

THE EVANGELICAL WORLD MISSION AND
THE WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP

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Introduction

My traditional Western upbringing tells me that in the assignment given me we are dealing with apples and oranges. When we speak of the evangelical world mission we refer to a task; when we speak of the World Evangelical Fellowship, the reference is to an institution. The two are not unrelated, but the distinction should be kept in mind.

It is not my intention to expound the theological basis for evangelical unity and cooperative action in mission. Nor will I presume to duplicate practical aspects already well surveyed. Rather, I will explore a few of the multiple relationships between the universal task and a specific institution, between the mandate valid until the end of the age and a particular structure historically and culturally conditioned.

To begin with, let me accept provisionally this consultation's interpretation of the task of evangelical world mission. I say 'provisionally,' not to indicate mental reservation on my part, but to remind us that this consultation's understanding of mission is, for the most part, the product of the thought and experience of only one part of the global evangelical community, namely, the North American sector. We have yet to formulate a truly global evangelical missiology.

Institutions and Open Spaces

The World Evangelical Fellowship, I have noted, is an institution, a structure, a framework, if you will. Such terms are hardly soul-stirring. On the contrary, they tend to evoke images of rigidity and bureaucracy. That is a pity, for the etymology of the word *institution* suggests something quite different – something that enlarges and liberates. Robert Greenleaf, management research director of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, in his book *Servant Leadership* describes the ideal institution in these terms:

An institution is a gathering of persons who have accepted a common purpose, and a common discipline to guide the pursuit of that purpose, to the end that

each involved person achieves higher fulfillment as a person, through *servicing and being served* [his emphasis] by the common venture, than would be achieved alone or in a less committed relationship.

This description may not adequately define the church as the mystical body of Christ. But it comes close to my own understanding of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF).

I see WEF as a kind of “open space” in which evangelicals from all six continents can meet to affirm their identity, to express their God-given unity, and to develop fruitful patterns of cooperation. The result of this interaction, wherein we serve and are served, will be, as John Stott has written, a more satisfying “fellowship of the gospel,” a more effective “defense and confirmation of the gospel,” and a more dynamic “furtherance of the gospel” (Philippians 1:5, 7, 12).

I don’t want to press the metaphor of open space too far. Yet it may be useful to contrast this image with that of the “walls or barbed-wire fences” Warren Webster has referred to. These may have been common enough images in an earlier generation, reflecting the realities of that time, but they are less than adequate today. Global realities today require that we think in terms of “centered sets” as well as “bounded sets.” (See Paul Hiebert’s paper, *Sets and Structures: A Study in Church Patterns*, to be presented later in this consultation.)

There was a time not too long ago when conservative evangelicals were very much on the defensive. In those circumstances it was important that boundaries be carefully defined. It seemed essential to draw a tight circle that would clearly distinguish “us” from “them.” Without disputing the need for such an attitude at that time and place, I want to suggest that our times call for a different attitude based on another perspective.

This other perspective derives partially from the fact that WEF is one of the products of the historic evangelical world mission. It would be too much to say that WEF is the immediate product of missions alone. WEF’s lineal ancestry must be traced instead to the Evangelical Alliance founded in London in 1846. But that Alliance itself had at least two sources.

On the one hand, there was a conviction among evangelicals in the middle of the 19th century that Roman and Anglo-Catholicism (both on the rise at the time) must be resisted by might and main. This anti-Catholic spirit untied evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic. (Ten percent of

the participants at the founding convention of the Alliance were North Americans.)

On the other hand, a deeper current giving rise to the Alliance can be discerned in the missionary outreach of evangelicals during the first half of the 19th century. J. B. A. Kessler, Jr., the historian of the Alliance, notes that their leaders “soon discovered that denominational barriers ceased to exist when they engaged in the common task of preaching the gospel to those who not before heard the name of Christ.”

The Alliance did yeoman’s service for the cause of evangelical unity and cooperation, though only in the limited North Atlantic context, for nearly one hundred years. But the stresses of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy on the North American side of the Atlantic, and the psychological tensions engendered by the first World War on the other side of that ocean, caused the Alliance to fall apart by the mid-20th century.

Meanwhile Evangelical missions had been proclaiming the gospel, making disciples, planting churches, implementing social services and, indirectly, fomenting social revolution throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America. By 1950 evangelical “communities of the King” were maturing everywhere. In early 1951 the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) was organized. Representatives of EFI, in turn, were among those who gathered in Holland later in 1951 to revive the Evangelical Alliance. Out of that meeting emerged the World Evangelical Fellowship, nearly two-thirds of whose membership today, please note, is from the Third World.

I share this background partly to acknowledge the important role European and North American missions played in events leading up to the inauguration of WEF. But I mention it also to remind us that it was largely because of fresh winds blowing from rapidly maturing Third World evangelical communities that global evangelicalism emerged from the doldrums in which it had been ensconced between the two world wars. And as Warren Webster has rightly noted, “younger churches have come to regard many of the minor differences which divide Christians in the West as ‘luxuries’ they do not want and cannot afford.”

Evangelical Pluralism

It is important to note that the Third World evangelical churches destined by 1975 to comprise the majority of WEF’s members had been parented by a variety of missionary mothers and fathers. Among those were British

evangelicals accustomed to religious inclusivism, American evangelicals adamant on the need for separation from apostasy, European evangelicals at home with the scientific study of Scripture and – at another level – evangelical missionaries planting pentecostal churches, others founding virulently anti-charismatic congregations, missionaries with a holistic view of mission and others with a strictly evangelistic horizon.

A fascinating mosaic of Third World evangelical communities therefore emerged from this parentage. Here were new communities for whom the modernist-fundamentalist controversy, which still colors much North American practical missiology, had no existential reality. Here were Christian communities for whom the collapse of European Christendom had little relevance. Here were communities for whom socialism and even communism, in some situations, evoked not fear but hope, communities for whom capitalism and Western ‘free enterprise’ had brought only shameful dependence and hateful oppression.

In approximately 50 countries (two in North America, a dozen in Europe, the remainder in the Third World) these communities have now come together in national associations of evangelicals. What a time they are having, getting to know one another! Instinctively they recognize a spiritual unity among themselves based on personal faith in Jesus, the authority of Scripture, a commitment to holiness, both private and public, and a passion for witness. Yet they find themselves strangers to one another by virtue of divisions originating not in their own experience, but in the experience and traditions of their foreign parents.

It is in *this* context, at *this* moment of history, that WEF is called on to provide an “open space” rather than barbed-wire fences. What is needed now is an attitude and a perspective that recognizes the evangelical pluralism of our time and places first priority on acceptance rather than rejection or avoidance.

The pluralism of which I speak is not simply theological. Frequently it is political and economic. In conversation with North American evangelical laymen, pastors, and mission executives, I find them often unable to understand, much less accept, Third World evangelical anti-American and anti-capitalist attitudes – and even less able to cope with the nationalistic, often socialistic, politics of African or Latin American evangelicals. North American evangelicals find it difficult to perceive the “rightness” that certain kinds of liberation theology convey to many Third World evangelicals.

In such an atmosphere it is instructive to recall some attitudes of the pioneer missionary William Carey. Most evangelicals today find little to admire, for example, in the French revolution of 1789. By contrast, Carey saw it as “a movement towards a completer humanity, a glorious door opened for the gospel by the spread of civil and religious liberty.”

This same Carey “had openly shown his radical sympathies by refusing to join in the Loyal Toast on board ship,” an incident that made some members of his sponsoring mission board nervous. Nor was Carey reluctant to confront the transnational corporations of his day, referring in his 1793 journal to the “abominable East India monopoly.” (These quotations are taken from Mary Drewry’s biography of William Carey.)

In the context of evangelical pluralism, WEF, as presently constituted, does not adequately reflect the global evangelical community. This is clearly seen in the composition of recent evangelical gatherings such as the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly, the Asian Leaders Congress on Evangelization, and the Second Latin America Congress on Evangelism. Each of these drew together a wider spectrum of evangelicals than is normally reflecting in WEF meetings.

One of the main reasons the WEF does not adequately represent the global evangelical community today is continuing pressure toward separatism exerted by Western missionaries on national leaders in emerging Third World evangelical churches. This pressure takes several forms. Yet, to cite Warren Webster again, “the missionary body which does not seriously assess the forces making for unity among younger churches may one day find them seeking expressions of Christian unity without its help or guidance.”

This is not to say that there are no ultimate evangelical boundaries. There are, and the WEF’s conservative statement of faith has stood the test for 135 years. But this is to say that the precise interpretation of that confession and, more to the point, definitive understandings of the implications of our faith, can no longer be regarded as the prerogative of European or North American evangelicals. Third World evangelicals want and expect to help define the character of evangelicalism in our day.

A global evangelical community, represented only in part by the WEF, needs some breathing space. It also needs a period of time, perhaps a generation or two, should the Lord tarry, during which believers from all six continents can meet together as equals to work and rethink their faith

together, and learn how to articulate and demonstrate the gospel in nonparochial terms. Current efforts with the WEF are aimed at enhancing the selfhood of the various national and regional evangelical associations, especially in the Third World.

Conclusion

Let us pull together some of threads of this discussion. What does the WEF mean to the evangelical world mission? And what can agencies deeply committed to world mission contribute to the WEF? How can we serve and be served by one another?

It must be clear to impartial observers that WEF serves missions first by helping to preserve, strengthen, and multiply the fruit of their toil. More specifically, WEF, in its international missions commission, provides a crucible in which a new alliance of Western and non-Western mission societies may be forged, an arena in which new and more effective patterns of cooperation may emerge.

At the same time, the commission is likely to become a unique meeting place in which dedicated Third World missionaries, executives, and professors, together with their counterparts from the West, will produce something the church has never had – a truly global evangelical theology. And with a unity thus forged in fellowship, we have biblical reason to expect that “the world will believe.”

That is one side of the coin. The other has to do with how mission societies can strengthen the movement toward unity institutionalized, to some degree, in WEF. The WEF is not perfect, but it deserves and needs the active, yet sensitive, support of North American evangelical missions. It needs support not necessarily on the same terms as in the past, or in the same patterns, but in new forms and with new attitudes.

The support needed first of all is spiritual, that is, prayer. Moral support is needed: participation in WEF's international commissions, for example. This needs to be on the basis of equality, even when North American participation is less than strict attention to numbers might warrant, or when activities do not reflect North American priorities.

Material support is required also. This is the kind of help the Evangelical Fellowship of India required and received in its early development. Today, after twenty-eight years, everyone acknowledges the value of EFI to the evangelical movement in India and beyond.

The time is ripe for North American mission societies to give evangelical unity the priority the Bible assigns to it, and to do in the context of global realities. I believe WEF as a global fellowship provides the kind of institutional “open space” most suited to this end.