

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Editorial

Recently I was skimming through one of the Church newspapers and came across an advertisement for a curate in a major city centre church. At the bottom of the advertisement it was announced that the tradition of the parish in question was 'open evangelical'. Having never seen a parish described in those terms before, and knowing something of the tradition of the church in question, I was intrigued by the description. What on earth was 'open evangelical' supposed to mean? 'Open' in what context, and in relation to what?

Evangelical parishes have traditionally been 'open' in the sense that they have always welcomed Christians of every denomination, a practice which was not always common among Anglicans. Likewise, they have usually been 'open' to the outside world, at least to the extent of perceiving the urgent necessity to go out and evangelize it. Both these characteristics are so common in Evangelical circles that it would seem unnecessary to advertise the fact in this particular way. So whatever 'open evangelical' might mean, it is probably not either one of these things!

Fortunately for the puzzled, we do not have to go very far these days to find this term being used to describe a certain theological stance which is hard to define precisely, but which is easily recognized in practice. For those with longish memories, it is the tendency which surfaced at the Keele Congress in 1967, when Evangelicals officially committed themselves to greater involvement in the structures of the Church of England. After having been virtually excluded from decision-making for more than a generation, and sensing a renewed strength in their own ranks, Evangelicals were understandably more anxious to make their weight felt in the councils of the Church.

A quarter of a century later, this vision has largely been realized, at least in the eyes of those who see themselves as part of it. There are now about a dozen diocesan bishops who would be described as Evangelical, and there are many more Evangelicals lower down the scale of the hierarchy. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself is an Evangelical, and is clearly perceived as such by those of other persuasions. If numbers are what count, then the 'open evangelicalism' of the post-Keele era has been an outstanding success.

The difficulty is that in the process, the word 'open' has come to mean something akin to 'diluted'. The postwar Evangelical revival had its theologians, but it was generally weak on theology as such. The non-academic clergy sensed that neo-Puritanism, which was the standard doctrinal system then on offer, was not going to make it in the average parish. The one thing which most of them retained from Puritanism was a dislike of set forms of public worship, so that when liturgical reform was

introduced, many of them saw it as the first step on the road towards abandoning liturgy altogether.

Of course, once the Prayer Book disappeared, so did its theology, which was not Puritan, but which on essential points was far closer to that approach than what has replaced it. The strong emphasis on sin and on our responsibility for it, which so characterized traditional Anglicanism, gave way to a more positive image of the human being. The Church was presented as a welcoming community centre, in which the 'Peace' at communion and the cup of coffee after the service became the high points of worship. Along with this came an emphasis on greater participation from the laity. The idea that theological training was necessary to make a good preacher quickly faded from view, as untrained laypeople were encouraged to share their own ideas, beliefs and experiences. Short and snappy became the order of the day in preaching—one could get along without a Biblical text, but not without a little anecdote to set the congregation at ease and convince them that the preacher really had very little to say that was 'serious'.

In terms of wider Church politics, 'openness' soon came to mean acquiescence in the system, in the hope of personal advancement within it. For a time, the first thing a new Evangelical bishop did was announce that he would be 'fair' to everybody, which in practice meant that he would do nothing to rock the boat. This declaration is less common now, perhaps because it is seen to be unnecessary. It is typical of the new breed of Evangelical bishop that in the recent debate over the ordination of women, not a single one of them voted against it. It would be understandable if they had been divided over the issue, as much of their natural constituency was, but it was not so. To be an Evangelical bishop, you must be 'open'; others need not apply.

The recent debates over the future of theological training have revealed 'openness' in yet another light. Of the six Evangelical training colleges, it was the one which was perceived to be the least 'open' which was slated for closure, and the response of the college authorities was both quick and revealing. Elements suspected of being resistant to 'openness' were purged in a particularly nasty and brutal manner, and when the Church authorities took a second look they gratefully announced that the teaching of the college was not in fact as 'narrow' as they had been led to believe.

It is now apparent that Evangelicals who put conviction before career are likely to be victimized, not merely by those outside their ranks, but even more by those who would claim to be within them. Convinced Evangelicals are now derided as 'narrow' by those who are more 'open', and are being consistently marginalized within their own constituency. Moreover, as long as theological issues are regarded as divisive, and put in cold storage for fear of causing offence, this situation is only too likely to continue. It is worth reflecting that if Jesus had been an 'open evangelical' there would not be a Church at all today. He would have accepted a seat in

the Sanhedrin and regarded it as a great victory for Himself and His followers. Anyone bold enough to point out that this was a betrayal of his mission would have suffered the fate they so richly deserved—crucifixion!

And so at last we know what it is that a church which describes itself as 'open evangelical' really wants in a curate. A person with lots of enthusiasm and little or no theological conviction, at least not of a clearly evangelical type. A person willing to bend with every trend, and absolutely determined not to hurt anyone for any reason. A person, in short, who does not follow Jesus, but who conforms to the prevailing ecclesiastical norm. Career prospects, of course, are assured. Any takers?

GERALD BRAY