

A rose is a rose – or is it?

By Ed Fowler

Language is a fluid thing. A word may mean today something very different from what it meant yesterday.

Take “evangelical.” We have understood it to designate a class of Christians. They are not typically members of the mainline churches which present Jesus Christ as a moral teacher and the Bible as a metaphorical guide to righteous living. Neither are they fundamentalists who wrench one verse or short passage from its moorings and build their theology on the interpretations that result.

An evangelical, then, has been one who believes the Bible to be inspired by God and true in its particulars regarding history and science and its truth to be accessible when Scripture is taken as a whole.

But is that what the word means today?

Nicholas D. Kristof began a column in The New York Times this way: “At a New York or Los Angeles cocktail party, few would dare make a pejorative comment about Barack Obama’s race or Hillary Clinton’s sex. Yet it would be easy to get away with deriding Mike Huckabee’s religious faith.”

These sentences introduce a Kumbaya moment in which the columnist chastises his fellow liberals for not recognizing how much they have in common with today’s evangelicals, who are no longer “moralizing blowhards” who demonstrate “more compassion for embryonic stem cells than for the poor or the sick . . .” He goes on, “Today, many evangelicals are powerful internationalists and humanitarians – and liberals haven’t awakened to the transformation.”

Can’t we all just get along?

Clearly, something has changed. What has changed is the definition of evangelical.

Kristof notes approvingly the finding of a CBS News poll that white evangelicals are now more concerned with fighting poverty than with abortion. Indeed, exit polling in several primary states has shown significant numbers of voters who classify themselves as evangelicals to be Obama backers. Obama, like Clinton, is an abortion advocate. Under the new definition, then, it is possible to be both an evangelical and one who condones abortion.

Abortion is a sin. Christians should certainly re-enact the compassion of Christ in his world. What they just as certainly should not do is condone what God condemns. Sin separates us from God and God’s purpose in history is to reconcile his creation to himself.

Kristof is celebrating an elevation of Christian compassion vis-a-vis a diminished concept of sin. If evangelicals are less sin-sensitive, they and liberals can be friends.

Biblically, God's love and his condemnation of sin are not in conflict. Both are real and true and holy. They are interdependent. God's love can find its perfect expression in the world only when sin is finally eliminated. His people are charged both with expressing compassion and combating sin, not one to the detriment of the other.

Kristof writes, "The new face of evangelicals is somebody like the Rev. Rick Warren, the California pastor who wrote 'The Purpose Driven Life.'" Kristof quotes Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California, as saying, "I couldn't care less about politics, the culture wars. My only interest is to get people to care about Darfurs and Rwandas."

Everyone can certainly applaud the work against disease and hunger he has led in Africa. Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry. He empowered his apostles to recreate his miracles. But neither he nor they ever lost sight of the purpose of those acts of compassion. They were done to reveal the power of God, this God whose love for mankind is so great that he sacrificed his Son to save us from the penalty for our sins. It's worth remembering that it was Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

Once again, God's love transcends finite human understanding. He saves us from the travails of this life to demonstrate his power to save us from the terrors of an eternity separated from him. Put another way, AIDS is terrible and temporary; hell is more terrible and eternal.

God offers redemption only on an individual basis: Trust in Christ's atoning death on the cross as the payment for your sins and be saved. He makes no provision for collective redemption or for self-salvation. Each sinner must confront his inability to find redemption anywhere but the cross. For that to happen, he must come to terms with the terrible destructiveness of sin. Any theology that diminishes the force of sin for any reason betrays God.

If Warren is using "politics" and "culture wars" as code to dismiss Christian concern for the effects of abortion and homosexuality he has truly made himself a friend of those political liberals who have no time for discussion of sin and hell. We must pray that he is not. The Saddleback Church website condemns both abortion and homosexuality in uncompromising language. This is a heartening sign but his message is mixed because they are certainly flashpoints in the culture wars, from which Christians may not withdraw if we are to be faithful to Scripture. Engaging the world is our calling, especially when it brings the scorn of the world down on us.

So it has ever been. Almost a century ago, Henry Barclay Swete wrote of the early church, "Her separateness was due, not, as the heathen supposed, to hatred of mankind, but to hatred of the evil with which heathen society was everywhere permeated . . . She was intensely conscious of possessing the Spirit of holiness." We do not have the option of being less so today.

Catholics charge Protestants with a cruel irony. They maintain that splintered Protestants, while standing on Scripture as the sole authority for their faith, have given it so many meanings apart from a single source of interpretation that it has no meaning at all. This is an indictment not easily dismissed. Even the same Protestant sometimes seems to jumble his messages.

So, who is an evangelical today? It's often hard to say, but if "evangelical" can encompass embrace of abortion a dwindling number of us must now search for a new word.