

# FIRST RESPONSE TO RED HERRINGS AND HOT POTATOES: THE REAL ISSUES FOR EVANGELICALS TODAY

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There's a lot of good things in Clive's talk. I read theology at London Bible College and I enjoyed it, and I think fondly of London Bible College. My own tradition is evangelical and I love lots of it.

Anyway, this is a kind of postmodern address; it doesn't go anywhere and it doesn't apologise for it. It doesn't have three points; it has lots of questions; it refers to some of the issues Clive has raised.

1. Is there any reason to think Jesus was an evangelical? And if you weren't, would you think he was an evangelical?

2. Most people I know think evangelical is something to do with television preachers. It means bad news to them, not good news. What does this mean?

3. I am involved in the Greenbelt arts festival which is organised by people from the evangelical tradition, but is intentionally experimental and sometimes controversial. We did some fund-raising last year and John Stott, George Carey and others sent us endorsements. A major evangelical relief organisation which takes tens of thousands of pounds in revenues every year at the festival regretted they could not endorse Greenbelt. I believe their reasoning, allegedly, had something to do with the fact that Greenbelt regularly invites Roman Catholics to speak, while this agency's most generous supporters are Northern Ireland's Protestants.

4. Maybe it's just me, but how come sometimes evangelicals seem more like the Pharisees than like Jesus?

5. A leading American evangelical was invited to speak at 'Brainstormers', which is a major evangelical youth event organised by a widely respected young evangelical leader. The American accepted, and cleared his diary. Then the invitation was suddenly withdrawn. The explanation was that the evangelical organisers had found out the American speaker was divorced.

6. Wider society, particularly in North America, is presently being throttled by P.C.—the politically correct movement. Is evangelicalism at risk of being throttled by T.C.—the theologically correct movement? I was glad to hear Clive endorsing Mother Teresa as the most respected Christian in Britain even though she doesn't live in Britain. Will Mother Teresa be invited to speak at Spring Harvest next year, or to give a

lecture at London Bible College, whether or not there's a chance that she could travel for that? Or do evangelicals think of her and other Catholics or Liberals as the theological version as HIV positive—doctrinally impure?

8. When Jesus told the story of the great party, and inviting everyone in from the highways and byways, the drunks and the drug-dealers, the homeless and the helpless, the Tories and the Trotskyites, who cut out the line about making sure before they were actually let into the party that they had consented to believe each of the four spiritual laws, or had a clear and obvious conversion experience, or were evidencing several fruits of the Spirit?

9. Clive has said that on the ordination of women the decision has now been taken. But has a decision been taken on women who don't particularly want to be ordained—business women, social workers, teachers, politicians, journalists? Clive hopes that womanhood will no longer face extremes of marginalisation, criticism and alienation. He talks of wanting to see young leadership, and accepting powerlessness to confront power. At the recent evangelical leaders' forum, by invitation only, perhaps a handful of delegates were below forty, and only three were women.

10. On the question of worship, Clive concedes that *Songs of Fellowship Volume 15* will undoubtedly one day be with us. Surely this is defeatist. There must be something in the power of the General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance to stop this! There may be something more exciting afoot in corporate worship. Witness the growing host of alternative services around the country, often held in the dark, using televisions and slides, with chanting, or just with silence. Depending on your age and your cultural tradition you may not like them very much. But then many young people do not much like present trends in church worship, and now there appears to be a real alternative to Radio 2 in church.

11. Why at the Spring Harvest convention this year was membership of the Evangelical Alliance (EA) being sold on the lines that the EA wanted to have more members than the Labour Party? What is this supposed to prove? And how does this square with Clive's correct talk about taking on powerlessness to face power? Why do evangelicals think that big is best? I'm glad that Clive thinks the era of those big missions is over. Is one of the Devil's cleverest illusions the idea that quantity is more important than quality? Why do the EA publish press releases making stands on everything from the former Yugoslavia to tithing, in which the EA stance is said to represent one million evangelicals? Who are they? Who asked them? What do they really think? Did Jesus claim to represent the twelve disciples, or the seventy sent out, or the five thousand he fed with bread and fish, or did he claim some more elusive authority?

12. Why are evangelicals good at making families, good at caring for the needy, telling the truth, and going the second mile? How come they're devoted to prayer and reading God's book? Why are evangelicals good at bringing people who felt they were beyond God's love to the place where they know they are loved by Jesus? But how come so many evangelicals move on out to some other church tradition or to none? Why are the Bishop of Durham or the Archbishop of York former evangelicals? Is it something in them, or something in evangelicalism? Isn't there a problem if our ecclesiology seems too superficial or too stale? Is it time for evangelicals to dive deeper into the God they love, to develop an authentic evangelical mystic tradition?

13. Who cares whether someone is an anglican evangelical, an evangelical anglican, or just wandered into church because they had a broken heart?

14. Why do evangelicals look in on themselves all the time? Why are their books published by evangelical publishing houses and sold in evangelical bookshops? Why does W.H. Smith's have a greater selection of New Age and Occult books than of books from evangelical authors? Why do evangelical magazines rarely appear in Menzies or your local newsagent? Has anyone stopped to think that a Christian radio station, of which there are increasing numbers, means fifty or a hundred Christians who know about radio, working in a Christian radio station, and not working at Capital Radio or Classic FM or Radio 4? Is this desire to replicate—to have evangelical versions of—putting all the salt grains in the salt pot with all the other salt grains? Did Jesus say that salt pots would flavour society?

15. Why do we understand evangelism as making other evangelicals? How come evangelicals are not more prominent in the environmental movement, instead of starting an evangelical version of it? How come evangelicals march for Jesus instead of marching for the miners or the health service, or people with AIDS? Or do they? Do you? Who tricked us into thinking that the Gospel is merely about words, when it's about clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and visiting the prisoner; when it's about mending God's broken world, breast-feeding the starving children; about dancing to another tune altogether?

16. Would Jesus have been invited to speak at Spring Harvest or Greenbelt? Would he have joined the EA or the AA? Would he have passed an interview to get into London Bible College? Why did he have dodgy friends? Hands up all those who had a prostitute around at their house this week.