

The Evangelical Mind

Pick Your Trenches

By Richard Mouw

She was writing a news story on the debates over "same sex unions" in the mainline churches, and she needed a few lines from an evangelical on the subject.

I think she was fighting a deadline--she seemed in a bit of a hurry. I too was having a busy day, and I had no desire to make the interview go longer than necessary. But when she used the word "entrenched," I knew I had to slow things down a bit.

Here is how it came up. She was describing some things that the Protestant defenders of "same sex unions" were saying, and she regularly referred to their views as "progressive." Then she asked me for my response: "So, what would you say from a more, um, how shall I say it--a more entrenched position?"

At that point, I insisted that we talk a little about labeling systems before I was willing to give her the quotations she needed.

I can understand how she could come up with the "entrenched" label. Earlier, she had used the word "conservative" to describe people like me, and I had not protested. When you admit that you want to "conserve" some things from the past, it is not silly for someone to think that you are one of those people who digs a trench and attempts to hold the ground at all costs. So "entrenched" is not so farfetched a term.

But I still do not like the label very much. The ironic thing was that only a few days earlier, another journalist was interviewing me about new patterns of worship. Many evangelicals are sponsoring "seeker sensitive" church services these days, where many of the traditional forms of worship have been replaced by rock bands, "praise choruses," dramatic skits, and sermons delivered by pastors wearing blue jeans and T-shirts.

In this interview, I was the one who was saying good things about change, about trying new things. And it just so happened that my views about worship were being compared with many of the same folks who defend "same sex unions"--except when it came to questions about worship they were the ones who were resisting change. But the reporter who was writing about worship did not think to describe those leaders as "entrenched."

To the degree that the "entrenched" label does apply to people like me, it also applies to the folks that we disagree with on important matters. If it is fair to say that some of us dig trenches, then we should be clear about the fact that we all do it--and we all do it selectively.

For example, some Protestants want to relegate the ancient creeds of the church to theological museums; others of us want to conserve them as living testimonies. You might want to describe us as entrenched on this subject. When we get into an argument with many of those same Christians about abortion-on-demand, though, some of us want to set aside *Roe v. Wade*, while the pro-choicers start digging their own trenches. And we can multiply examples.

The "left" wants to conserve affirmative action policies; the "right" wants to progress beyond these practices. But the "right" digs trenches in defending prayer in the public schools, while the "left" sees religious neutrality as a sign of progress. And so on.

The reporter who described me as "entrenched" on the question of same-sex unions had a point of sorts. But trench digging is not a practice that takes place only on one side of the ideological spectrum. No one simply wants to "progress," no matter what the particular cause is. Nor does any of us really want to be on the "conserving" side of every argument about whether to change.

All this does make me wonder, however, whether it would not be better to rely on some different metaphors in our attempts to sort out the ways in which we disagree on important subjects. Trench digging is a rather militant activity. The biblical writers provide an alternative picture in emphasizing the notion of a journey. The Psalms, especially, make much of this theme: To be a proper worshipper of God is to walk a certain kind of path, to follow a special "way." Here is a nice example from Psalm 119: "I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding."

Each of us is on a journey through life. It is important, biblically speaking, that we find the right "way." In this context, it is not a good thing to dig too many trenches. It may be necessary, of course, to engage in a battle on occasion--I do not want to rule out the realities of "culture wars." But these divert us from the important business of moving along on the "way" we have chosen.

And we should be clear about the fact that we do choose the paths that we walk. To encourage same-sex unions and abortion-on-demand is to walk a different "way" than to discourage such things. We need to talk about our choice of paths. Dialogue about these matters is of great importance. It is even good and necessary to argue about such things.

But we can do so by walking together for a while, talking as we go. In that sense, we can all be "progressive." And we can avoid digging too many trenches.