



# CNI

## **Comment - LGBT's mirror on Evangelicalism**

Living most of my life and ministry in Northern Ireland, I have never been permitted to forget about evangelicalism. The legacy - positive and negative - of the Ulster Revival still resonates in this part of the island where the Scots Irish and Presbyterianism predominates.

The Irish historian Akenson carefully dissects the denominational impact of that revival phenomenon.

The Presbyterians were always ahead of the Church of Ireland and others in playing the evangelical card within their church structures and without it. Support for the church ensured the services of marriage and burial, if not baptism. However, it was often accompanied by support for a mission hall where the "true" gospel was preached. There was a suspicion that clergy who had attended theological college

and studied the scriptures formally were not really trusted to be on message with the hot gospel spirit. This capability of moving outside the structures and discipline of denominations is a characteristic of evangelicalism within all the mainstream protestant churches. That Evangelicals have a tendency to schism based upon their own yardstick is clearly identifiable.

Furthermore, in contrast to Akenson, few Irish historians have taken notice of the Irish border as a serious cultural divide. This especially effects those who have a golden-tinted view of a Gaelic homeland prior to Protestant plantations. Most of these historians Akenson states would benefit from reading Frieslander, Max Heslinga's "The Irish border as a cultural divide." (Frieslanders are the Ulstermen of the Netherlands!)

Max Heslinga was Professor of Geography at Utrecht and built up links with the Geography Department at Queen's, when I was a student there under the unsurpassable Eystn Evans who sits near the zenith of my personal indebtedness to academics. "The Prof" Evans was a human geographer who detected and uncovered the relationships between people, their society and the very soil which shaped them. If you have not

encountered “Mourne Country”, a treat awaits you.

Human geography and history easily shows how Evangelicalism, northern Irish style, was exported to America in particular and in turn Northern Ireland has been influenced by the reverse tide of its returning waters. Country and Western Gospel is only one part of that cultural trans-Atlantic whirlpool... a nightmare combination of Dolly Parton and Willie McCrea, the Paisleyite preacher, singer, politician, comes to mind!

The major motif, if not the governing story at the heart of evangelicalism, is the conversion narrative. Evangelicalism claims to be driven by the story of the gospel.

This evangelical ‘gospel’ is typically framed, not as Scripture frames it—as the historical story of God’s salvation accomplished in his Son through the public events of Christ’s incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and his return in glory—but as the ‘story’ of how the sinful individual can be saved in the present. It is the story of how Christ can become an active part of my personal biography, rather rather than an historical account that stands apart from my biography, which I must

enter as I die to myself and my old biography and become a part of Christ's life. The difference may appear subtle, but it is immensely significant.

In this evangelical version of the gospel, the conversion narrative leads to a particular understanding of the formation of the Christian's subjectivity. In a tradition that placed its primary accent upon the objective, historical narrative of God's work in Christ, Christians' subjectivity would principally be formed as they entered into a larger story outside of themselves and as this story shaped and identified them. By contrast, within evangelicalism, Christian subjectivity is effected chiefly from within, through the immediacy of the 'conversion experience'.

This interior deposition consequently leads to a suspicion of the place of the objective, external, and institutional dimensions of Christian faith—of creeds, confessions, theologies, liturgies, sacraments, rites, churches, etc. Rather than being valued as means of spiritual formation and incorporation into the life of Christ and his people, they are viewed as a sort of dead shell that surrounds the internal, living reality of Christian faith, residing purely in the believer's heart. Their sole value arises as they serve as means by which we *express* the

spiritual life within us. As one commentator states, “The sacraments and institutions of Christianity cease to be regarded as acting upon us to form us into a living body and start to be seen as mere public expressions of our private faith. I am baptized, not so that I might participate in and by formed by the life and death of Christ and his body more fully, but in order publicly to declare my personal and private belief.”

Evangelicalism places upon all within it a responsibility to fashion a spiritual identity from out of their own divinely-visited subjectivity. To be evangelical is to account for one's identity from out of one's own 'born again' spiritual experience and subjectivity and not in terms of membership or participation in some external institution or ritual. The typical evangelical narrative of conversion begins by establishing an antithesis between genuine Christian identity and 'external' identities—'I was raised in a Christian home and grew up attending a gospel-believing church but...' Rather than emphasizing an outward-looking affirmation of one's belief in the truth and saving power of the historical events of the gospel and the reliability of God's word and promise in the 'external' means of grace, the evangelical 'personal testimony' is

principally concerned with presenting a detailed account of one's arrival at a believing subjectivity. Evangelical identity is manifested and established through demonstrative piety, which is where the lure of emotionalism comes in.

My impression is that LGBT people challenge evangelicalism from an especial and ironic perspective. I am persuaded that there is an immense affinity between them. The content may radically differ, but the form of identity has great similarities. This affinity has considerable implications for understanding the character of evangelicalism's response to LGBT persons and to same-sex marriage. The following are three areas where the effect of this affinity can be felt. An evangelical academic has expressed it thus:

“First, evangelicalism lacks a robust account of institutions. It is ill-equipped to mount a strong defense of marriage when its own fundamental understanding of institutions has much in common with that of the LGBT community. If institutions are chiefly means by which we express our personal narratives and subjectivities, rather than larger ‘narratives’ that we enter, to which we subject ourselves, and by which we are formed, the case against same-sex

marriage is a much weaker one. Evangelicalism has long had a fraught relationship with institutions and their claimed authority over the individual and their spiritual consciousness. Placed in the position of having to defend an institution such as marriage, it lacks the requisite conceptual tools and categories.

“Second, when a movement finds its centre of gravity in individual subjectivity, it will face either the risk of a brittle bigotry, asserting the superiority of its own mode of subjectivity over all others, or a soft relativism, within which all subjectivities are treated as independent guardians of their own individual ‘truth’. Evangelicals have typically been tempted to the former. However, such a posture is difficult to sustain when one encounters well-intentioned people of radically different perspectives. The moment that genuine empathy occurs, it becomes very hard to sustain such a position. Young evangelicals are exposed to the subjectivities of LGBT persons in a way that their parents were not. As their initial bigotry crumbles (as it should) there is often nothing else to fall back upon.

“Third, the LGBT community and the same-sex marriage cause are advanced in large measure through emotional personal testimony and

stories of subjective self-realization. This is the language that evangelicals were raised upon and it can resonate with us. Evangelicals, having placed so much store upon the truth and the immediacy of the personal narrative and the value of unfeigned emotion, will face particular difficulties in considering how to respond to these.

“In responding to movements that are deemed to be unchristian within our culture, our habitual posture is one of direct and forceful rejection. We perceive our duty within such engagement solely to be that of defending the truth against error. In adopting such an approach, I believe that we miss one of the chief purposes of such challenges in God’s providence. In sparring with opposing positions, we can uphold the truth. However, we can also develop new strengths and, more importantly, can discover our own compromising weaknesses.”

As evangelicals respond to the LGBT movement, we should pray that they will do so self-reflectively. This is an opportunity to learn uncomfortable lessons about themselves, to discover how their ‘truth’ can rely upon little more than brittle bigotry, to discover how they have marginalized God’s story for the sake of their own, and how they have lost sight of the



blessing and authority of institutional means of Christian and social formation. As they come to a realization of the faults in others, they may find that they are seeing a mirror image of the faults in themselves.

Houston McKelvey