

**June 2022 Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative  
‘Engaging with Scripture in Today’s World’**

**‘The role and function of scripture in Evangelicalism, especially evangelical worship.’  
Some historical reflections and contemporary observations.**

## **1 Scripture in evangelicalism: roots and early growth**

### ***Sixteenth Century Reformation***

In 1521 Martin Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms in 1521 to save himself from excommunication. In his defence he declared before the Emperor, ‘I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience’.<sup>1</sup> Some years later, John Calvin, the architect of reformed theology, wrote in his influential *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ‘We must come, I say, to the Word, where God is truly described to us from his works ... If we turn aside from the Word ... we shall never reach the goal ...’ He continued, quoting Augustine, to say, ‘it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it’.

Evangelicalism as a distinct movement within world Christianity is usually traced to the evangelical revival that began in Britain through the ministry of the Wesleys and John Whitefield and then spread to America. That is true. But the revivalists of the eighteenth century saw their theological and spiritual roots in the sixteenth century reformation and, through the reformation, stretching back to the Augustine and other Fathers and to St Paul and the earliest Church.

In these two declarations by Luther and Calvin we can see the main lines of the role and function of scripture in evangelicalism, including its worship. Scripture brings to us the Word of God. The Church is founded and bounded by this Word, and therefore, the Scriptures of the Word. The Church is always *semper reformanda* – always open to being reformed by

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mark A. Noll’s chapter, ‘Evangelicals and the Bible’ in *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism* edited by Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (New York and London: Routledge, 2019) from which I have drawn the quotations from Luther, Calvin and Wesley.

God's Word. Likewise, the individual believer is constrained, 'held captive' by God's Word revealed in scripture and cannot depart from – and this is important – what it impresses upon the individual conscience, no matter what the world or the church says.

### ***Eighteenth century revival***

During the revivals of the eighteenth century, these roots grew into a form of scripturally energised Christian faith that was inherently *missional*, *experiential* and *doxological* – and, therefore, essentially *conversionist*. In John Wesley's first published edition of sermons in 1746 he said, 'I want one thing, the way to heaven ... God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God. I have it here. Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book]'. John Wesley was a sophisticated Christian thinker: devoted to the Fathers, and especially the Eastern Fathers with their emphasis on the Spirit, formed by the liturgical tradition, open to new insights from the western intellectual tradition. But he could also see and state things very simply: 'I want one thing, the way to heaven'. That was – and remains – the missional zeal of evangelicalism: to open to everyone the way of salvation, to confront each person with the grace and call of the gospel, to see lives transformed and transfigured, eternally. And the Book – Scripture – shows how that can happen. 'O give me that book!'

John Wesley, John Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and other great preachers of the revival on both sides of the Atlantic preached to convert the sinner (justification and new birth) and to exhort the converted sinner to ongoing transformation (sanctification). The Bible is not merely the repository of the Word, its doctrines to be simply understood. It is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' (Hebrews 5.12). 'The sacred writings', make us 'wise unto salvation'. 'Inspired by God', 'they train us for righteousness ... and equip us for every good work' (2 Timothy 4.15-16). The truth of scripture is not just for the mind but for the heart: the God of whom they speak is to be experienced in every dimension of personal and social life. Scripture is to be appropriated and applied in all its parts to the personal life of each believer and to the church life of each congregation. Wesley would also say that it is to be applied to society, and therein lies another story about the relationship between

personal and societal transformation in evangelicalism, but I will avoid going down that road in this paper, important as it is.

The scriptures are also to be sung, sung by all the people, not just choirs, and sung in words that people understand and with familiar tunes that everyone can sing. The evangelical revival opened the flood gates to accessible hymnody that turns scripture into song – songs of praise that move the heart, shape the mind and edify the will – that still continues today. More of that later.

***Summary: God in and through scripture***

The great reformed theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, is a figure who has divided evangelicalism. But his insistence that the core, centre and content of the Bible is the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, captures the essence of the role and function of the Bible in evangelicalism. *What* we encounter in the Bible is the *who* – the God of the Bible who speaks to the world, the church and to each individual believer through the Bible. Scripture's authority is the authority of God, its ultimate author. Scripture is the dynamic site of encounter with God, the living, active source of God speaking.

In order to safeguard scripture as the speech of God, evangelicals have argued with other Christians and with themselves over doctrines of inspiration and status, and especially the question of how scripture can be said to be without error. Given the connection between this conference and the Lausanne conferences and movement, let me offer one attempt (successful in my mind) to bring some unity to that debate between evangelicals from the Lausanne Manila meeting of 1989: 'We affirm that in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments God has given us an authoritative disclosure of his character and will, his redemptive acts and their meaning and his mandate for mission'. At a minimum, evangelicals say that the Bible is trustworthy about what it says about God and the way of salvation that God has for us. That is why we say with John Wesley: 'O give me that book ... at any price give me the Book of God'.

## 2 Scripture in evangelical worship: practices and questions

### *Reformation*

As we move in to focus on scripture in evangelical worship, I will give my attention – if you will allow me – to my own country, and to England in particular. The reformation took a distinctive course in England and, undoubtedly – and this was true on the continent as well – became caught up with politics and the affairs (!) of state. The Bishops, though, were generally united in the desire to reform the church according to scripture and that teaching of the Fathers that was agreeable to scripture. Their efforts were directed, on the one hand, towards getting the Bible heard by the people and embedded in their hearts, and in the fabric of society, and, on the other hand, to the reform of the Mass so that it would ring true to scripture and sound the tune of the gospel of grace. One of the first acts of the reformation in England, therefore, was the injunction in 1536 that every parish church should have a Bible in English and that the readings should be given from it. Reforms of the lectionary and the Daily Offices followed alongside reform of the Mass from 1548 and the simplification of other liturgies, including of the ordination liturgy, so that the Bible was more prominent, and that everything said by priest and people conformed clearly to scripture. Scripture was to define and direct, shape and inspire, the worship of the people.

Cracks opened up among the English reformers. A few bishops felt that reforms were too radical. Many presbyters felt that it was too timid and called for a more radical reformation. Two disputes arose in particular. First, is it proper for scripture to be read but not expounded by a sermon? Second, does everything that happens in the church's worship need to find a direct mandate in scripture or need it be only consonant – broadly consistent – with the teaching but not the practice of scripture? Those who later became known as Puritans said 'no' to the first and yes to the 'second'.

To cut a long and sometimes violent story short, those different answers – and similar tensions over other questions related to worship, from vestments for clergy, to rings in marriage, to kneeling for communion and to whether bishops are worth keeping – led to many English Christians departing from the Church of England and forming their own churches of several kinds. That separation remains and has been extended over the

centuries. Its legacy is two forms of evangelicalism. One – and I am part of this – is a liturgically-shaped and ecclesial-conscious form of evangelicalism. The other is a free-er, more independent form of evangelicalism. Charismatics are found in both groups and both groups get on well together and work in all sorts of pan-evangelical and pan-charismatic ways for the good of the kingdom of God.

To be provocative for a moment, though, I would say that those who, unlike the Puritans, answered *yes* to the first dispute and *no* to second have been proved right. These are the more liturgically shaped and ecclesial conscious evangelicals of which I am one. It is proper to read scripture and not to expound it; and it is not necessary for everything we do in worship to have a direct mandate in scripture.

### ***Revival***

Let me now touch upon a few developments in evangelical worship during the revival which have prevailed over time. First, to say again that turning scripture into hymns and songs with a contemporary resonance has proven an important and enduring way in which scripture has been learnt and experienced in evangelical worship. Though not all is entirely well on that front today.

Second, the Puritans were right to dignify the sermon and, following their lead, the revivalists put their heart and soul into preaching to convert the soul. Preaching is part of worship. It expounds and applies God's word in order –as of old – to give 'sense so that the people understand the scripture' (Nehemiah 8.8). Preaching on the Bible remains a vital part of evangelical worship so that people may be taught 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20.27) and encounter the real presence of God in their midst. Though, again, not all is entirely well on that front today.

Third, the revival led to the fuller implementation of the reformation doctrine of 'the priesthood of all believers', with laity preaching, lay leaders running bible classes, households saying prayers together and the individual devouring the scriptures. The empowerment of the laity remains a strong element of evangelical worship. Though – and here we go again – not all is entirely well on that front today as well.

## **Today**

My final section will pick up those three 'not all is well today's', and also help to explain why I believe that evangelical worship always needs the wisdom and anchorage of the more liturgical and ecclesially-rooted forms of Christian worship. My observations are mainly anecdotal. They are a set of impressions, though I think they are well-founded.

First, there is a tendency to neglect the public reading of scripture despite the injunction to Timothy (1 Timothy 4.13). Two recent stories. Some 1400 evangelicals and charismatics from different churches across the city of Coventry gathered for a service of praise and prayer last month in the ruins of Coventry cathedral. It was brilliant – 90 minutes of joy! But there was no public reading of scripture except in the form of short passages weaved into the sections led by each pastor (including the bishop!). On Pentecost I was with a catholic Anglican parish. We had three readings and psalm. Even in evangelical Anglican worship, scripture is kept to a minimum, and psalmody is a rarity. There seems to be an inverse relationship between the doctrinal emphasis on the bible and the liturgical position that is given to the bible in contemporary Christianity.

Secondly, there is a tendency for scripture to be used selectively and to serve predetermined themes. Despite the evangelical commitment to preach the whole bible, its suspicion of the church's lectionaries makes it prone to focus on those passages which lend themselves best to preaching. The predilection for theme-related sermons, often arranged in a series and the determination to make preaching accessible and relevant to the listeners, can also risk of pressing scripture into the form of the topic in the contemporary mind rather than allowing scripture to speak in its own right and, in so doing, reform the categories, desires and understanding of our minds.

Third, the scriptural content of many contemporary hymns and songs is very light. That is not always the case, and some songs that might at first sight bear little connection with particular texts still powerfully communicate the Christian gospel. But many are so

concerned with the expression or engendering of feeling and emotion that they fail to draw on the rich resource of scriptural texts in the ways that were familiar to their predecessors.

Fourth, although evangelicalism, especially where under charismatic influence, has been good at empowering all of God's people to participate fully, to exercise ministry and use their gifts in the coming together of Christians in worship, I sometimes wonder whether this flowering of the priesthood of the people *in church* has been at the expense of the training and release of well-trained prophetic disciples for witness to the Word of God *in the world*.

### **3 Conclusion**

None of this is said to disparage evangelical worship which by its unique combination of the fidelity to the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 1.3), respect for the written word that carries that faith to the next generation and extraordinary capacity for cultural adaptivity and faithful improvisation, gives life to the people of God throughout the world and propels them into the church's mission. But in the context of the Lausanne–Orthodox Initiative, perhaps it is fair to say that evangelical worship has much to learn from the experience and wisdom of the ancient churches of the Orthodoxy with their long liturgical rooting and deep ecclesial consciousness, just as Orthodoxy has much to learn from evangelicalism's capacity to keep people excited and engaged in scripture as God's written word, sharper than any two-edged sword. And if I may end on another personal observation, I think that the most fruitful field for that mutual learning is where evangelicals meet the ancient Oriental Orthodox Churches.

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