

## EVANGELICALS AT A CROSSROADS

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In January 1984 I was invited to participate in an inter-religious forum sponsored by the U.S. National Council of Churches at the Greenbrier Resort Hotel in Sulpher Springs, West Virginia.

“Evangelicals” – the designation is admittedly ambiguous. In parts of Europe and in Latin America it is merely a synonym for Protestants. During the past generation or so, however, it has come to be used more narrowly to identify those Christians, conservative in doctrine, who emphasize the primacy of the Bible as the inspired word of God, who insist on the need for a personal relationship with Christ through conversion and new birth, and who are strongly committed to evangelism and missionary endeavor.

These Christians are among the fastest-growing branches of Christianity in our time. This is one of the hidden surprises in David Barrett’s monumental *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press, 1982). Barrett projects that by mid-1985 evangelicals will number nearly 270 million -- 17½ percent of the global Christian community. (As a point of comparison, all four branches of Eastern Orthodoxy comprise just under 11% of the world’s Christians.)

This impressive figure of 270 million includes six main sub-groups: conservative evangelicals, conciliar evangelicals, fundamentalists, black evangelicals, Anglican evangelicals, and most Pentecostals. There is some overlap between the groups.

*Conservative* evangelicals are formally united within the World Evangelical Fellowship. They “fly the flag” and in certain important ways constitute the core group of evangelicalism. *Conciliar* evangelicals maintain their membership in churches belonging to the World Council of Churches. *Fundamentalists* (here taken to include Southern Baptists) comprise an independent “right wing” of the broader evangelical movement. *Black evangelicals* are essentially an American phenomenon. *Anglican* evangelicals constitute a long recognized fellowship within a major world communion. Most Pentecostals (though not all “neo-Pentecostals) identify themselves as evangelicals.

Although evangelicals make up a significant minority within the total Christian community, their size, of course, is

not as important as their overall contribution. Many observers would agree that evangelicals have contributed and are contributing substantially to the quality of Christian life during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an age of nominalism they have preserved the warm, pietistic values of earlier generations. In an age of relativism, evangelicals have upheld a rational theology firmly grounded in Scripture. In an age of social activism they have continued to demonstrate the efficacy of gospel proclamation. And in an era of religious pluralism evangelicals have not lost sight of the Church's missionary mandate.

All this is to be expected, perhaps, given the conservative nature of the movement. Less predictable has been the way evangelicals have responded creatively to the special challenges of our generation. Among these challenges and responses, seven are particularly notable.

1. Wycliffe Bible Translators, an evangelical agency founded in 1934, has become the largest Protestant missionary society in the world. Under the aegis of Wycliffe more than 2,500 missionaries are at work reducing languages to writing and translating the Bible among 700 "people groups" (see below). Their's is a major contribution to global Christianity, notwithstanding the fact that nearly 3,300 languages and dialects remain to be translated.

2. For the past 50 years also evangelicals have both pioneered and excelled in exploiting the potential of electronic mass media, first radio and more recently, television. Today the gospel message penetrates the so-called iron and bamboo curtains effectively, as countless letters from these areas attest. In addition, radio has become an important adjunct in the teaching and evangelistic ministries of Third World churches. In the West the ubiquitous "electronic church" has become an object of both praise and criticism, but its influence is unquestioned. Not exactly a mass medium, I should also mention the growing influence of evangelicalism's flagship journal, *Christianity Today*.

3. The relatively soft science of sociology has been utilized creatively by evangelicals to develop contemporary approaches to church growth. Emphasizing the "homogenous unit principle," (people convert more easily to Christian faith when cultural barriers are minimized) evangelical missiologists have launched new efforts among previously unreached "people groups" – a people group being defined as a significantly large collection of individuals and families who perceive themselves to have a common affinity to one another. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

and the U. S. Center for World Mission have been prominent in promoting the drive to reach unreached people groups.

4. "Third World missions" is another creative response arising from within the global evangelical community. Third World missions are cross-cultural discipling endeavors by members of the evangelical churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America. They have mushroomed in recent years. Now numbering more than 32,000, Third World missionaries are expanding their areas of service rapidly. Some see them as the missionary wave of the future. The World Evangelical Fellowship has been instrumental in bringing together key Third World missionary leaders for mutual edification and joint action.

5. Disaster relief and community development has been another creative response to the exigencies of modern life. Evangelical agencies such as World Vision, Tear Fund, and World Relief are among the very largest private voluntary organizations at work in the world today.

6. Since the publication of Carl F. H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947), and partly in response to the pressure of Third World concerns, evangelicals have made substantial progress in reintegrating social action and evangelism. The Lausanne Congress of 1974, when evangelicals from the Third World succeeded in bringing this issue to the forefront, was a watershed event. The relationship between evangelism and social action is still being hotly debated among evangelicals, but an emerging consensus was evident at the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (1983), co-sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. More recently, evangelicals in Great Britain and the United States have begun publishing *Transformation*, a journal for dialogue on social ethics. This trend toward a more holistic understanding and application of the gospel is welcomed by many in the evangelical community and beyond.

7. Evangelicals have made positive contributions in the area of international cooperation. The Billy Graham crusades continue to unite Christians across denominational lines in major cities in all six continents. The Lausanne Congress not only capped off three decades of growing cooperation between evangelicals in Europe and North America, but also introduced a new generation of Third World evangelical leaders to the public and spawned a host of joint evangelistic enterprises.

Going beyond evangelism, the World Evangelical Fellowship has brought together, especially during the past

ten years, Western and Third World theologians, communicators, development specialists, and missiologists in a variety of evangelical forums. At the same time, the World Evangelical Fellowship has expanded its grass-roots network to include national evangelical associations in more than fifty countries. Evangelicals have also been reaching out, rather tentatively, to Christians in other sectors of the world church. Small ad hoc groups have dialogues with representatives of the World Council of Churches. Serious theological discussions have been held, without publicity, between evangelical leaders and Roman Catholic dignitaries.

So by virtue of their growth and contributions evangelicals can claim to be a significant clan within the global Christian family. In certain respects they are stronger now than at any time since the famed 1910 Edinburgh Conference. Their colleges and seminaries, though not as well-endowed as some, are bursting at the seams. They are producing a limited but growing number of respected Third World leaders. They are more socially conscious than ever. Their future seems assured.

Yet in reality evangelicals are at a crossroads. One road is fraught with risk but replete with opportunities. The other is relatively safe but ends in a cul-de-sac. One way forward frees evangelicals to interact creatively with other sectors of the Christian community, but carries with it the possibility of blurring evangelical distinctives. The other route seems more likely to safeguard evangelicalism as an ideology, but perpetuates the fortress mentality that has plagued evangelicals throughout this century.

In mid-1980 the World Council of Churches held a major international conference on world mission and evangelism in Melbourne, Australia. Just three weeks later the Lausanne committee for World Evangelization sponsored an international consultation on unreached peoples at Pattaya, Thailand. Evangelicals were present and active at the WCC gathering in Melbourne and at least 25 went on to participate in the Pattaya conclave. There they made vigorous attempts to relate the major emphases of the Melbourne meeting to the main thrust of Pattaya. But they met with a cool response on the part of the Lausanne leadership.

Pattaya was concerned with the millions of people still unreached by the gospel. Melbourne had focused on the fact that the overwhelming majority of these unreached people are *poor*, in the multifaceted biblical sense of that word, and wrestled with the relevance of the gospel to such people.

Clearly Pattaya afforded an opportunity for evangelicals to relate the concerns of main line Protestant, Orthodox and roman Catholic churches to the traditional missionary endeavor. But the opportunity was missed, and this in spite of (or perhaps because of?) the fact that the Lausanne Committee includes members of WCC-related churches.

In hindsight it appears that most evangelicals at Pattaya were fearful that any extended discussion of social concerns would lead to a weakening of the conviction that evangelism is the primary task of the church. Yet in the midst of the consultation a group of participants from five continents drew up a "Statement of Concerns" which was circulated and eventually signed by a third of the participants. In part the statement reads:

Since the world is made up of institutions and structures as well as people groups, the Lausanne Movement, if it is to make a lasting evangelistic impact in the six continents of the world, must make a special effort to help Christians, local churches, denominations and mission agencies identify not only people groups but also the social, economic and political institutions that determine their lives and the structures behind them that hinder evangelism.

Such a statement clearly built a bridge between Melbourne and Pattaya – few of the Lausanne and WCC leaders were willing to cross it in either direction.

Some argue that before evangelicals can take their place in the broader ecumenical movement they must first get their own house in order, develop a stronger dynamic of inner unity, and reach a consensus on issues such as social action versus evangelism. That is, they must relate to the ecumenical mainstream from a position of strength rather than weakness.

From a biblical perspective this argument has doubtful validity. But granting it whatever merit it may have, the fact is that the numerical strength of evangelicals today, as well as the positive contributions they are perceived as making to the work of the Kingdom, has piqued the interest of the World Council of Churches and roman Catholic leaders who welcome evangelical participation in the larger arena.

In 1974, following the Lausanne Congress, WCC general secretary Philip Potter's assertion to the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops in Rome that "evangelization is the test of our ecumenical vocation" struck a ready response in the hearts of many ecumenical leaders, both Western and Third World. Eight years later evangelical influence was evident in

the publication of the policy document, "Mission and Evangelism – an Ecumenical Affirmation." This was prepared by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC and carried with it the official endorsement of the Council's Central Committee. Evangelicals welcomed the document and saw in it possibilities for further dialogue and perhaps joint action with ecumenical bodies.

At the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, Canada in 1983 evangelicals were made to feel at home. Upwards of 30 evangelical leaders met frequently during the Assembly to evaluate the on-going proceedings. Toward the end of the conclave 27 of the 30 prepared, signed and circulated an "open letter" to evangelicals everywhere. In this they asserted that Vancouver, in their judgment, marked "significant progress" in terms of spiritual and biblical orientation over the preceding WCC assemblies at Nairobi in 1975 and Uppsala in 1968.

While perturbed by some aspects of the Assembly, and disappointed by others, these evangelical leaders expressed their appreciation of the dimension of worship in the Assembly, the wider space given to Bible exposition, the Trinitarian emphasis of the Orthodox participants, the evident concern for the world's poor and oppressed, and the strong affirmation of Jesus Christ as the life of the world – this latter being the Assembly's theme.

At the same time, three prominent evangelicals from the United States, West Germany, and South Korea respectively, produced a dissenting evaluation. They contended, among other things, that the Assembly's theme remained ambiguous, that its documents were tainted with Marxist ideology, that an adequate emphasis on evangelization was missing, and that a tendency toward syncretism was evident. These leaders concluded that they could not in good conscience encourage fellow evangelicals to participate in the structures and programs of the WCC.

What then should be the evangelical response to the signs of spiritual renewal many discern in Protestant and Orthodox churches related to the WCC as well as in Roman Catholic churches since Vatican II? Is it possible that evangelicals not only have something to contribute to this larger community but also something to receive through involvement with the ecumenical movement? The Vancouver experience certainly challenged the stereotypes some evangelicals had of the World Council of Churches. Are there other stereotypes, on both sides, waiting to be broken?

An even deeper spiritual issue may be at stake. In the words of the writers of the "open letter" referred to above,

“Do evangelicals not also have the obligation along with other Christians to seek to overcome the scandal of the disunity and disobedience of the churches that the world might believe (John 17:21)? According to the “open letter,” there is no biblical warrant to withdraw from those who have not withdrawn from Christ:

“Should not Christians gladly receive all those whom God has manifestly received? Are not the alternatives – rejection or indifference – totally incompatible with the Apostle Paul’s affirmation that Christ is not divided (I Corinthians 1:13)?...Should we not be more trustful of those who profess Christ’s lordship? Should we not be more concerned with the peace, purity and *unity* of the people of God in our day? And if God thereby grants the church the renewal for which many pray, shall this not forever demolish that all too popular evangelical heresy – that the way to renew the body of Christ is to separate from it and relentlessly criticize it?”

This is the crossroads at which evangelicals stand today. Many watch with interest to see whether evangelicals will take the path to fuller participation in the global Christian community, or whether they will stride forward along the road to yesterday.