

A walk with Mr O (11)

Then – and now

Mr O, last Sunday we had a visiting preacher in our church. Like you, he was an older man, but what he had to say really troubled me. He gave the impression that the Evangelicalism of years ago was wonderfully healthy, but that today it has lost its way. Was it really like that? What do you think?

All of us who are older are tempted to think that everything was better when we were young. But it's not true. The fact is that every generation of Christians has its own strengths and weaknesses.

What were the weaknesses of Evangelicals when you were young?

Without going into a detailed analysis, there are some things that spring immediately to mind. For example, the robust evangelistic Calvinism of Spurgeon had been largely forgotten. Arminianism and dispensationalism ruled the roost.

In most churches expository preaching was completely unknown. And most Evangelical people were still members of churches in doctrinally-mixed denominations.

That's not a very pretty picture! So, what were the strengths?

Evangelicals believed the Bible to be the Word of God. Almost everywhere they understood that Sunday was the Sabbath and that the whole day was to be spent in the worship and service of God. They also understood that Jesus Christ was Lord, and that this meant that every Christian was to live very differently from other people.

Yes, it's true that Evangelicals had an unwritten (and unbiblical) list of do's and don'ts, but they were crystal clear about separation – that is, never to do anything of which you would be ashamed if the Lord returned at that moment. There were a lot of spin-offs from this. For example, amongst my Christian friends I did not know of one person who had not spent time with the Lord asking Him whether they should spend their life abroad as a missionary.

Wow! I think I am beginning to have a bit more sympathy with last Sunday's preacher! You have mentioned some things there that I have never thought of.

But surely that does not mean that everything about modern Evangelicalism is wrong, does it?

No. But before we get round to some of its strengths, let us be clear that there is a lot about Evangelicals today which is shameful.

That's strong language, Mr O. Can you give me some examples?

Here are half a dozen which you might like to think about. At this point I'll just mention them. And, of course, these are generalisations. Not every Christian individual is guilty in this way.

- It is shameful that Evangelicals today are not afraid of God.
- It is shameful that they don't take His law seriously. Most of them can't even recite the Ten Commandments.
- It is shameful that the cross of Christ is not at the heart of every meeting of the church.
- It is shameful that they are unwilling to devote one whole day a week to celebrating and proclaiming the resurrection of Christ.
- It is shameful that they find themselves able to live without thinking that Christ may return today.
- It is shameful that they are willing to let millions and millions of people live and die without hearing the gospel of Christ.

It's true, it's true, and I feel both guilty and ashamed. But you mentioned that today's Evangelicalism has some strengths. Please tell me about them.

- There are a lot of preachers about who love the Bible and who are seeking to expound it in a way which is faithful, memorable, and relevant.
- There is a widespread recognition that every member is important and has something significant to contribute to the life of their church.
- There is a healthy stress on the need to do everything in love.
- The social distinctions that plagued large swathes of Evangelicalism in the past are no longer recognised.
- There is an understanding of how hard it is to live as a Christian in a hostile society, and therefore of the need to spend time with each other as a means of encouragement.
- A lot of believers are displaying a lot of flair in using social media and new technologies in the service of the gospel.

Thank you, Mr O. I'm going to go away now and think about how we can address our weaknesses and build on our strengths. Please pray for me.
