

Christianity & Culture

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Introduction to the Conference: Evangelicals in the Public Square – To What Extent Should Evangelicals Be Socially and Politically Engaged?

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KEY WORDS

| Evangelicalism | Culture | Politics |
| Public Theology | Public Square |

ABSTRACT

This paper, which opens the conference, serves as an introductory comment to the current cultural and political situation in the United Kingdom insofar as it affects British Evangelicals. The fundamental premise of this short paper is that British Evangelical faith, on several moral and cultural issues, is increasingly being forced into the private realm. Moreover, even private faith is increasingly being singled out for criticism. The paper concludes with some practical points on how to respond to the new orthodoxy.

RATIONALE FOR AND AIMS OF THIS CONFERENCE

There are several reasons why at King's Evangelical Divinity School we considered it important to organise a conference such as this. First, we believe it is imperative to draw awareness among students and friends of the school to deeply significant social and political changes that are affecting (and will increasingly affect) Evangelical Christians here in the United Kingdom. Thus, this conference seeks to explore how several of these social and political trends are developing and where they may lead in the future, together with the ramifications for Evangelical believers, churches and ministries in this country.

This leads to a second conference aim, namely, to contribute towards equipping and providing analytical tools for responding to

and engaging with the public square, and also exploit any opportunities available to fulfill our task of proclaiming the Gospel.

There are, of course, various Evangelical organisations in the UK that, likewise, are raising and exploring these issues among the wider Evangelical community. Some enjoy a high profile in this field and do an excellent job. This conference is primarily aimed at our student body, both postgraduate and undergraduate (together with friends of the school), which will increasingly encounter some of these issues within a future ministry setting. However, we are also keen to go beyond the next thirty six hours and, in time, make some of the resources emanating from this conference available to the wider British church.

TERMINOLOGY

Before proceeding, it may be useful to identify and define several terms I will use throughout this brief paper. The first is “public theology”, which as the term implies, is Christian theological engagement with the public square. Thus, this is theology that engages society, the political sphere and the public realm as a whole. An opposite position is the concept of “private faith”, where theology is strictly personal and private, focusing on spiritual issues. Outsiders seeking to limit Christian engagement with public issues aim to enforce the concept of private faith, while Christians themselves can so separate the world from the divine that they become sectarian and insular in outlook. The result can be a form of “apoliticism”, or lack of political engagement. Apoliticism can take various shapes, from a highly sectarian form to a more nuanced version that separates some issues as truly of little interest to Christians from other issues, including within the social and political spheres, that patently are of interest to Christians.

In any discussion such as this we will also inevitably come across the word “postmodernism”. Obviously it is impossible to define it here (whole books have been written seeking to define and explain the phenomenon), and as students most of you will already have encountered the word and explored its meaning in some depth. But in short (and at danger of oversimplification), postmodernism rejects what it considers are traditional, dominant metanarratives, in favour of pluralism, where each alternative mini-narrative is given equal consideration and status. Moreover, in a marketplace of ideas postmodernism promotes subjectivism and relativism over objectivism and absolutism. In practice, of course, that is

not the case. Christian apologist William Craig Lane states:

The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth. In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unliveable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of religion and ethics. But, of course, that’s not postmodernism; that’s modernism!¹

SHOULD CHRISTIANS ENGAGE IN POLITICS?

Throughout history there has been an ebb and flow in Christian thought concerning the extent to which the Church should engage with the social and political realm. For example, the early church in the book of Acts arguably concentrated most of its efforts on proclaiming the Gospel, evangelisation and growth. It is from the post-Apostolic era, and particularly from the time of Emperor Constantine onwards, that we see the institutionalisation of the church and its increasingly cosy relationship with the state. This was particularly the case during the medieval, Catholic era (which goes some way to explaining why many nonconformists, including many Evangelicals, are so suspicious of engaging with the state). Puritanism and other more recent expressions of theonomy (for example 20th century dominionism and “Kingdom Now” theology) have sought to promote Christian government and laws. Yet others have taken a completely opposite position, for example early 20th century dispensational-influenced Pentecostalism, where the view that an imminent *parousia* precluded social and political activity in favour of an urgent focus on evangelism.

1 “God is Not Dead Yet”, *Christianity Today*, 3 July 2008.

Such apoliticism (for various reasons) continues to exist today, in varying degrees of intensity. Many Evangelicals avoid Christian social and political engagement because it is seen as worldly, irrelevant to Christians, or creates the potential for division within the church. Others have firm views on social and moral issues (for example, abortion, homosexuality, marriage and the family, and so on), while others are equally engaged with political issues interpreted through a theological worldview and lens (e.g. membership of the European Union), but tend to keep their opinions to themselves, or else share them privately within like-minded circles. So although many Evangelical scholars, leaders and individuals are increasingly engaging the public square, many in the past have preferred to take (despite in many cases quite strong views), a “render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s” approach.

I think this is an increasingly problematic approach in light of what we are seeing today in this country (and Western society as a whole). My title for this talk is, “To what extent should Evangelicals be socially and politically engaged?” Really, though, given recent developments here in the UK, that question arguably should be re-phrased to, “To what extent can Evangelicals *avoid* being socially and politically engaged?”

Let us, for a moment, consider the New Testament milieu the earliest Christians found themselves in. Arguably, the focus of the New Testament church was predominantly upon evangelism, praxis, ethics, church building, and so on. It is true that there was also a social aspect, although it is important to note that this was within a *congregational* setting/context (consider, similarly, the congregational context of the Old Testament, namely the congregation of Israel, in which social work by the congregation took place). So because the

New Testament church raised money to help their own, much like the Old Testament had rules to assist the most vulnerable within the congregation of Israel, this does not in itself make the Bible a handbook for transforming society. Thus, social engagement is by and large limited to the congregational setting, so that we see much more of a focus on evangelism and church activity in Acts. To be sure, obedience to ruling authorities is instructed (Romans 13:1-7), but I see little in the New Testament that encourages *proactive* social and political engagement by the church.

But there is plenty of evidence of *reactive* social and political engagement in Acts onwards. The early church faced a constant barrage from the state, whether from the Sanhedrin (Acts 4, 5), Paul breathing threats, even going to Damascus, and imprisoning believers, or the scene involving Paul and Felix, the riots by the silversmiths in Ephesus, Paul’s high profile trial in Rome (and his later execution), or the circumstances Christians found themselves in following the AD 64 great fire of Rome. Following the conflagration Nero, accused of having the fire started, found a scapegoat with the Christians, who were thrown to wild animals or dipped in tar and set alight in Nero’s gardens. In short, the early church could not ignore society or the state, bury its head in the sand and ignore it, because the state would not allow it.

And similar attempt to bury one’s head in the sand is occurring today. Small churches and ministries up and down the country are burying their heads in the sand, keeping a low profile, hoping and praying some of the social and moral issues that increasingly challenge Christian orthodoxy somehow will not affect them. Yet gradually the state’s powers – and society’s worldview and mores – are encroaching

upon the private sphere, so that even remaining silent is regarded with suspicion. Increasingly, there is arguably a witchhunt against those who do not enthusiastically embrace and celebrate the new orthodoxy. Thus, in one of the sessions tomorrow you will hear first-hand some cases represented by Christian barrister Paul Diamond where everyday Christians are encountering severe difficulties by virtue of their faith on a daily basis.

If anyone is in any doubt as to whether any of this will affect them, consider for a moment how many of us are so careful about what we say, who may be monitoring our views, even within a private social context. The coercive nature of the new orthodoxy is such that to even express a reasonably-presented, traditional view of human sexuality in a non-polemical, thoughtful manner immediately brings charges of “homophobia” or similar. Recently, a well-known international personality, interviewing a Christian lawyer on a chat show, accused him repeatedly of homophobia, simply because the Christian guest explained that Christians believe marriage is between one man and one woman.

Yet it is not just human sexuality, or Christian views on abortion, marriage, or other issues that are causing problems for Christians. It is easy to become overly focused on the homosexuality issue, but I think there is a deeper issue at play here. Consider, for example, how social media recently expressed outrage when a Christian described adultery as a sin in a national publication. Increasingly, I suggest, in a pluralist, postmodern context that constantly preaches tolerance, there is zero tolerance for anyone who suggests certain views or practices are sinful. It goes against the essence of relativist pluralism. The irony, of course, is that those preaching against intolerance are often strongly

intolerant of those disagreeing with their liberal worldview. It is interesting to see a growing debate within political left, between liberals promoting free speech and an illiberal hard left that seeks to silence alternative viewpoints, even within the political left.²

A far more important issue, however, is the extent to which this directly impinges on the proclamation of the Gospel. Now, I understand how many Christians in the past have not made themselves the most popular of people by going around preaching judgment, fire and brimstone, and so on. Inevitably, some have turned the proclamation of the Gospel into finger-pointing, forgetting that we are all sinners and have been saved by grace. This is a pity, as it fails to communicate the theological concept of sin, what it is, how it came about, God’s view of it, and how the Gospel is his response to sin. It is this theological understanding that forces individuals to grapple with their relationship with God and the need for his forgiveness. Yet increasingly, I believe we will see more societal rejection of the actual concept of sin (whatever the sin is and however de-personalised it is). Previously people would simply ignore or sneer at Christians and their talk of sin, whereas today many are directly challenging it, demanding Christians change their views or remain silent. You can see, then, how an increasingly antagonistic societal view towards the concept of sin strikes at the very heart of a gospel that proclaims how God’s love overcomes and frees individuals from sin.

Besides such views growing in popularity, there are other ways in which society is encroaching upon Christians’ lives. Public preaching is increasingly under threat in this

2 Consider the backlash following the publication by a liberal criticising the diminution of free speech within the political left, Kirsten Powers, *The Silencing: How the Left is Killing Free Speech* (Regnery, 2015).

country, with various high profile cases of public preachers being arrested and/or charged. At the current time, the British government is considering a proposed register of religious speakers and leaders, which, if it were to come into law, would allow the government to police who is and is not a *bona fides* religious speaker. Quite rightly, the proposals have been met with outrage. Meanwhile, some Christians are being called out on their private beliefs, with some people demanding to know their views on this or that issue. I am reminded of George Orwell's 1984, where there is a demand to know what you think and believe, even if you have never expressed your beliefs in public.

Liberalism has a long and worthy history. Emanating from Protestantism, modern liberalism emphasizes the worth of all individuals and the need to respect all humanity. That is nothing new, of course, we see that in passages throughout the Bible concerned with assisting and treating with dignity the frail, the destitute, the old and young, the vulnerable, widowed, and so on. Notwithstanding, Protestantism, which has shaped much of Western society's values, has played a crucial role in making this mindset part of the West's shared values.

However, we are increasingly seeing a shift from liberalism to hard left illiberalism, a form of cultural Marxism, where some have seized upon these values and use it as a weapon of the most illiberal kind. Inevitably, anyone not conforming and toeing the line, including Christians, will increasingly be singled out by an illiberal society. Try as they may, British Evangelicals will find it increasingly difficult to remain apolitical.

CHALLENGES CURRENTLY FACING EVANGELICALS

Evangelicals in the UK (and much of the West in general, as well as elsewhere) face various challenges in the present and not-so-distant future. As the current culture wars take their course, evolving societal views will bring further – and greater – challenges for Christians. For example, currently there is a growing focus on the trans issue, gender “fluidity” and how parents are increasingly being encouraged to indulge their children's rejection of a gender “assigned at birth”. Such views go to the very heart of Christian views of humanity, human sexuality, and the traditional view that God created man and woman.

Other challenges include the increasingly coercive power of the state, how technology drives society (and provides authorities with ever more powerful methods of policing viewpoints and beliefs), an increasing number of legal challenges aimed at Christianity (to be covered in the next talk), and more and more encroachment upon the private sphere. But perhaps one of the greatest challenges we face is from within, in the form of apathy among Evangelicals. There is a real danger that we are sleepwalking into serious trouble when, one day we will awaken to find all manner of freedoms curtailed.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

I want to suggest very briefly some ways in which we might respond to current social and political developments that directly challenge Christian values and activity.

First, we should ensure as Evangelicals we desist from feeding the fundamentalist stereotypes. Evangelicals should always aim

to be reasonable, thoughtful, analytical, knowledgeable, biblically based, less judgmental. Also important is the need to ensure we do not fall for sensationalism, as circulated by some Christians. Too often on social media we see fake stories seized upon by Christians, which are further shared and promoted (almost like a mirror-image of the hard left groupthink we see so much of today). When it transpires a story is not true or the facts have been exaggerated, all it serves to do is reinforce the straw man view that many Evangelical Christians are lunatics on the fringe of society.

Second, it is imperative that we know our Bible and our theology, so that we are ready to provide persuasive biblical responses to the world's questions. Christians ought to work hard on knowing and understanding the issues, rather than merely offering knee-jerk reactions, to develop robust and thoughtful arguments. Of course, we recognise that pluralism is nothing of the sort, nonetheless we should seek to exploit postmodernism's marketplace of ideas.

Finally, we need to make a commitment to stand and fight. Some Christians will

respond with Jesus' words to "Turn the other cheek" as justification for not engaging an increasingly anti-Christian social and political realm. But those words are very much about individual responses to persecution, rather than a collective response to those who seek to challenge Christian values. The New Testament has plenty to say about believers uniting to challenge the enemies of God. If we do not at the very least make our voices heard, much like the prophets in the Old Testament, one day our grandchildren may well ask why we did not do more to challenge the current wave of anti-Christian sentiment.

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