

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

DEREK TIDBALL

I was a student with Clive Calver at London Bible College, and was actually the student chairman for one of the years. Clive in his radical days was one of my most ardent critics, and also faithful supporters at the same time. I've valued his friendship over the years and it gives me an opportunity to put on record at this point the gratitude I personally feel, and I'm sure that many other evangelicals do, for the leadership that he has exercised in the Evangelical Alliance in these last years. That does not detract in any way from the questions that Martin Wroe has so brilliantly put to us. I resist the temptation to reply to Martin rather than Clive, though there are so many things which I think Martin has said which are unanswerable.

Let me simply say that there are many things in Clive's address that I want to affirm. I welcome his whole emphasis on society. I would, wouldn't I? I've taught sociology at London Bible College in days gone by. I'm glad to be able to tell him that I think as far as most churches and denominations are concerned, the days of big missions are passed. I sit on the Decade for Evangelism Officers' Group that meets at the moment, and struggle with evangelism at that national and interdenominational level, and nobody there is keen on big missions; but all are keen on affirming and enabling local initiatives and local churches and every Christian to engage in the task of mission. I welcome his emphasis on pluralism and so many other issues as well.

But let me develop, rather than take issue with Clive, at a number of points. I'm not convinced that individualism is a red herring. Yes, it is a red herring in the sense that it will side-track the church from the major mission and drain energy which we ought to be investing in other things. But it's much more serious than that. Individualism is a profound social force in our society and its energies are constantly being reinvigorated by political, economic, psychological and philosophical currents. It simply won't go away. It was not surprising at all that the arch symbols of the 1990s that Clive chose to mention were the personal computer (information technology) and the Walkman—both symbols of individualism. You needn't go to work any longer; you can sit at home and address your PC and be networked with other people whom you never meet. The church is subject to those currents, and we need to address

that issue of individualism at profound levels; as Michael Schluter and his colleague David Lee have done, in the rather inelegantly-named book published recently called *The R Factor*. If we don't, then we will be further eroding our society which is already in an advanced state of disintegration. We need to be both a counter-cultural movement at the level of individualism, and addressing some of the major issues associated with it.

Richard Neville who was one of the main leaders of the '60s radical movement said on a television programme that I was listening to some time ago that it was time for us as a society to say, 'Move over Rambo; bring back the Good Samaritan'. Rambo is an arch-symbol of individualism, but if we're not giving place to the Good Samaritan before long, then our society will go on falling apart at the seams. So we need to raise that high on the agenda and to be addressing it at every level.

I would like to make a brief comment about the ordination of women—to endorse one of the things Martin Wroe mentioned. I agree with Clive absolutely; I'm sick to death with hearing about the ordination of women as if it's the only issue; sick to death of some of the media programmes which seem to have vested interests in perpetuating it as if that's the only thing we're doing in the church. I absolutely agree that that particular form of the debate is a red herring, and that fundamental issues of *ministry* are where we ought to be addressing our energies. But I still want to say I believe that women are marginalised in the church. We cannot relax the battle on the broader issue—for a genuine liberating equality which the Gospel affirms is to be found in Jesus Christ. I speak as one who belongs to a denomination that has ordained women since 1922 but is still chauvinist to the core. And though in theory it assents to their equality, in practice denies it time and time again. So much for the red herrings.

Let me raise some of my own hot potatoes which relate to but extend some of the things Clive mentioned. First, there is a desperate need for us to engage in apologetics, at the level of the intellect in terms of the Gospel. Evangelicals do not have a very good history at doing that. Time and again in our history, we have been busily engaged in our activism while the real battles have been fought elsewhere. In the nineteenth century when we reached a point of great success in the middle of the century, we then retreated into premillennialism, and to holiness conferences, and to the organisation of missions, and to such activism that we deceived and deluded ourselves. Then at the end of the century we woke up and discovered that people were asking different questions, that the universities—more in the United States than here—had been radically secularised and we had not noticed it, that the whole next generation of evangelicals, the bishops of Durham and of York in their day, that Martin referred to, were no longer evangelicals because evangelicals were not addressing the questions that they were,

and coming up with satisfying answers. We are often deluded by our activism, and we need apologists in the church today—people like Stephen, of whom the Scripture says that 'none could stand up against his wisdom, or the Spirit by whom he spoke'.

The second hot potato is the need for unity—not in the ecumenical sense, but real unity between evangelicals and charismatics. I am grateful for David Pawson's recent book, *The Fourth Wave*, where he has so helpfully set out an agenda that together we should be addressing. London Bible College has always shown that it is possible for evangelicals and pentecostals and charismatics to coexist healthily together, although there have been moments of skirmish in the years gone by. But we need to be grasping that one and pursuing the issue and taking it further.

My third hot potato is that we need a broad vision. I identify again with the things that Clive has said with regard to change and to younger leadership. But what about leadership that comes from elsewhere in the world? Will the future leadership of *world* evangelicalism come from the third world rather than from this world, and will we be great enough, humble enough, powerless enough, to recognise them as the leaders of this or the next generation? And listen without condescension and with care to what they have to say?

And do we have a broad vision not only to champion truth, but to champion the practice that goes alongside it? I stand with all that Clive has said about pluralism; I want to affirm Scripture and truth as he has done. And yet there is also the need, as he himself concluded, to engage in the world. I was humbled recently as an evangelical, in calling together a consultation of people in my denomination, of evangelicals and those with much broader theologies, to discuss the whole question of evangelism in the inter-faith context in Britain. We met together for two days to engage with one another in depth, and the overall revelation which I came away with—apart from a statement which I think will commend itself to evangelicals—was the humiliating reminder, that though evangelicals who had come to that consultation probably had all the right theology, none of them knew, or had friends, or spoke to, or engaged closely in this country with, those of other faiths. All those with the broader theologies could speak about their friends who were members of the Islamic faith, or Hindus, or Seikhs. They could speak from personal and first-hand experience of their engagement with such people. We need a broader vision that tells us not only what to believe but indeed, how to do it, and how to behave.