

“I FIND EVANGELICALS BORING”

My husband was complaining—again—about evangelicals. He wasn't raised in that tradition as I was, and has a low tolerance for boredom. Yet, he tends to exaggerate and dramatize, so often I ignore this sort of outrageous meant-to-shock comment. This time, however, I decided to pursue the matter further. What follows here is a living room interview I conducted that Saturday morning.

Me: Why:

Him: Because they have *the* answers to ultimate questions.

Me: What's wrong with having answers?

Him: There's no humor in them. Finality leaves no breadth for going farther. It's superficial. Any variation occurs only as a matter of style.

Humor is a built-in contradiction. It is a way of expressing a truth of your inability to comprehend anything at all of importance.

Me: Then evangelicals are boring because they think they know “the truth”?

Him: Yes, and that sets them apart in a special way—they are “higher.” It is hard to talk to people who are on a mountaintop. Real conversation has to do with personal language. Unless I climb the mountaintop of theological categories and assumptions and speak into the microphone from the mountaintop where people hear the message of Final Victory, I have to stand in the valley of the shadow (of doubt) and yell up to the mountain.

And evangelicals relate to Biblical exegesis. Coming from a Jewish tradition, I recognize the value of the 2,000 years since Christ—the history of the Jewish people, of Christians and their theology and interpreters, and the necessity to study them, including the heretics. They are important, as well as the Bible.

Me: Is the Bible boring?

Him: No, the Bible itself is not boring, but evangelicals see the Bible through a particular pair of glasses—their “corrective lenses”—that have little importance to 20th century people. I can understand they may have been the right prescription when Wesley was using them, for example, but peoples' eyes change. Evangelicals continue to treat the glasses—*the way one looks at the Bible*—as Holy Writ itself. It is a dangerous symptom—making holy something that is only man's contraption: a way of thinking.

Also it is painful watching people walk into walls wearing those glasses. Worse, they walk into other people who are trying to see. I get the image of evangelicals as people who are out jogging, wearing those glasses, and running

into people who are trying—in their solitude—to see God. Joggers keep running them over.

Me: Whom do you *not* find boring?

Him: Specifically, someone who has respect for words. The history of our people is heightened and intensified by language.

Someone who pays a very moment-by-moment attention to life as it happens.

Someone who listens with an ear to learn and knows that she doesn't know as much as she might.

In general, anybody who doesn't use words too categorically, but in context and in time, and realizes words historically only have a place in time. Words are volatile, and if taken out of time, become sterile.

Evangelicals have not only taken words too far, but think completely out of time. Gospel Blimp Heads.

We all do this to words, because we carry a personal history and it becomes sacred. In the Jewish story, words are not so important as *the events to which they point*. In the evangelical perspective, words got codified. And evangelicals began to build a mountain, a Babel, something theoretical.

Poets by word and memory relive history. They sense that language can bring with it more than just a shadow. Evangelicals ask language to do something inappropriate—to bring life. Language only brings a description of this. Logos—a wonderful word, but a central problem.

In poetry, the concept of the exact words and the meaning of the poem are not so important as the “breath” of the poem, both materially and spiritually. Poems breathe in a certain way, even materially. God does love our bodies, which (are) matter. And there is also the spiritual level of breath. Words are not a machine. They breathe and live in history as we do. All words *do it*.

It is hard for anyone to use words humbly. Evangelicals take this a step farther. They grind words up, like sand, to make their glasses. They put words on. They see through words, see reality through a pattern of words.

Me: In a way, you seem to be saying that evangelicals are shortsighted—they are “wearing the wrong glasses,” is your expression. And this near-sightedness cuts them off from an important connection to history.

Him: This relates to their identification with America. America is a wonderful breeding ground for evangelicals. America doesn't have a history. We crossed the ocean. We have our own American history based on the machine. Memory

banks. We can skip the entire European experience except for a little sentiment. In general, evangelicals have cut off the whole of Europe.

America has built its educational system on anti-intellectualism. Evangelicals are pseudo-intellectuals at best, anti-intellectuals at worst, because they stop short by answering. Language is a form of math to them.

Western culture is relegated to the "old man." The American experience is seen as new—the "new Adam." People like Emerson could get away with that, but. . .

There is a brand of evangelicalism coming now through the New Oxford Movement infiltrating Western culture. I think these evangelicals are going at it "arse backwards," because they come into Western culture with the Truth, with answers. This results in their reading history two-dimensionally, like a laser beam.

Intellectually, one may not have a mountain to stand on. We are not to stand at the peak of history and say, "I have overcome." One must move into history with a sense of awe and respect for people.

Me: I notice many evangelicals are now turning Episcopalian. Are these persons—like those in the New Oxford Movement—rediscovering a European connection, a catholicity of faith?

Him: Evangelical Episcopalians are still two-dimensional, in my judgment. They don't want to get their minds dirty in historical contradictions. They want instant history (very English, of course), a shot of ritual as long as it's correct (Biblical). It goes with the money. "Take the money and Donne."

Me: We are living now in "the era of the evangelical" in this country. That being the case, you must be *especially* bored!

Him: Not just bored. Alarmed, too. I am frightened by my observation that evangelicalism seems born out of a contemporary sense of ego alone. Ego has a way of repressing. Something particularly dangerous is occurring now in relation to heroism and authority, which are tied in certain ways to Fascism. This is based on a higher development of sexual repression, human contact ego-fried into the other.

A problem with sex in evangelicalism (and in America in general) is that it cannot be controlled. It is like Chaos. Evangelicals need badly to control, to be "little Fuhrers."

The saintliness of evangelicals is related to heroism in the classical male tradition. We are to be "armored against the world." We put on a uniform of

piety. This constricts the flow of deeper dimensions of love. It is the absence of love that alarms me.

And I'm afraid that the evangelicals' minds are set. They have it. The sun has gone down, right on top of their heads. Which precludes development, or the need for it except down the line of the "normal."

Me: What if this article proves to be boring?

Him: To me, "boring" refers to the sameness of things. Another use for the word "boring" is to indicate, "not understanding." That is a different thing. It's a shutdown. Being bored because I cannot understand is different from being bored because I understand all too well.

Me: What makes you think you understand evangelicals so well?

Him: It takes one to know one.

Note: In submitting this article for publication in *The Other Side* magazine at that time, I wanted to claim my title as author was "Gloria Gadfly, a self-appointed staff correspondent for a publication named *Yet Another Side*. She and her husband recently joined the Episcopalian Church."