

Would Jesus have Condemned Evangelicals as Pharisees?

By [Simon Vibert](#)

Recent criticisms of Evangelicalism have included an accusation that modern evangelicals would have been on the receiving end of Jesus' rebuke in the same way and for the same reasons that the Pharisees were in His own day. Is such a charge justified? Does modern evangelicalism display the worst of Pharisaism?

Yes?

1) Evangelicals are always in danger of overvaluing received tradition

This is thought to be especially the case when you put the adjective "conservative" in front of Evangelical. The Pharisees loved their long flowing robes, their ostentatious prayers, their pomp and ceremony. But they were condemned by Jesus for letting go of the commandments of God and holding onto the traditions of men (Mark 7).

Evangelicals today are castigated, not as those who hold to pompous tradition in terms of clothing, liturgy or ceremony, but rather as those who hold to apparently outdated views on the role of women and practising homosexuals in the life of the church community. In other words, the charge is not against their religious ceremony but rather over their adherence to traditional views of Church order and sexual ethics. Indeed evangelical churches tend to have little time for fussy liturgy, vestments or ostentation. However they do believe that tradition and reason are subservient to Scripture and that the Bible is still normative for Christian life.

2) Evangelicals view Scripture as utterly reliable and infallible so there is always a danger of legalism.

The Pharisees were condemned by Jesus for washing the outside of the dish but failing to clean the inside; for tithing their herbs but neglecting justice, mercy and faithfulness. And thus they are castigated as being "blind guides" (Matthew 23). Surely a more enlightened approach would be to sit a little looser to the teaching of Scripture?

However, was it not Jesus who spoke about every jot and tittle being fulfilled? Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees was not over their desire to keep the law, but rather their expectation that by narrowing it down to external matters of conduct and ceremony they could think that they had fulfilled it. Hence, Jesus

points out the full responsibility of keeping and teaching the law – going to issues of the heart as well as of conduct (Matthew 7:27-48). As Article VI states, Evangelicals believe that whatsoever is not written in Holy Scripture is not required of anyone.

3) *Evangelicals are seen as joy-killers and finicky rather than celebrating the richness of the life God has given.*

Rather than bringing liberty to their followers, the Pharisees were accused of “tying heavy loads on men’s shoulders” and not lifting a finger to relieve their burden.

The joy of the good news of Jesus is not freedom from obligation or worship. Rather the joy offered in the Gospel is that of being in tune with the living, creating, redeeming God. This is at the heart of evangelical faith.

4) *Evangelicals demand moral purity but don’t keep it themselves nor realise the complexity of living in the real world and thus are subject to the charge of hypocrisy*

Jesus warned the crowds to do what the Pharisees tell them to do, but not to hold up as models to follow, for they do not practice what they preach (Matthew 23:3). They are hypocrites.

Evangelicals have had their fair share of scandal associated with the movement. However, in Evangelical churches corporate and individual sin is most likely to be confessed. Personal holiness flows from a self-awareness about the state of the human heart, which is more likely to help avoid hypocrisy. As the Church sign wisely says: “You’re not so bad you have to stay out; you’re not so good you can’t afford to come in”.

No?

1) *Evangelical faith has the worship of Jesus at its heart.*

One of the features of many Evangelical Churches I have been in is a desire to worship Jesus. I find the reality of living faith which is focussed, not on rules and regulations, but on a heartfelt engagement with God. Surely this is one of the reasons why Evangelical churches are growing? People are hungry to meet God, and they find Him in many of our evangelical congregations. Relationship with him matters more than tradition.

2) *Evangelical faith is fully inclusive.*

To be inclusive does not mean that all people get to heaven irrespective of their genuine repentance and personal faith in Christ. To believe that would make them, not Evangelicals, but Universalists. To be truly inclusive means to say to a sinful person, such as the women Jesus encountered in John 8, “Neither do I condemn you” plus “go and sin no more”. This is the inclusive love that is found in the Gospel. It involves acceptance by Christ but also with a mandate to live, under God, a reformed life. The Gospel demands telling people of their danger outside of Christ, but their full acceptance in Christ.

3) Evangelical faith has been at the forefront of social reform.

We recall that members of the so-called Clapham Sect were not only key players in social movements such as the abolition of slavery but they were genuine pietists who saw national reformation as the overflow of a godly life. The statue in St Paul’s Cathedral speaks of William Wilberforce as one who exuded the “abiding eloquence of a Christian life”. Christ’s lordship over all demands celebration of all that is good in his world.

4) Evangelical faith is realistic about the pervasiveness of human sin affecting body, mind and soul, but at the same time takes seriously the Bible’s call to live a blameless life.

Personal holiness is at the heart of Evangelical faith, and like those notorious Corinthians evangelicals know for themselves “such were some of you”. Evangelical faith recognises both: that we are more sinful than we ever previously believed **and** we are more loved than ever we could have imagined. Christian communities are made up of notorious sinners who have been “washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Conclusion

Of course, it is wrong to assume that Jesus was uniformly critical of the Pharisees, and much of their “separatism” was motivated by a desire to live pure lives in an impure world. However, Jesus did say that our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Pharisees if we are to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:19-20). Surely this means that the Pharisees were wrong to reduce the obedience which God requires of us to mere external, manageable amounts? True righteousness goes much further. And there is a warning to all that the breaking of God’s commandments, and worse, teaching others to do so, earns the attribute of “least in the kingdom of God”. The Sadducees likewise are in error because they do not know the Scriptures or the power of God (Matthew 22:19).

Commitment to the Evangel is a commitment to God, for the true custodians of the faith are those who cherish the God who we meet in Jesus in the pages of His word. Pharisaism is not far from every heart when it presumes to sit over God's word rather than under it; when it fails to worship Jesus and is not passionate about sharing His message to a lost and needy world. It is a loving thing to warn the world of the reality of their eternal plight and how to prepare for it! For that reason I am happy to be called an evangelical, and suspect that Jesus is rather pleased too!

— Revd Dr Simon Vibert, Vicar St Luke's Wimbledon Park

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).