

Faith Pulpit

Another Look at the New Evangelicalism

In the late 1940s there was a move by some leaders within conservative Protestantism toward a new kind of evangelicalism. It expressed dissatisfaction with fundamentalism (note Carl Henry's book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, published in 1947, as well as Harold Ockenga's inaugural address at the founding of Fuller Seminary that same year). Its new evangelicalism differed from the older fundamentalism in several ways.

As their movement developed, some of these differences surfaced immediately and others more gradually. The overall difference could be noted as a change from recognizing the essential importance of doctrinal conviction and practice with a call to defend the truth, to a less precise view of doctrine, with an emphasis upon personal relationships, and a softened attitude toward (or capitulation to) the world's way of thinking and doing.

It's not that historic orthodox doctrine was generally denied initially. Rather, a more relaxed attitude developed which tolerated doctrinal and positional variations. Thus, Bernard Ramm could write an editorial in *Eternity* magazine about "Green Grass Evangelicals"— "the new breed of evangelical theology but not committed to the older bromides of previous generations."¹

"Green-grass evangelicals are not interested in doctrinal questions like 'eternal security.' To them such issues are too academic . . . The real business of Christianity is living the Christian life . . . [They] are not much interested in prophecy or the millennium or details about the tribulation. That is all future. It will be fulfilled as it will be fulfilled. So why so much concern about settling details about something that hasn't happened yet? Furthermore, so much can be done now for Christ it is a pity to waste time, energy and print over something yet to happen! . . . [They] believe that debates over Scripture (infallibility, inerrancy) pay no great dividends. They are more experience-centered."¹

This New Evangelical theologian concludes his description of the new breed with this advice: “My recommendation is, Don’t fight them! Try some of that very old virtue, humility, to see what we can learn from this new breed of evangelicals.”¹

And another example of this early toleration is noted in Christianity Today magazine, in a news article on ten evangelical Christians who spent a weekend of dialogue with Moonies at the Unification Theological Seminary in Barrytown, New York. The article states that when they met for their final session, “Convener [Richard] Quebedeaux, in an emotionally charged speech, admitted that he had not been enthusiastic about his first encounter with the U. C. seminary students last March. But, said he, two visits to the seminary had changed his mind. ‘I’ve never seen a place where agape has worked out so well,’ he said. ‘Theologically, doctrinally, I think you’re wrong. Emotionally, I think you’re right . . . You may be heretics—I’ll let God decide that. But I love you, and I believe the world is a better place because of you.’” A Moonie responded similarly, expressing respect and love for the evangelical participants. The gathering concluded with a period of spontaneous prayer led by Moonies and evangelicals alike. “One evangelical seemed to sum up the sentiments of a number of his colleagues as he offered a farewell comment; ‘I’m going back and telling everyone I found real Christian fellowship in Barrytown.’”²

Specific issues on which the new evangelicalism differed from fundamentalism included (1) the proclamation of a “gospel” which was social as well as spiritual; (2) rejection of the traditional dispensational approach which stressed the spiritual and evangelistic aspects of the Great Commission as the defining duty of believers in this age; (3) a dismissal of the fundamentalist concept of separating from unbelievers and disobedient brethren in religious cooperative endeavors, and an emphasis on infiltration into the major denominations and cooperative ecumenical evangelism; (4) an enchantment with contemporary “scholarship,” which desires respectability from the unsaved academic community; (5) a toning down of differences between contemporary leaders in science and the Bible’s teaching regarding creation and the universal flood at the time of Noah, resulting in a toleration of evolutionary views of the earth’s creation; (6) rejection of fundamentalist emphases on lifestyle standards and personal holiness, resulting in a “liberating” attitude toward (or caving in to) the world’s attitude toward contemporary cultural issues; (7) an embarrassment with the concept of biblical inerrancy and the toleration of higher criticism; (8) the development of a neutral or positive attitude toward charismatic experience as noted in their broad acceptance and tolerance of the Charismatic Movement.

Today, as we are now in the twenty-first century, and a few generations separate us from the beginnings of the new evangelicalism, there are some from within fundamentalist circles who are saying, “New evangelicalism was at one time a reality, but today it is non-existent (or at least, not a formidable foe any longer).” Is this really an accurate statement? The answer is an emphatic “No!” The issue is not the term new evangelicalism. Terms come and go. The question is, “Are the issues and attitudes raised by the new evangelicalism gone?” And, again, the answer is an emphatic “No!”

Neo-evangelical thinking is seen today in the following areas.

- (1) The rapid rise of the church marketing movement from the early 1990s to the present, with its emphasis upon relationships and experience, drama and contemporary music, to reach and hold people. The Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington , Illinois , has a Willow Creek Association of many other churches (into the hundreds) which are following the Willow Creek model.
- (2) The positive response of evangelicals to the programs and ministry of Robert Schuller and his Crystal Cathedral.
- (3) The broad acceptance (or at least toleration) of the Contemporary Christian Music movement and rejection of fundamentalism's personal separation standards, so that Charisma magazine could write that "British Christians Use Techno-Dance to Reach Youth." The article talked about alternative worship services, evangelistic night clubs, and "a revolutionary Christian dance movement." In describing this movement, the article said that "strobe lighting, smoke effects, DJs, dancers, Celtic music and tribal rhythms were served up for this worship feast. The trend can be found everywhere."³
- (4) The influence of the apologetic writings and lecturing of Dr. Hugh Ross, who teaches that the earth is billions of years old and began with a "big bang," that death and degeneration existed in the beginning and have continued for billions of years, and that neither the fall to sin nor the Flood resulted in significant physical changes in nature.
- (5) The positive attitude of many evangelicals toward the Charismatic Movement, especially as seen in the signs-and-wonders movement.
- (6) The acceptance of religious teachers and institutions which have not held the line on belief in eternal punishment. Fuller Seminary modified its doctrinal statement in this area, and individuals like Clark Pinnock have opened the door to the idea that people can hear the gospel after death and have a chance to respond positively, or that hell is simply annihilation.
- (7) The hearing being given in evangelical circles to "the openness of God" concept which rejects His absolute foreknowledge, among other things.
- (8) The toleration by some evangelicals— especially in academic settings—of deviant sexual lifestyles, particularly homosexuality.
- (9) The willingness of evangelical publishers to publish works which allow for aspects of higher critical views of the Bible, including redaction criticism, in interpreting the life of Christ in the Gospel accounts.
- (10) The broad acceptance of the Promise-Keepers movement, even though it tolerates working with Roman Catholics and has strong charismatic overtones.

(11) The willingness of major evangelical leaders to sign their names to the Evangelicals and Catholics Together⁴ document, and still others to sign the later statement entitled The Gift of Salvation.⁵ Although traditional differences (including sacramentalism) are recognized, there is a willingness to call each other “brothers in Christ.”

(12) The belief by some evangelicals that the Head of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope, is an evangelical.

If those attitudes and issues do not seem to be of such concern today, it is only because the new evangelical position has become mainstreamed into many Bible-believing circles to the extent that speaking against them puts one in a rather small minority. Issues such as ecumenical evangelism are still very significant today, but we hear little about them because many whose voices might at one time have spoken out in opposition have been quieted by a changed or at least a relaxed position. The new evangelical attitude has become so prevalent that one may be tempted to tolerate it as inevitable and normal.

Although addressing doctrinal and positional issues is not all that Christian leaders should be doing, it is one such important thing (note Paul’s admonition to the Christian leaders in Ephesus [Acts 20:25–31] and Jude’s comments in his brief letter [Jude 3–5, 7–21]). Specific terms and titles may change, but there are always those from without and from within about whom the warning alarm needs to be sounded. This is biblical militancy. The issues and attitudes expressed by leaders within the new evangelicalism over the last 50 years are still important enough for biblical fundamentalists to address today. God’s people must be informed and educated; they need to know where we as contemporary Christian leaders stand on these very significant topics.

Works Cited

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