

A consideration of Viola Viola's 'Beyond Evangelical'

I have written several book reviews, but this not one of them. In this article I am considering 'Beyond Evangelical', not reviewing it. My purpose is to reflect on some of the things written in this book from a positive perspective and leave the evaluation and critique to others.

Viola contends that the word 'evangelical' is becoming increasingly vague and open to widely different interpretations. I have also noted this trend, and wondered what to do about it. The word originally became a banner for those who were seeking to reclaim historic Christianity from 19th and 20th century liberalism, and it still has that connotation for many Christians. Inventing a new word to describe 'historic Christianity' would merely add to the confusion. When I established the South African Theological Seminary, some 16 years ago now, I was comfortable with describing it as an evangelical seminary but recently I prefer to describe it in terms of its foundational principles as Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led.

If I have read Viola correctly, I would say that his central and over-riding concern with modern evangelicalism is that 'it has cantered itself on making correct propositional statements rather than on a way of living in, through, and for the Lord Jesus in a shared-life local community'. Although not usually defined this way, I believe that this statement contains two of the lynchpins of true historic evangelicalism— the centrality of Jesus Christ, and the corporate nature of our life in Him.

Concerning the first of these, Viola pleads for 'a recovery of the Bible's consistent and razor-sharp emphasis that Jesus Christ is supreme, preeminent, sovereign, the centre of biblical revelation, and the practical, living head of the church'. He laments that 'in today's evangelicalism, countless religious "themes" and "subjects" have replaced Christ as the centrality and supremacy'. I share his passion for the centrality of Jesus. The Bible is all about Him, the Christian life is all about Him, eternity is all about Him, and worship is all about Him. Some modern spiritual songs are rather fatuous, but Michael W. Smith got it so right when he wrote, 'I'm coming back to the heart of worship and it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus. I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it, when it's all about You, It's all about You, Jesus'. Evangelical theology, as with its worship, appears to celebrate the fact that it is wide enough to embrace almost all reasonable Christian doctrines and practices, yet it seems to have lost focus on its centre, Jesus. If this lynchpin slips out of the axil the wheel comes flying off and the evangelical cart crashes!

A second key characteristic of true evangelicalism is the importance given to the church, the corporate expression of Christ on earth. Viola observes that 'the typical evangelical holds to the idea that the Christian life is an individual pursuit. "Church" is something Christians attend in order to be motivated to go out and serve as an individual Christian and live a strong individual Christian life. But those who have gone "beyond evangelical" believe that the church is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, Christ existing as community'. As a pastor, I am acutely aware of how so many Christians have an essentially consumerist mentality when it comes to the church. I am currently meeting regularly with a group of young church leaders and potential leaders. In our first session together I asked, 'what is the church to you?' and several of the answers were an expression of 'the church is my equipping centre', or 'the place where I learn to live the Christian life'. Of course it is all these things, but it is so

much more. After exploring this question, I asked 'what is the church to God?' A scripture that expresses part of the answer to this question is Acts 20:18 where Paul exhorts the elders of the church in Ephesus to 'be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.' Can something be more important than that?! We often speak of Christ dying for us as individuals, but this text speaks of Christ dying for us, the church. The church is the Body of Christ and we are part of that body. The church is very important to God and it should be important to us. I agree with Viola when he writes that, 'the Christian life doesn't work outside of a local, shared-life community that's meeting under the headship of Jesus Christ as His body on the earth. Consequently, how a local church functions and expresses itself is imminently important'.

Of course the book contains a lot more, and is well worth reading, particularly at a time when many thoughtful Christians are seeking to position themselves and their churches on the wide and often confusing landscape of 21st century Christianity.