

Pragmatism Rules, OK?

Before I get to grips with the way Evans uses Scripture to justify his thesis, I must show how deeply pragmatism undergirds his thinking.

Let me make it clear what we are talking about:

Pragmatism: Dealing with a problem in a sensible way that suits prevailing conditions, rather than following fixed principles.¹

In blunt, but fair terms, we are talking about fixing on a course of action by what works.

On the issue in hand, the pragmatism I am concerned with is that of attempting to reach the lost – not by the principles and commandments of Scripture, but rather by what works. I accuse Relationship Evangelism of pragmatism. It depends heavily, not on revelation (that is, Scripture), but commercial best practice. Pragmatism!

Evans himself admits the risk:

Many are wary [of my scheme], fearing a theological sell-out to unfettered pragmatism or worse. People have rightly warned about ‘the numbers game’ and the subtle temptations associated with growing a church.²

Even so, Evans strides on! He comes to a section entitled ‘Principled pragmatism’³ – not quite an oxymoron, but not far removed from it. Pragmatism does rule for Evans! His book could have that as a subtitle: ‘Probable Success by Principled Pragmatism’. Instead of submitting to the Bible, Relationship Evangelism draws its practice from the best – that is, the most successful – practice wherever it can find it. Pragmatism!

This should cause no surprise. For, as I have said, Relationship Evangelism is a phenomenon unknown in

¹ *Cambridge Dictionary*.

² Evans p12.

³ Evans p91.

Scripture. As a consequence, its advocates are compelled to look outside the sacred volume for their principles and practice. Where can they go? They must look to the secular world; their guidance cannot come from Scripture; it can come only from the world. And so it proves.

Evans is a case in point. While his book may be a top-class management-manual – full of practical instruction on that score – my complaint about it is twofold. *First*, the church is not a body that ought to be subjected to ‘business management’: just as the Bible is unique and must not be treated as any common work, so the church is unique, and not subject to worldly principles. And, *secondly*, Evans’ work is overwhelmingly drawn from worlds other than Scripture. This is what I want to examine in this chapter.

Evans is quite open about his sources. As I have already noted, he started a seminar by saying he was going to be ‘unscriptural’ or, rather, ‘non-scriptural’.

And what about his book? Evans is clear: Scripture is not his fundamental source. In his chapter ‘Seek Wisdom’, he attempts to justify tempering the regulative principle by ‘the gaining of wisdom from external sources’. Evans calls on James Bannerman.⁴ This is most interesting. Sure enough, Bannerman delineated what might be regarded as the standard interpretation of the Westminster documents on the Regulative Principle. The Regulative Principle? Just this: that nothing must be done in the church unless it is prescribed in Scripture. But, of course, however highly exalted their intentions or well-meaning men might be, this is a fence too high to climb. The fact is, Scripture does not prescribe every last detail in every last matter. So how does this work out? Take preaching a discourse in the usually accepted meaning of the word. I am sure the New Testament warrants and governs the principles and practice of preaching, but it leaves us free to decide whether we preach at, say, 10 in the morning or 10:30. It does not tell us how many minutes a discourse should last. And so on. All this is left unspecified. What the New

⁴ Evans pp51-52.

Testament does not authorise us to do, however, is to decide whether or not we should preach, and whether or not we should preach Scripture or something other than Scripture.⁵

Evans gives us some examples of what he is talking about when he counsels his readers to ‘seek wisdom’:

...[including] examples of common-grace wisdom found in the comments made by two leading coaches [Clive Woodward and David Brailsford], both now knighted in recognition of the wisdom they have brought to their respective sports... Sir Clive Woodward... makes the point that winning the Rugby World Cup in 2003 was not just the game on the pitch, but about the food preparation, team rules that instilled in players a discipline of working for one another... and a thousand and one other things.⁶

And so to the application:

⁵ Hugh M.Cartwright set out his assessment: ‘James Bannerman puts this well: “Conscience has no right, and can possess no liberties, in opposition to the ordinances of him who is the Lord of the conscience. But the rights of conscience furnish a plea that may lawfully be urged in opposition to ordinances and ceremonies imposed by mere human authority and enforced by ecclesiastical power” [*The Church of Christ* Vol.1 p370]’ (Hugh M.Cartwright: ‘The Regulative Principle’). Bannerman depended on George Gillespie, who said: ‘The church is forbidden to add anything to the commandments of God which he has given unto us, concerning his worship and service (Deut. 4:2;12:32; Prov. 30:6); therefore she may not lawfully prescribe anything in the works of divine worship, if it be not a mere circumstance belonging to that kind of things which were not determinable by Scripture... But, in all the Scripture, princes [in the present climate, today’s teachers – DG] have neither a commendable example [laid down], nor any other warrant, for the making of any innovation in religion, or for the prescribing of sacred significant ceremonies [or practices – DG] of men’s devising’ (George Gillespie: ‘What is the Regulative Principle of Worship?’). See also E.Bennett Robinson: ‘How shall we now Worship? Applying the Regulative Principle’.

⁶ Evans p52.

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In a church worship meeting, for example,⁷ there are a lot of critical non-essentials. If the building is too cold, the sound system is poor, the seating uncomfortable, there's no welcome for visitors, and refreshments are non-existent – and so on – the ability to concentrate and engage will be affected. Are these things essential to salvation or the church accomplishing its goals? No. Are they a source of putting people off? Yes, they can be. Why put extra barriers in the way? The only barrier we want people to stumble over, if they stumble at all, is 'the offence of the cross' (Gal. 5:11). If aesthetic and environmental things can help or hinder, why not have a good look at what helps in your situation and do something about those things you can improve.⁸

And now for the second exemplar drawn from the world:

Sir David Brailsford, the architect of British cycling success in the 2012 Olympics talks about 'marginal incremental gains'. He points to the importance of working on improving a whole host of small things by a mere 1% margin... Add all these marginal gains up and the upshot was that UK cycling virtually swept the board of medals.⁹

Once again, the application:

So where are your 1% improvements going to be? Our church was challenged to do 1% more praying on a Saturday evening, take 15 minutes more out of the day to commit Sunday to God, and make 1% more smiles – it's amazing what a smiling face does to someone's sense of being welcomed! Finally we were encouraged to eat 1% more food – as long as it was with someone else during the week somewhere. Meals eaten with others make a difference. Read Tim Chester's excellent *A Meal with Jesus* if you're unsure of the missional value of food. Can't some of the wisdom of these two coaches be harnessed in your church?¹⁰

⁷ Do not miss 'church worship meeting'. Evans is perfectly happy – he wants – unbelievers to be active in 'church worship'.

⁸ Evans pp52-53.

⁹ Evans p53.

¹⁰ Evans p53. In a sermon preached by another of the leaders, Jon Putt, June 20th, 2014 (I was in the congregation), we were told that to be an effective team we must be prepared to change. Clive

But before he reaches this important chapter in his book, Evans has already cited the military historian, Richard Holmes and, through him, Marc Bloch, on the disadvantage of small groups in the army: ‘Similarly, small churches...’.¹¹ Evans also cites ‘Jim Collins, [who] in... a secular book on what causes large organisations to fail, speaks also to the church’. ‘Jim Collins, writing as a not-yet-Christian¹² in a secular context, nevertheless picks up on... what makes companies “great” ...’.¹³

It is on the basis of ‘common grace’ that Evans justifies the taking of advice from unbelievers as to how best to run Relationship Evangelism within the church:

Some [unbelievers] have great insights into overcoming problems, including problems with running an organisation... We can gain help by listening to wisdom where it is found

Woodward had attributed England’s success in the World Rugby Cup to this willingness (Jon Putt: ‘Mission: Relationships’).

¹¹ Evans p21.

¹² What a loaded way of putting it! Is there any evidence that Collins is converted or is going to be converted? If the latter, how does Evans know? I get the distinct impression that he is scratching around trying to justify his use of such men. ‘Jim Collins III is an American business consultant, author, and lecturer on the subject of company sustainability and growth’ (Wikipedia). On a wider issue, why does Evans seem to want to avoid using ‘unconverted’? He never uses the word in his book.

¹³ Evans pp41,78. ‘Collins spoke about his findings with former CT [Christianity Today] assistant editor Helen Lee. “Good to Great has struck a nerve with Christian leaders, who have latched on to your concept of Level 5 Leadership. Were you surprised by what your results showed about leadership?” “I am delighted that so many people in the Christian community resonate with the Level 5 concept. They probably feel tension between the brutal competitiveness of the outside world and their inner faith and being a type of person that the New Testament calls you to be. If you thought you had to be an anti-level 5 to be successful, but now you find this evidence that your instincts were right all along, that can be powerful...”’ (‘Good to Great’s Leadership Model Looks Familiar to Christians’, taken from the website of *Christianity Today*).

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[even from unbelievers]. Wisdom is not to be rejected if not specifically found in the Bible, for, as the word itself shows, we can benefit from the insights of others. The moral status of this kind of wisdom is always at the level of advice. It is not a binding moral imperative, but it is still important.¹⁴

When we come to Evans' section 'Learning from others',¹⁵ we read:

A few years ago, the British medical fraternity published research on what helped doctors make progress... Pastors also learn best from fellow practitioners. Though we should be rightly wary of cut-and-paste or plug-and-play approaches to church ministry, borrowing good ideas, wise structures and best practice from other churches and leaders can indeed help take the work forward.¹⁶

Yes, but how can we know what is 'best practice'? Before I deal with that, however, let me ask another question. Should believers be talking, in the first instance, about 'best practice'? I thought – I thought it was axiomatic – that believers talked in terms of 'right practice' and 'wrong practice'; 'biblical practice' or 'worldly practice'. Why this seismic shift to 'best practice'? But, in the interest of pursuing the point, let us assume that by 'best practice' Evans really means 'scriptural practice'.¹⁷ In this new system, however, I fear that the two are not the same.

Let me pursue this a little further. Where should we go to discover that 'best [that is, right] practice'? Scripture, of course. Where else? But does Evans say that? Where? Does he ever argue his case primarily from Scripture? Should he not give us clear, explicit, unequivocal direction as to how we can determine 'best practice'? The impression he gives, to me at least, is that 'best practice' is that which, in Relationship

¹⁴ Evans p51.

¹⁵ Evans p99.

¹⁶ Evans pp99-100.

¹⁷ Incidentally, in the same vein, while I have allowed the idea (Evans' idea) that 'pastors' (allowing that 'pastors' exist – see my *Pastor*) should be seeking this, in truth every believer should be seeking to know what Scripture teaches.

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Evangelism, works best – works best, that is, at meeting Christendom’s objective for the church, which Evans takes for granted. This has all the appearance of pragmatism and/or arguing in a circle. Evans assumes an unscriptural role for the church, sets up an unscriptural way of reaching that goal, uses non-scriptural sources to formulate and tweak the scheme, and finally uses non-scriptural criteria by which to measure the success of it all. According to Evans, pastors who are failing to meet the standard would be well advised to glance sideways, pick out from the ranks those pastors who have mastered the procedure and shown themselves to be ‘successful’ managers with a good (not to say outstanding) track record, and copy them. Hence, in Evans’ book we meet page after page of management techniques, organisation and evaluation... and all in the name of Christ.

True, within a couple of pages, Evans mentions the need for leaders to be sure they ‘are pulling in the right direction and reflecting the Bible’s teaching’. But where, in his book, is that teaching? Indeed, what is biblical teaching on Relationship Evangelism? Is the Bible full of instruction on the organisation and management of schemes to attract unbelievers to the church? In any case, is it enough for believers and churches to be ‘reflecting’ Scripture? How about ‘obeying’ it? Christ did not say: ‘If a man loves me, his life will reflect Scripture’. And I know of no text that says that the practice and methods churches adopt must *reflect* Scripture. Jesus speaks unequivocally, and without a tinge of compromise, in terms of commandments and obedience:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you... If you love me, you will keep my commandments... Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me... Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me... Abide in me... If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.

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These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you... These things I command you, so that you will love one another (John 13:13-15; 14:15,21,24; 15:4,10-14,17).

Yes, this applies to the individual first. Of course. But will anybody argue that, while the life of the individual believer must be governed by Christ's law, the life of the *ekklēsia* is exempt? As I read the New Testament, I come across apostolic command after apostolic command addressed to the churches. What is more, though it is an oft-neglected (or unknown) fact, most of the apostolic letters are addressed to 'you' in the plural, not the singular; in short, to the *ekklēsia*. We have, alas, over-individualised Scripture, with the consequent loss of its corporate emphasis.¹⁸ I do not in any way wish to degrade the individual application of Scripture, but I do assert that the *ekklēsia* is as much under Christ's rule and law as the individual believer.

Evans is clear about the way he came to Relationship Evangelism:

Though we [in the UK] live in one of the most economically advanced nations on earth, the social problems resulting from human sin don't go away. Only now are these problems on such a scale that even the government can't continue to fund the help that is needed.¹⁹ Social commentator Peter Hitchens remarks: 'Britain cannot possibly afford its welfare state for much longer...'... So, informed by all of this, we [at Kempston] began to organise deeds of kindness and ministries of mercy in a more deliberate way... People started to come. They spread the word about the benefits... After a couple of years, the workers were a bit worried that the church leadership would be asking: 'Where are the gospel

¹⁸ Of course, as I say, it begins with the individual.

¹⁹ If I understand Evans, the sentence would be better: 'Only these problems are now on such a scale that even the government can't continue...?'

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results?²⁰ But leaders have to give this time and not be driven by a quick return. As relationships were cemented, questions and opportunities arose which led to a few people initially, and then many, beginning the journey to faith.²¹

This is all perfectly clear. But where is Scripture?

As I have already observed, Evans gives the game away:

An MP once remarked to me that he'd love to see churches... grow to 1000 strong, for, he said, they do so much for the community. But he pleaded for us not to start ten churches of 100. He had worked out the economies of scale.²²

So much, for the moment,²³ for the MP and his reasons. We know what 'he'd love to see', what he's 'pleading for'. But what does Christ 'love to see'? What is Christ 'pleading for'? How can we find out?

Let me illustrate that, for Evans, pragmatism really does rule. Take what he calls 'key opinion-leaders'²⁴ in the church. Evans has a fair bit to say on these 'key opinion-leaders', by which he really means those who are 'key in enabling the church to come to the right opinion'. Let that sink in. 'Right opinion'. Who decides? How? It is clear that for Evans these 'key opinion-leaders' are the real source of control in the church. If the wrong man gets in that position, watch out for trouble. Evans records the advice he once offered a man:

An aspiring preacher once expressed to me a strong desire to go into full-time ministry. 'You do know it is all about

²⁰ Why weren't the workers asking this question of themselves and their system?

²¹ Evans pp172-174.

²² Evans p180.

²³ I will return to this MP.

²⁴ Judging by the number of appearances the word makes in his book, 'key' occupies an important place in Evans' lexicon. By the way, where in Scripture do we come across the criteria to guide us in the search for our 'key opinion-leaders'? Should we call in a top head-hunting agency? Who are these key workers? The Bible shows that God uses the oddest, weakest, most insignificant people to do seemingly small things which turn out to have a massive impact.

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conflict resolution in one form or another', I told him. 'The preaching is the nice part of the job'. Sadly many a pastor of a medium-sized church with a problematic history will know all about this. Often a power structure has developed, meaning that the key opinion-leader calling the shots is not the full-time worker, but the head of a clan or network who has been there for some time.²⁵

And when it comes to 'organising'²⁶ the church, leaders have to know how to make the best use of these 'key opinion-leaders', especially when it comes to using them to manipulate – yes, I use the word advisedly – manipulate church meetings to get the desired result:

Work with your key opinion-leaders. They are sometimes called 'gatekeepers'. Engage with them properly and they will help lead the majority. Often if those people are being helped forward, most of the last 16% or so will go forward too, resulting in a significant majority for most things.²⁷

'Manipulation' is the proper word for all this! Evans, not failing to sense the carnal sound of what he is saying, immediately leaps to damage limitation, but in so doing he forgets the sensible maxim that 'when one is in a hole, stop digging!':

Is this to negate all spiritual values, or the validity of arguments put fairly and well? Of course not. The above is not a commentary on the rights and wrongs of a case. The Bible decides that. Most of us know, however, that many decisions are about wisdom, preference and taste. People often vote on what they would or would not like, far more often than on what is morally absolute. This wisdom of how to take change forward brings some sanity, and churches can make progress without it all becoming rancorous.²⁸

Well? Evans:

²⁵ Evans p31.

²⁶ Another key word for Evans.

²⁷ Evans p59.

²⁸ Evans p59.

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Leaders have to be insightful and deliberate here. For there will always be movements and currents of ideas which may mean that ‘the whole will of God’ (Acts 20:27) might not be covered in a balanced way, or that church life merely reflects the newest thing to be embraced (or not!). Paul didn’t hesitate to ‘preach anything that would be helpful’, and made sure that all felt the challenge ‘to turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus’ (Acts 20:19-20).²⁹

And:

We must keep making the gospel the basis for meeting people’s deepest desires, and learn to grow beyond an immature basis for meeting them. Glynn Harrison, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Bristol, comments: ‘Most growing churches today positively *play* to our culture’s preference for informality and individuality’. He mentions authors Jennifer Twenge and Keith Campbell’s research into the current epidemic of narcissism, and their view that: ‘Today’s most successful churches have adapted cleverly to our self-oriented culture by front-ending their appeal to what people want’.³⁰

It cannot be gainsaid: in Evans’ scheme, pragmatism does rule, OK!

I can hear the protest: ‘Evans does use Scripture!’ And so he does. Let’s have a look at it. But before I do, I must reiterate my complaint. I am left with the distinct impression that Scripture comes a very poor second in Evans’ scheme of things. And this means that Evans’ work is wrong and dangerous. Scripture should come first. No! Scripture *must* come first. Everything else must come second, and a poor second at that – if anywhere at all.

²⁹ Evans p106.

³⁰ Evans p116.