# Evangelical Doctrine: Basis for Unity or Cause of Division?

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## Introduction

Evangelicalism, from its beginnings in the 1730s, has been a self-consciously ecumenical movement. For the first two centuries of its existence, that made it radical; ecumenism is now more commonplace, but the Evangelical vision of shared worship and mission remains remarkable. Evangelical ecumenism has never been marked by a lack of concern for doctrine, but by a differing estimation of which doctrines are non-negotiable. These are the theses I want to argue in this paper. Along the way, I will glance at a couple of recent Evangelical disputes, and try to evaluate them against the background I have built up.[1]

To begin with, I take the beginnings of the Evangelical movement to be in the revivals of the 1730s—the so-called Bebbington thesis. I am aware that this has been challenged to some degree,[2] and I have some sympathy with some aspects of the challenge. Clearly, the Evangelical movement did not arise *ab novo*—or even *ex nihilo*—with the preaching of Wesley, Edwards, and Whitefield. The are significant continuities with what went before, as well as significant shared features with the broader cultural changes of the eighteenth century—and there are also some idiosyncratic features found neither in inheritance or culture; this mixture of the inherited, the culturally-conditioned, and the genuinely new is present in any historical movement, not just Evangelicalism. Our final evaluation of the Bebbington thesis will depend on which elements of the Evangelical movement we judge to be central to its identity, and where we locate them in this pattern of inheritance, influence, and invention.

To take an example relevant to the concerns of this paper, many of the contributors to the Haykin and Stewart volume that attacked the Beb-

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1 This paper was originally given at the 2011 meeting of the Scottish Evangelical Theological Society. I am grateful to the Society for its invitation to speak to this topic.

2 See Michael Haykin and Kenneth Stewart, eds., *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008) for the most sustained attempt to criticise the thesis to appear in print thus far.

bington thesis wanted to locate Evangelicalism within a broader stream of Anglophone Christianity, Calvinistic in theology and affective in piety; Bebbington's own construction stressed the novelty of certain beliefs about the nature of true conversion, beliefs shared by Calvinists and Arminians alike in the eighteenth century. The question might be starkly put: is Methodism[3] aberrant or definitive of the Evangelical movement? Our answer, of course, depends in part on one's geographical location and interest: it is far easier to see the major story being about continuities in affective Calvinism if one is in Scotland, or if one's area of study happens to lie in New England, than it is if one is in England, or studying the more southerly colonies, where the ministry of the Wesleys was so central to the revival.

(By way of an excursus, I suspect more adequate scholarly debate on the Bebbington thesis will in future have to take great account of this regionalism; the single most curious facet of (most of) the contributions to Haykin and Stewart's book, not excluding David Bebbington's own response, was the constant reference to a monolithic and international 'Enlightenment'; for a generation, now, historians of ideas have insisted on the difference between different national Enlightenments—the aggressive atheism of France not being at all replicated in Scotland, for instance. Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley were both quintessentially Enlightened thinkers, but the Enlightenment traditions they represented were divergent at important points, and very different from the Enlightenment of Diderot or Voltaire.)

## EVANGELICAL ECUMENISM

All that said, it seems to me that something new does happen in the 1730s: to focus on the aspect most relevant to this paper, narratives of surprising conversions challenge inherited accounts of proper processes of Christian initiation, and do so in remarkably similar ways across a surprisingly wide spectrum of protestant churches, forcing processes of common reflection, and even shared mission, which would have been simply unthinkable two generations before. Recall that, in England, in 1688 it was still possible to be imprisoned—and worse—for failing to conform to the liturgy and the discipline of the established church; that religious violence over the question of church government was common in Scotland in 1680; that after the Glorious Revolution and a Presbyterian settlement, toleration was

[3] 'Methodism' here as rhetorical shorthand for 'Arminian streams of Evangelicalism'; I am aware, of course, of the existence of Calvinistic Methodism, and indeed of non-Wesleyan Arminian evangelicals, such as the New Connexion of the General Baptists.

extended to Scottish episcopalians only in 1712; that in New England, the Collegiate School had dismissed its Rector, Timothy Cutler, for Anglican sympathies in 1723. In 1740—fifty years after toleration in England; sixty after covenantors and bishops had slaughtered each other in Fife; seventeen only after Cutler's dismissal—the Anglican priest George Whitefield and the congregational minister Jonathan Edwards made common cause, and they were far from the first so to do. There was an organic and relational unity, imperfect, but real, and so remarkable as to be astonishing in its historical context, from the beginnings of Evangelicalism.

This was testified to by Evangelical preachers. William Seward wrote in his journal for 24th August 1740 'I told them I did not desire them to leave [their] Church but to attend it closely—and that I only wanted to bring them to Jesus Christ and then if they were fully persuaded in their own mind let each remain in the communion in which he was called. If he was called a Churchman, let him remain; if a Quaker, a Baptist, or Presbyterian let him remain so.'[4] Seward was a close friend of Whitefield, who was much less interested in questions of ecclesiology than the Wesleys, it is true, but John Wesley's commitment to the Church of England was significantly tempered by sentiments similar to the Moravian desire to be a vital leaven in all Christian denominations, rather than a separated group.[5] Roger Martin sums up the mood well: '[i]n its first exhilarating phase, the suddenness of the awakening, the sense of millennial expectation it aroused, the freshness of the evangelical experience, created a powerful sense of fraternity among the converts of the movement. Arminians and Calvinists, Churchmen and Dissenters, achieved an unprecedented level of unity.'[6] Given how deep the divisions had run two generations before, this must be counted as extraordinary.

I do not want to offer a historical narrative here, but it is perhaps important to note that this unity was soon threatened—the fierce debates over the doctrines of grace in the 1770s are the most obvious example, but tensions between Churchmen and Dissenters in England arose even earlier. That said, a measure of unity survived, and the great period for Evangelical ecumenism in organisational terms is the birth of the pan-evangelical organisations, beginning with the London Missionary Society in 1795. David Bogue's sermon, entitled 'The Funeral of Bigotry' was as rousing as it was idealistic:

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4 Quoted in Roger H. Martin, *Evangelicals United: Ecumenical Stirrings in pre-Victorian Britain, 1795-1830* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1983), p. 3.

5 See A.J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf the Ecumenical Pioneer: A study in the Moravian contribution to Christian mission and unity* (London: SCM, 1962).

6 Martin, *Evangelicals United*, p. 4.

> Here are Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Independents, all united in one society, all joining to form its laws, to regulate its institutions, and manage its various concerns. Behold us here assembled with one accord to attend the funeral of *bigotry*: And may she be buried so deep that not a particle of her dust may ever be thrown up on the face of the earth. I could almost add, cursed be the man who shall attempt to raise her from the grave.[7]

We could cite similar sentiments from the founding of the Bible Society in 1804 (John Owen proclaiming 'the dawn of a new era of Christendom'[8]), the founding of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 (Edward Norris Kirk hailing 'the death of sectarianism'), and many other events between. After the Evangelical Alliance, other pan-evangelical organisations have been founded, but their foundations do not seem to have been marked by this same idealistic euphoria—except, perhaps, for some expressions of charismatic renewal. For half a century, however, Evangelical ecumenism was conscious, distinctive, and celebrated.

Beyond this organisational Evangelical ecumenicity, we can tell many stories of local cooperation and fellowship that crossed denominational boundaries in then-surprising ways. In Olney, to take only one example, John Newton's friendship with the local Congregationalist minister, John Drake, and the local Baptist pastor, William Walker, led to the holding of united services for young people in the late 1770s. There are even some Evangelical congregations that not only refused to own a denominational label, but cannot convincingly be given one: Surrey Chapel, built for Rowland Hill in 1782, would have a Baptist such as John Ryland, Sr, in the pulpit one week, an Anglican such as Henry Venn another, and a Congregationalist such as William Jay still another. In Scotland, the stable chapel of Robert Haldane's house at Airthrey was similarly eclectic.

In the twentieth century, ecumenism became normal beyond the bounds of Evangelicalism. Cross-denominational mission, organisation, and friendship is now normal, and united services are hardly exceptional. This should not blind us to the sheer oddness of Evangelical ecumenism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, the origins of recent ecumenism largely lie in the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, and so have at least deep origins in Evangelicalism: it would be difficult to describe Edinburgh as an Evangelical event, but the mission movement which gave rise to it was originally a natively Evangelical vision, and many of the societies represented had their beginnings in Evangelical-

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7 *Sermons Preached in London at the Formation of the Missionary Society* (London: T. Chapman, 1795), pp. 130-1.

8 John Owen, *The History of the Origin and First Ten Years of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 2 vols (London: Tilling & Hughes, 1816), 1, p. 44.

ism, even if they had drifted away. Contemporary Evangelical suspicion of organised ecumenism stems in part from the very liberal theology that has sometimes been embraced and promoted by the World Council of Churches, and in part from the question of shared organisational membership with Rome. The result is that Evangelicals, for so long ecumenical pioneers, can now seem to be the least ecumenically-minded tradition of the church.

The reality remains that Evangelical cooperation across denominational lines in worship and mission is still so common as to be routine and remains distinctive. Evangelical pulpits are far more likely to be open to preachers of a variety of denominations than other pulpits; Evangelical congregations are far more likely to be involved in trans-denominational mission that other congregations; and so on. (I confess to not having figures to demonstrate these claims, but they seem to me to be incontrovertible, at least in Britain.) Evangelical organisations and conferences are cross-denominational as a matter of course; if others are beginning to catch up, that should not blind us to the distinctiveness of our tradition.

## EVANGELICALS IN CONFLICT

Of course, Evangelicalism can have its vitriolic disputes. I have mentioned the Calvinistic Controversy of 1770; we might add the various debates that marred the early years of the Bible Society, whether Baptists demanding the use of the word 'immerse' or Haldane's concern over the printing of Bibles that included the Apocryphal books; the division over slavery that led to the failure of the plan to form a worldwide Evangelical Alliance; the longstanding and almost visceral lack of trust between Baptists and Methodists in the American south, and so on. But instead, let us come completely up to date, and glance at a two high profile Evangelical disputes from the current century.

In April, 2011, Rob Bell published his latest book, *Love Wins*.[9] Prior to the publication, a promotional video had been posted on YouTube, generating concerned or dismissive responses from several Evangelical leaders associated with a recently-founded organisation known, rather grandly perhaps, as The Gospel Coalition. These responses suggested that one committed to the doctrines Bell would expound in his (not-yet published) book could no longer be considered to be Evangelical. The pithiest—but

[9] Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (London: Collins, 2011).

characteristic—response was John Piper's now-famous comment on Twitter, 'Farewell Rob Bell'—remarkably terse, even for a tweet.[10]

I have commented publicly already on aspects of this debate. There are two questions that need to be untangled: what is Bell saying; and is it an acceptable thing to say? Bell was widely trailed as teaching universalism; in fact, as far as I can see, he explicitly denies that doctrine in the book, holding to an Arminian view that love always gives the beloved the chance to reject. (He does affirm post-mortem offers of salvation, and so it is possible that he ends up logically committed to a position rather like John Hick's, in which Arminian freedom is affirmed, but, in the face of an infinite number of offers, each with a finite chance of being accepted, the final salvation of all is a necessary truth. This is at best a logical deduction from what Bell affirms, and one he refuses to draw, however.) As mentioned, he does assert the possibility of post-mortem salvation, and the possibility of salvation in other religious traditions. Once his position is established, the second question is does this position put him outwith the Evangelical tradition? Even if Bell were committed to universalism, Robin Parry, under the pseudonym Gregory MacDonald, has argued powerfully that dogmatic universalism is an acceptable Evangelical position.[11] The argument might not be right, but it is too well-constructed to be merely ignored or dismissed.

The controversy Bell generated, however, did not particularly turn on that question. In the promotional video, two questions were raised, one about the relative proportions of the saved and the lost, and one, by means of a story, about whether it is appropriate to assert that Gandhi is in hell. It is worth pausing on one of these, and thinking about it carefully. In Bell's own, already endlessly-quoted, words:[12]

> A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. . . . This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus's message. . . .

This line was broadcast widely and taken as a full-frontal attack on historic orthodoxy. Zealous defenders of the truth held that Bell must be

[10] John Piper on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/#!/JohnPiper/statuses/41590656421863424> [accessed 17 April 2012].

[11] Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist: The Biblical Hope that God's Love will Save Us All* (London: SPCK, 2008).

[12] *Love Wins*, p. viii.

opposed, denounced, corrected, and bid farewell, because he has ceased to believe the gospel found in Scripture and taught by the church down the ages, and this paragraph was offered as sufficient proof of that. By contrast, I want to suggest that in saying this, Bell is saying nothing that has not been held by the vast majority of Christian theologians down the ages, taught explicitly by many of them, and repeatedly defended as Biblical by the most conservative scholars. If we read the passage carefully, the core claim is about proportion: the offence is in the 'select few' who are saved—not the nature of heaven, nor the nature of hell, but in their relative populations. The message of God's love demands that we hold that God saves many, or most, or all—that the gift of grace is not given parsimoniously. And this is not about the nature of hell, but about who God is—the claim of the book is that 'love wins'.

The question of the relative populations of heaven and hell come the eschaton was asked quite frequently in the Reformed tradition. B.B. Warfield published an essay under the title 'Are they few that be Saved?'[13] His argument was exegetical; his answer a resounding negative. In closing, he paused to point to others who held that the number of the saved would far outnumber the lost: R.L. Dabney; Charles Hodge; W.G.T. Shedd. I could add A.A. Hodge and Jonathan Edwards. This is not a catalogue of woolly-minded liberals. This was the united witness of Old Princeton, a position taken by at least two of the writers of *The Fundamentals*. These names are the very definition of Calvinist orthodoxy. These are the people whose respect for Scripture was such that they developed and defined the doctrine of inerrancy. These are the people with whom Bell is agreeing.

And if we examine what these luminaries actually said, the point becomes more striking still. Charles Hodge calls the number of the lost 'very inconsiderable' on the last page of his *Systematic Theology*, in part as a response to the Biblical texts that assert that God desires all to be saved—for Hodge, the number of the lost is so vanishingly small that 'all will be saved' becomes an acceptable figure of speech. Shedd actually suggests that the error of believing that only a few are saved is equal and opposite to the error of universalism; he asserted that the point Bell writes to oppose is a grave heresy (albeit one that seems presently to be being vigorously defended by all manner of men whose zeal, unfortunately, apparently far outweighs their knowledge). Bell was attacked by faithful and Godly pastors who believed they knew enough to denounce him. They were, unfortunately, just wrong in that belief. This is endemic in recent Evangelical debate; I shall return to the point.

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[13] B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. by S. G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968), pp. 334-50.

This is not an argument that Bell is right to reject a gospel that asserts that few will be saved—although I happen to think that he is—it is an argument that, on one of the two points, so far, on which he has been endlessly castigated and criticised, he is in line with the most impeccable Reformed orthodoxy. If someone wishes to call Bell a heretic or a 'liberal' on the basis of his beliefs about the relative populations of heaven and hell, then they must apply the same terms to Warfield, Hodge, and Edwards. (I could say the same on the other point also, concerning a certainty that Gandhi is in hell, but there is not space here.)

Now, of course, there is a question of how a writer defends the idea of near-universal salvation. The older Reformed tradition had two central lines. On the one hand, in pre-antibiotic days, they generally held that those dying as infants (a significant proportion of the human race) would all be saved; on the other, they tended to assume a postmillennial eschatology under which the last age of the world would be marked by unimaginable prosperity, and so population growth, and by near-universal Christian commitment. The vast preponderance of believers in this millennium so far outweighed the numbers of unbelievers in all earlier ages that salvation was the general norm for humanity. Rob Bell does not assert either of these things (I suppose that, if pressed, he would assent to the salvation of infants, but the point is not a significant part of his polemic); instead he posits a post-mortem gospel offer, held endlessly open. This a well-attested position in recent theology—C.S. Lewis probably held it, for instance; Gabriel Fackre, John Hick, and George Lindbeck certainly do or did; it is also a position that I find simply unconvincing.

This aside, the debate is profoundly important, because it is about who God is. A God who saves only a few is niggardly and ungracious—that is why Shedd regards it as a grave error to believe that only a few are saved; it necessarily posits an unbiblical doctrine of God. Warfield's essay is fascinating on this point. He notes that the argument that few will be saved has apparent exegetical support; he cites Johann Heidegger, who reached that view by reflecting on texts such as Matthew 7:13–14. Warfield thus sets himself to find alternative readings to the apparently-natural ones because the straightforward reading of these texts would be theologically impossible. The broad witness of Scripture is overwhelmingly to the generosity of God in salvation, or so Warfield, Hodge, and most others thought.

Bell's book has had fewer repercussions this side of the Atlantic; most of the responses to the book from Britain were written by people who had at least waited to read it, and were rather more conciliatory in tone, even when raising genuine concerns. There was not, generally, the same sense that this was a matter of Evangelical identity under threat. I understand

that some invitations for Bell to speak were withdrawn, or not offered, but it was all done very quietly. Before those of us in the British Evangelical movement congratulate ourselves on the relative maturity of our response, however, we might recall another debate, sparked in 2003 by the publication of Steve Chalke and Alan Mann's *The Lost Message of Jesus*.[14] Similar to the Bell case, a well-known Evangelical leader published a popular book that was felt by some on the conservative end of the Evangelical spectrum to call into question crucial doctrines; the result was public denunciation of the individual concerned, and a request/demand that Evangelical organisations with which he was involved should distance themselves from him, as a proof of their commitment to the maintenance of orthodoxy. In the case of the debate around the atonement occasioned by *The Lost Message of Jesus*, individuals and churches chose to distance themselves from organisations they had previously supported financially and in prayer,[15] and at least one significant organisational divide, between the various collaborators in the Word Alive Bible week, was represented after the fact by some involved as being centrally related to this debate. I believe this representation to be largely, if not wholly, false, but it has nonetheless become an iconic moment for those who wish to define the divisions in contemporary British Evangelicalism on doctrinal grounds, and has continued in important ways to define the location of various organisations within the landscape of British Evangelicalism.[16]

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[14] Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

[15] I suppose that this went wider, but the evidence I have concerns the withdrawal of support from Oasis by several individuals and churches, naming this debate as the cause. I was informed of this verbally by Steve Chalke on several occasions.

[16] Word Alive was jointly run by Spring Harvest, UCCF: The Christian Unions, and Keswick. An announcement of the discontinuation of the event, and so the dissolution of the partnership, was made public in March 2007; no reason was given in the announcement, although it was not difficult at the time to find people closely involved with the event who highlighted off-the-record Spring Harvest's belief that the Word Alive week was its least popular event in terms of bookings by some distance. It seemed clear from this first press release, which was issued jointly by all three partners, that the final decision to end the partnership was Spring Harvest's.

On 23rd April 2007, a press release appeared from UCCF ascribing the split to an ongoing debate as to whether someone holding Chalke's views on the atonement should be allowed to speak from an Evangelical platform, and a desire on the part of the other partners in Word Alive to maintain doctrinal orthodoxy. This asserted—erroneously as far as I can determine—that the Evangelical Alliance UK had 'decided to change its constitution' in response

I have argued at some length in previous publications that this debate was also simply badly conducted: on the one hand, historical assertions about atonement theology which did not stand up to a moment's scrutiny were made on both sides; on the other hand, the entire debate was conducted assuming an 'either this or that' approach to the atonement, when the theological consensus for several decades has been that a 'multiple metaphors' view is more adequate. In saying this, I am not asserting that the current academic consensus is right—I happen to think in this case that it is—but that if we are going to threaten to split organisations over a theological dispute, we ought to have a reasonable grasp of the theological issue at hand, which must at least include knowing why we think current scholarship is wrong, if we think it is. As with the Bell book, the major

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to debates following the publication of Chalke and Mann's book (my best understanding of this reference concerns the revision of the EAUK Statement of Faith agreed in 2005; I was involved in the latter stages of the process of that revision, a process which pre-dated the publication of *The Lost Message of Jesus* and which was not affected in any way that I could discern by that publication). It also claimed that 'Spring Harvest said they regretted they were putting a personality ahead of partnership,' something straightforwardly refuted by Spring Harvest in a strongly-worded press release from Pete Broadbent. It is hard to square this presentation of UCCF walking away with their earlier statement that Spring Harvest had been the initiators of the ending of the collaboration.

On May 21, 2007, a further press release from UCCF admitted one specific, albeit 'unwitting', error in the earlier statement concerning the existence of a request that Chalke be allowed to speak at Word Alive; lamented the public confusion over the issues; and ruled out any further public attempt to clarify what had happened. A comment from Peter Maiden, chair of the Keswick Convention council, in the wake of the public disagreement between Spring Harvest and UCCF perhaps came closest to the whole truth, suggesting that the atonement debate 'created difficulties in the partnership,' but suggesting that the fundamental question had been whether 'there was space for Word Alive in the Spring Harvest programme any longer' (the Keswick statement is no longer online; I am quoting from an online news report published in its wake <http://j.mp/SpringHarvestRegret> [accessed 17 April 2012]).

Given all this, the most plausible reconstruction would seem to be that the Word Alive week was beginning to be perceived as commercially unviable and this, coupled with a general 'growing apart' on multiple issues (the question of women speaking from platforms was also privately asserted by some to have been a part of the mix), led to a split, which (some people connected with) one partner then attempted to represent as largely due to its taking a principled stand defending orthodoxy on one particular issue.

problem with the debate was that many of those engaged in it were ill-equipped.

## THE NATURE OF EVANGELICAL DISAGREEMENT

Of course, Evangelical organisations are hardly unique in struggling with divisive disagreements. The two established churches in the UK are both embroiled in protracted and angry debates over the ethical status of faithful and committed gay and lesbian partnerships, and the Church of England is also struggling to maintain its unity over the question of the consecration of women to the episcopate. The Free Church of Scotland is engaged in an occasionally vitriolic argument over hymn singing (despite the ruling of the Council of Antioch in 268 AD that singing only psalms and refusing to sing hymns to Christ, was unacceptable!) and so on. There are, it seems to me, however, at least two unusual features about the Evangelical debates mentioned, when compared with these other disagreements: they are cross-denominational; and they concern matters of doctrine, rather than practice.

I suppose that these two are linked; it is a matter of common observation that churches—and denominations—generally split over matters of liturgical practice, not over doctrinal issues. It is easy to suggest a rationale for this: assuming that a group of believers share some level of concern for organisational unity—and that may be theological, but it may equally be a concern for keeping the manse or the pension fund—then they can and probably will negotiate disagreements in doctrine, by agreeing not to raise them, or by finding compromise formulas that allow them to slide over our divisions. If, however, they disagree about a point of practice: who should be permitted to preach, say, or even whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in celebrating communion—then congregational division, at least, seems inevitable. Their disagreements render them unable to attend the same sermon, or the same celebration of the Eucharist. The peculiar character of historic Evangelical unity negotiated this by taking unity outside of the congregation, and by a pragmatic willingness to find *ad hoc* compromises. We might not be able to agree adequately enough on how to celebrate the Eucharist that we can unite, but we can manage one celebration that we will all be able to join in, and so we do.

As a result, for Evangelicals, doctrinal disputes loom larger. We have well-developed strategies of being ecumenical; the question is, when do we employ them, and when do we hold off? This, finally, brings me to the title that I was given. It was not mine, and it seems to me to demand interrogation: what is this thing, 'Evangelical doctrine,' and who gets to

define it? If asked to speak about Roman Catholic doctrine, or Presbyterian doctrine, or Anglican doctrine, one may turn to the Catechism or the Westminster Confession or the Thirty Nine Articles, and be confident of having an official account of the subject under discussion. Evangelical organisations do indeed write statements of faith—although generally they are much briefer than those named—but there are many of them, and they are routinely subject to revision. Whilst there is a common core of doctrines, it is hardly distinctive—Trinity, Christology, atonement, eschatology; there are very significant statements (that of the Evangelical Theological Society in the USA, for example) which do not even include all these items; and other items might be insisted on which are either not common to all Evangelicals, or actively disputed in the tradition—the inclusion of premillennial eschatology in many American Evangelical statements would be an example of the latter.

As a result, faced with controversy over this or that doctrinal point, we cannot simply point to an authoritative definition. I have mentioned briefly already Robin Parry's pseudonymous defence of the possibility of an Evangelical universalism; when Dr Parry 'came out,' so to speak, as the author of that book I was asked for my views on his position; as part of my response, I tested the doctrinal position defended in the book against several of the better-known Evangelical statements of faith; predictably, it fell foul of some, but not of others—in the case of the UK Evangelical Alliance statement, which was revised in 2005, it was acceptable under the older statement when it was written, but less so under the new one. How do we negotiate such complexities?

## EVANGELICAL DOCTRINE: UNITING OR DIVIDING?

The standard definitions of Evangelicalism are not doctrinal. The most generally-accepted definition is the Bebbington quadrilateral of conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism;[17] of these, the latter two suggest, not specific doctrinal commitments, but areas of doctrinal concern; the former two are about spirituality: the narration of spiritual experience and patterns of devoted living. Mark Noll essayed a definition in terms of communities of conversation—an explicitly sociological/cultural account, which is very helpful in understanding some of the hard

[17] David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 2-17.

cases.[18] Timothy Larsen has recently offered a five-fold list,[19] which begins by asserting that an Evangelical is 'an orthodox Protestant', but moves on to historical location ('stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revivals...') and spirituality ('has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life...') before returning to hover on the boundaries of doctrine and spirituality ('stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross... stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual...'). At most, these various definitions gesture towards certain theological emphases as being necessary to, but not sufficient for, Evangelical identity. A Calvinist is identified as such by the doctrines she believes; an Evangelical not so.

That said, there has been a persistent attempt by at least some within the Evangelical tradition to draw lines of doctrinal orthodoxy—sometimes, as in 1770, it was Calvinism; sometimes it was believer's baptism, as for the American Landmarkian tradition. More recently, it might be penal substitution, or universalism, or open theism, or either side of the charismatic debate. Lacking any authoritative source for Evangelical doctrine, such debates generally prove almost impossible to settle, and tend to generate more heat than light. How might one prove that all true Evangelicals narrate the atonement in penal substitutionary terms, or deny universalism? There is some historical investigation to be done, to be sure, which however is rarely done adequately. Even where it is done well, the historical data is rarely neat: it is not, for example, especially difficult to find universalists amongst the eighteenth-century Evangelicals, and the number even includes some fairly central figures—Peter Bohler, or, probably, Zinzendorf himself. One cannot then say 'no-one associated with the Evangelical movement has ever held to universal salvation,' and settle the matter. We are left with assertion, either an assertion that such figures are anomalous, or not truly Evangelical, or an assertion that, despite their scarcity, they do establish precedent.

Finally, I might note that whenever I am asked to speak about Evangelical theology, I am reminded of Gandhi's reported comment—I cannot find a good source, so I suspect it to be apocryphal: when he was asked what he thought of Western civilisation, he allegedly replied to the effect that it would be a good idea and we should try it sometime. This might

[18] Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd edn (Vancouver: Regent College, 2004), pp. 3-4.

[19] Timothy Larsen, 'Defining and Locating Evangelicalism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. by T. Larsen and Daniel J. Trier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1-14, see p. 1.

be said of Evangelical theology. British Evangelicals have not been good theologians, at least through the twentieth century. We produced world-leading Biblical scholars in some numbers, but not a single theologian of the same stature. More seriously, but probably linked, we produce, far more than any other tradition, leaders who appear unaware of how limited their theological knowledge is. As a result when we enter into disputes we often lack the knowledge to dispute well. Sometimes we fail on the level of simple historical knowledge: when the dispute is of the 'can you say this and still be an Evangelical?' sort, the response, 'well, Billy Graham said it, and he usually makes the list...' is available far more often than we realise (not always with Dr Graham as the comparator). More often, we lack knowledge of well-established distinctions and arguments, and so the intellectual finesse to argue well: conflating ideas that should be kept apart, and missing standard theological analyses, we blunder about unhelpfully and unhappily. We don't know what Evangelical doctrine is, and that gets in the way of our disputes far more than that doctrine itself.

All of which said, let me close by suggesting a definition of Evangelical doctrine which might help us navigate the disputes. From the beginnings till today, what has been distinctive about Evangelical theology, I suggest, has not been its content, its conservatism, or its commitment to this or that doctrine or selection of doctrines; it has been a conscious and serious decision about the relative importance of doctrines. We can and will disagree about ecclesiology, or the doctrines of grace, and still work together, because these are not first order. What are first order doctrines for us? I propose this: just those necessary to maintain a particular soteriological scheme. Evangelicals are those who preach the same gospel, of punctilliar conversion and immediate assurance available through faith alone. For this gospel to be true, God must be triune, and Christ must be fully divine and truly human, so we take our stand on classical Trinity and Christology. The basis of this gospel is in the Scriptures, so Biblical authority, sufficiently strong to establish its truth, is central to our belief. And so we could go on.

This account, if accepted, seems to me to carry two important implications. The first is that the debates which will be truly toxic for Evangelicals are those that apparently concern the nature of the gospel itself. This was the case with the doctrines of grace in 1770, and it has been the case with the two recent debates mentioned above. Other arguments will happen, but they will not have the power to divide that soteriological debates will. The second is that this construction of Evangelical theology excludes, or at least marginalises, those who do place other doctrines—baptism; presbyterian ecclesiology; a particular account of church-state

relations; Calvinism—as first order. This seems to me appropriate. 'Evangelical' does not usefully mean 'conservative Protestant'. Rather, it refers to a movement that was self-consciously and offensively radical—in its ecumenism, as well as in other ways—in its eighteenth-century origins, because the mission of taking the gospel to the world mattered far more than the task of upholding inherited doctrinal distinctives.

I notice that in some of the conservative denominations in the USA, younger leaders are eschewing the term 'Evangelical' and describing themselves as 'Confessional'—committed, that is, to the historic beliefs of a particular tradition of Christianity, rather than to a radically missional movement that sits lightly to all traditions in its concern to take the gospel to the world. I do not argue that one is a better position than the other—although I know where I stand—just that they should be distinguished. Evangelical doctrine is missional doctrine, through-and-through, and that which does not serve the cause of mission is, necessarily, not important in a truly Evangelical theology.