ has redeemed us to be his servants; he has made us friends with one another; he has put us into his church not to be solo performers but partners together. *Koinonia* means partnership, and I long that we might recover that. Individualism, self-fulfilment, achieving what *I* want, is a red herring. We must be asking in our desperate hour of need, 'What does God want? What do we need together? How can we stand with each other? How can we help each other?'

### The Ordination of Women

Fourth, the ordination of women. I believe this is a chronic red herring in this one sense. The decision within the Church of England has now been taken. It's not necessarily a real revolution for those of us outside the Church of England. Most of us have had women's ministry for years; but the decision has now been taken in the Anglican Communion. The danger is that the chattering classes won't let it die down. It's been a very topical issue because it marries the focus on women to that of religion. It has been a helpful issue because it highlights the way that so

many women have been marginalised, criticised and alienated in the church.

Now the decision has been taken, I want to predict what will happen. We evangelicals have got what we love—we've got an *internal* issue, and we need another one quickly. No longer are we arguing about whether we should raise our arms in worship, have our hands in our pockets, or be at half-mast not sure which way to go! That debate was wonderful because it clearly didn't affect anyone in the real world—it just affected ourselves. Christians are much nicer to argue with than non-Christians, and it doesn't achieve anything—but it doesn't do any harm either as far as we can see. The ordination of women will be just that kind of agenda item for those who want a red herring. The issues will now be: 'Is this a biblical step or an unbiblical step? Should there be women bishops? Should we actually consent to their authority or not consent to it?' It would be a lovely internal issue. I am not denying the sincere integrity of those who do not believe in the ordination of women, and therefore feel they should leave the church that follows that viewpoint. But God forbid that the next ten years is going to see a concentration in the secular press on our internal bickering on the ordination of women. We have somehow got to realise that that could very easily be a nasty red herring for us. I'm not trying to discriminate further against women who have been pushed to the sidelines for so long. I'm thrilled a decision has now been taken. Nor am I trying to knock those who have genuine concerns about the debate. But if you think you've got to do something about it, *do* it; don't spend the next ten years *talking* about it. So I'm not saying that women in ministry is a red herring, I'm saying that *arguing* about it for too long is a red herring.

### Methodology

Fifth, methodology. Our society has become far more concerned with means than with end. Processes, bureaucracy and budgets have often ruled. Within the church we are learning how to do it. Our bureaucracies are extending, and it's not the province of any one denomination. I'm not sure that whether the church meets in glorious convocation or not is as important an issue as to how godly our people are becoming, how much we are fulfilling the dictates of Scripture, and how much we are living as God's people in the real world.

Of course we need methodology, but it must not be obsessive. Of course the ordination of women is an important issue, but it cannot occupy our tea tables for the next decade. Of course we are individuals with an individual salvation, but we're also a church and called to be together in partnership. Of course evangelists and evangelistic missions are a benefit and a bonus to the church, but that's not the sum total of Christian witness. And of course we need to worship and develop new

songs and style, but that's not the key issue for the church. These things, to me, are the red herrings.

## II. HOT POTATOES

What are the hot potatoes? Again, I've gone for five.

### Immorality

First, immorality in church life. There is a line in 'My Fair Lady': 'Words, words, words, I'm sick of words. Sing me no song, read me no rhyme, don't waste my time, show me.' I think our world is looking for the evidence of the truth that we claim to have. It is looking for it in the way that we live. The single most serious danger we have in the church in this country today is what I would call secret sins. By 'secret' sins I do not mean just sexual sin. One can include financial sin, marital disharmony, child abuse, and so many other things.

Also, I believe I'm learning more about the reality of the enemy, temptation, and spiritual warfare. And I wouldn't confine that to people in so-called Christian service. Those like Martin Wroe, doing the kind of job he is doing in journalism are as much, if not more, on the frontline of Christian ministry than those ministering here in the College. We have a calling before God to maintain an integrity of lifestyle that gives testimony to the words we use.

Within the body of Christ we need a greater honesty, a greater mutual trust, and a greater openness to one another to expose who and what we are, so that we may minister into the lives of each other.

Ten years ago, in college, I entrusted to a close friend everything I did in my life, apart from those things that would be private between my family and myself. He would know if I fell into sin. It has been a great discouragement to me to venture forth into some of the areas where I have been tempted, to know that I would have to go and tell this particularly disapproving Welshman if I did so! I personally have found that very helpful. It is critical we recognise that the danger of secret sins is that they are *secret*, and that sin remains sin whether it is secret or not. But if it is secret, the risk is that we do it, think we can go on doing it, and the end result inevitably brings discredit to the name of Christ.

It's a hot potato, but I believe we need to develop relationships with each other, strip off the evangelical mask, show what we're really like, share our weaknesses and pain with one another, take each other on in God, getting rid of the old ideas of ambition and self-seeking, and demonstrating to the world a partnership that means we are more pleased with the success of our brothers and sisters in Christ than we are with our own.

### Pluralism

Second, that which I believe is the biggest issue we will face in the next ten years, has been one that we've had for the last five or more, and we really do need to take seriously: the whole area of pluralism. We live in an age of relativistic ethics, when we are told that there is no such thing as what Francis Schaeffer called 'True Truth', but there is truth as each one perceives it. Society teaches that truth for me is not necessarily truth for you, and we each of us can do what is right in our own eyes. So, Anne Diamond can say: 'It doesn't matter what you do so long as you're sincere about it.' The argument, of course, could be used to say that one can be a sincere paedophile and the damage one does to the lives of 5 year old children is irrelevant.

I have no time for the relativism of our age that has written off what it regards as a bigoted absolutism as irrelevant to it. In our society today we need to discover truth, and we need to recognise that truth is true, that what is truth for one person is also truth for another person. It may have to be contextually applied, but it doesn't change from being truth. I believe that when Jesus said 'I am the way, the truth and the life', he wasn't saying he was 'a way, a truth and a life', he was saying 'the way, the truth and the life'. This means that he's the *only* way, the *only* truth, the *only* life. Other religions may have much to offer us in terms of understanding, but they do not represent the way to find God as Father—that's found only in Jesus.

This leads us further to say that Scripture is not just for Christians. If Scripture is the truth, then it is not truth for Christians alone. If this is God's world, the only way to live in it is God's way, and if we want to find about God's way, we find it through the revelation of his will and purpose in Scripture. Scripture is not one scripture among other 'scriptures'; rather, it alone represents truth as God's revelation of his will and his purpose for humankind.

### Reluctance to Face Change

The third hot potato: a reluctance to face change. There are so many areas where as evangelicals we need to change. The kind of questions I think we need to ask ourselves in this area would be the following:

First, if we're going to look to change, how does Europe involve us with change? How do the needs of our brothers and sisters in Spain and Portugal and Greece involve us in change? How does the development of the church in the two thirds world involve us in change? Are we prepared to have a much broader concept of ministry than that which we've previously had?

Second, what do we do about younger leadership? The church has a cycle that it goes through, something like this: the need is recognised for younger leadership, leaders in their thirties are appointed, and when

they're in their sixties we retire them and recognise the need for younger leadership and appoint leaders in their thirties. One or two who happen to be born in the wrong decade do manage somehow to make it somewhere but not very far. I was General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance at 33 and if I really play my cards right I could still be there at 63! (One of my predecessors managed to do it for 44 years.) But we want to see younger leaders coming through. This means we've got to move into concepts like 'power sharing', which in the context of a Baptist church means younger deacons working alongside older deacons with an equal say. It might even mean a change in the flower rota! Jesus took people in their teens and twenties and made them disciples. Look at the models in scripture: Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy. I hope that every one of us has got an apprentice we're discipling in God ready to take over for the future.

The third area of change is singles. A third of those in our churches are single, and we have an obsession with family services. When did we last have a singles service or last recognise the existence of those who are single? I am not suggesting evangelical dating agencies or marriage bureaux (although I have found that the prayer meeting at Spring Harvest has been fruitful in this respect in recent years!). But I do believe we need to have a recognition of the needs of those who are single, and the importance of ministry and support to them and to those preparing for marriage. In a recent conversation with George Carey we emphasised to each other the grave danger that both of us perceived in the way that there is so little preparation for marriage within the church, and that that may be one of the reasons for the escalation of Christian divorce. We don't prepare people for what marriage means and the stress that can exist in it.

Fourth, the whole issue of negativism. Some of us have got so set in a mould of despising certain things that we find it hard to change. For someone who was once a young radical, I am finding it increasingly disturbing that there are now things I don't want to allow my children to do. I recall a moment when my son came home and announced that he would like to have an earring. This I found very difficult. He might like rock music—so did his father; he might like long hair—so did his father; he might like earrings—his father didn't, so that was out! Particularly when his mother agreed. So we both explained why he shouldn't have an earring. He then explained that his youth leader did, that the assistant principal of London Bible College and various other people did! He couldn't see what was wrong with earrings. So in the end his father agreed to buy the earring. He went off and came back with two. I said, 'That's taking advantage of me.' He said, 'No, it was two for the price of one, and you always taught me good stewardship!'

We've got to be prepared to change. Not in terms of truth; we've compromised on that too often. Let's stand for the truth and com-

promise on our culture. Let's move with the culture and hold firm to the Word. I'm tired of the way that evangelicals have played footsie with liberalism when it comes to their theology, but have resisted any option of making themselves more culturally relevant as being unacceptable.

### Theological Education

My fourth hot potato is theological education. The time has come for our theological colleges to have a radical rethink about how they train people for life in the real world. We need to allow our theological thinking to impact on several other areas of contemporary understanding and life. I would like to see our theological colleges moving in to joint degrees in theology and politics, theology and economics, theology and sociology. If you ask why, I will say that I don't believe we have a faith that can be locked up in a corner and ignore the rest of the world. I believe a person can think Christianly about economics. I think theology can have an impact on economic thinking. The lack of it is in evidence in our contemporary society. That's why when London Bible college introduced sociology into their syllabus in the 70s it was a critical step. The way that many theology degrees incorporate philosophy has been fundamental. We need to establish our theological colleges as being the equal, if not superior, to the theology departments in the universities. And we need to demonstrate a pan-European model helping those throughout the rest of Europe to get the benefit of the colleges we have here in Britain.

I was fascinated recently to have a trust come to me and ask to give benefaction to theological colleges. They have since doubled that benefaction and are now increasing it again because they are so impressed by what is being done. But we've got to encourage that, resource it, and improve it. For example, to talk to the lecturer in Islamics over lunch here at London Bible College was an education. We are now doing something that needed to be done ten or twenty years before. In this country so many evangelicals have been sub-conscious racists, and we've not faced the challenge of Islam in an honourable way, and we need to be able to do so.

### Authentic Lifestyle

Finally, I believe that our Christianity is not a call to health and wealth. We follow one of whom it was said, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. The evangelical world is full of people who say 'More'. I actually believe in 'More', but I believe we need to give more. We need to return to a faith of sacrifice, a faith that majors on what we give not what we get, a faith that majors on pouring ourselves out for others.

We need to be prepared to lay down status, and to face persecution. As long as we go on telling people, 'We've got something better than you've got', they'll say, 'Fine, we've got something better than you've got'; that approach panders to a relativistic society. As soon as we start telling people they have no life, no truth and no reality apart from Jesus, then they'll really get uptight with us. So if you want to be persecuted, tell everyone else they're wrong and stop telling them you're more right than they are.

This means that we're not going to sit back and engage in what Ian Coffey calls a kind of 'cupboard/closet universalism'—really believing that everyone else is going to get sorted out in the end because when the Lord returns everyone will suddenly realise they were wrong and repent. That is not found in Scripture. I don't think we actually believe it, but most of us live as if we did, because we live lives *getting* what we can instead of *giving* what we can. We live lives that don't seem to be burdened and impassioned with the fact that people are going to a Godless eternity. We don't seem to be prepared to lay down our status to meet with people in need, in hurt, and where they are. We don't seem to be prepared to accept powerlessness in order to confront power. We don't seem to be prepared for those little words 'self-sacrifice'.

So, the biggest issue outside of the pluralistic world in which we live is the kind of lifestyle we'll live in response to that. The most respected Christian in Britain today doesn't live in Britain. It's Mother Teresa. You may not like her theology but the world loves her lifestyle, and I want us to go back to Barnardo, to Booth and the first employment exchanges, to Müller, to Shaftesbury, to Wilberforce. I want us to realise what it means to live lives of self-sacrifice and give ourselves for a needy world. Then that world will start to listen to the message of truth that we have.

Red herrings—furnishing our own agendas. Hot Potatoes—getting involved in the real world.