

## REVISIONING THE EVANGELICAL CENTRE

How should we think of the 'Evangelical centre?' Recent discussion on the Fulcrum forum threads has raised the interesting question of whether it should be regarded as a theology or a mindset. In this article, I want to argue that to polarize the issue in this way is attractive but misleading.

Those who contest the notion of the Evangelical centre invariably question its theological distinctiveness. 'How', they ask, 'is it to be distinguished from other expressions of Evangelical Anglicanism, particularly in doctrinal beliefs?' This is often accompanied by the comment: 'We can't see the difference', with the implication: what's the point?

Certainly, if doctrine is regarded as the sole criterion by which the Evangelical centre is to be characterized and assessed, it has to be said that it differs little from its fellow Evangelicals, whether conservative, charismatic or 'don't know'. Fulcrum from its inception has affirmed the statement of faith held by the Church of England Evangelical Council – a body that represents the breadth of Evangelical Anglicanism.

But, as the late Stanley Grenz pointed out, Evangelicalism is about much more than giving assent to a series of theological propositions: it is a *form of life* (to use Wittgenstein's phrase). If the litmus test of what it means to be an Evangelical were to be restricted to the category of doctrinal assent, we would find ourselves ignoring the historical complexity and richness of the Evangelical movement both in the Anglican Church and beyond. Doctrinal orthodoxy (as defined by the historic creeds) is *necessary* for an accurate characterization of Evangelicalism but it is not *sufficient*.

Wherein, then, lies the centre's distinctiveness? This is where those who speak of it as a mindset offer real insight. But even to think of Evangelicalism in this way must be accepted with some qualification, for mindset implies a privileged status for the cognitive over and against other dimensions of what it means to be made human in the image of God. We are, after all, creatures of will, emotion and spirit as well as intellect. Here again, we bump up against the inadequacy of one-dimensional models.

I want to suggest that what lies at the core of the Evangelical centre is a theological method based on Evangelicalism's commitment to Scripture as the word of God coupled with an attitude of self-critical humility and non-defensive openness towards those with whom we disagree. Both are summed up in Grenz's phrase 'generous orthodoxy'<sup>1</sup> It is important to realise that by this we do not mean the advocacy of a theology of the lowest common denominator, still less an unboundaried faith controlled only by the pressures of situational exigency or relativistic pragmatism. The challenge that postmodernity presents to the Evangelical centre is to give due weight to both parts of the phrase. 'What the present situation demands...is the renewal of a "generous orthodoxy" that is as "orthodox" as it is "generous".'<sup>2</sup>

In terms of theological method, this implies a number of things. Firstly, it points to the need for a paradigm shift. As Stephen Kuhrt has noted, self-critical awareness has not

been a natural characteristic of Evangelicalism.<sup>3</sup> But until we are ready to stand back and ask hard questions of ourselves – *and to admit that we might be wrong* - we have no moral right to make the same demand of others. In the words of Harriet Harris in her study *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals* (1998), for Evangelicalism to distinguish itself from fundamentalism, it must show itself to be ‘as open and critical with respect to its own presuppositions as evangelicals expect others to be.’<sup>4</sup> If the centre stands for anything, it is surely this.

Secondly, to identify with the Evangelical centre implies a recognition that there is always a tension between fixedness and provisionality in theological statements which should be welcomed rather than regretted or ignored. The hermeneutic reality that we face is that because we engage with the fluidity of human cultures and knowledge, we do theology as a dynamic rather than a static enterprise. Put another way, orthodoxy has constantly to dialogue with the narrative flow of human life and intellectual understanding if it is to avoid the blind alley of mistakenly thinking that theology is a matter of stating propositional ‘truths’. To be true to the theological principles of incarnation and redemption, we must resist the notion that truth is a set of abstractions isolated from the actualities of human cultures and history: to do so would be to fall into the same trap in which modernity found itself in the wake of rationalism. A truly Christological view of truth recognizes that the same kind of mystery inherent in affirming Christ as both fully human and fully divine is mirrored in the equally mysterious interplay of human and divine to be found in the process of constituting and apprehending that which is true.

Thirdly, the theological method of the Evangelical centre is marked by a faithfulness to Scripture and the historic creeds on one hand and an openness to the breadth of Christian traditions on the other. This does not require that we assign equal validity to all theological perspectives (for all, including Evangelicalism, must stand under the scrutiny of Scripture). However, it does demand that we listen with respect to voices other than our own. Fundamental to this is a recognition that theology arises out of communities of faith which possess their own historical trajectories and which have found themselves having to address their own particular problems: it is not a system of ahistorical propositions that stand independent of the contexts which have produced them. Theological truth does not drop out of the sky: it is always and everywhere the outcome of community struggle and reflection. That communities produce systems and principles cannot be denied. But it has always to be remembered that the primary category for theology is narrative and that systematic theology is a second-order outcome of this.<sup>5</sup> Theologies are products of communal stories; and Evangelicals need to accept that this is as true for themselves as for anybody else. Consequently, the centre is committed to respect for the stories of others rather than a reactionary defensiveness whose first instinct is to circle the wagons and to equate otherness with error.

This leads finally to the question of theology and relationality. One of the most important and profound theological developments of the last 20 years has been the revival of Trinitarian theology. Although Evangelicals by and large have yet to absorb the impact of this, the implications for theological method are enormous. For if the Trinity is central to

all theology, then it follows that relationality lies at the heart of a Trinitarian theological method and that this in turn demands a willingness to enter into, and a desire to sustain, relationships with others who name the name of Christ and are seekers after truth *even if we profoundly disagree with them*.<sup>6</sup>

The Evangelical centre, therefore, finds itself committed, as a matter of fundamental principle, to encouraging dialogue even across heated differences. Moreover, it believes that the discernment of truth and the mind of God is more likely to arise out of a process of mutual respect and charitable assumption than out of polarisation and demonisation. However wrong-headed we may think Christian brothers or sisters, they are not Amalekites to be smitten hip and thigh.

In 2000, Grenz prophetically observed that, ‘The way forward is for Evangelicals to take the lead in renewing a theological “center” that can meet the challenges of the postmodern, and in some sense post-theological, situation in which the church now finds itself.’<sup>7</sup>

Enter Fulcrum.

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<sup>1</sup> Itself a repetition, with important differences, of Hans Frei’s earlier coining of the term in relation to the evangelical-liberal dichotomy in the USA. See Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic 2000, p.325. Also, his *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, p.326.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kuhrt, *A Positive Model for Responding to Unorthodox Theology*, currently on the Fulcrum website.

<sup>4</sup> Harriet A. Harris, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998, p.324.

<sup>5</sup> Thus Alister McGrath, ‘The *sola scriptura* principle is ultimately an assertion of the primacy of the foundational scriptural narrative over any framework of conceptualities which it may generate.’ *A Passion for Truth: the Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism*, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP 1996, p.79.

<sup>6</sup> This is particularly the case where differences are over highly contentious issues that many hold to be fundamental to biblical faithfulness, as the Anglican Communion is currently finding to its cost.

<sup>7</sup> Grenz, *ibid*, p.331.