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RECENT INTERPRETATIONS OF EVANGELICAL PLURALISM

Paul Toews

The past few decades have been the evangelical ones in American Christianity. People professing evangelical faith were in the White House from 1976 to 1990. Evangelical media stars dominated much of the front line religious news during the past decade. Evangelical churches have been growing faster than other segments of the Christian community. Their institutions (colleges, seminaries, publishing houses, para-church agencies, etc.) have gained success and visibility. It may seem paradoxical that the "old time religion" should be so popular in an age that prizes the new and fashionable. Yet evangelicalism has historically been one of the most adaptive and inventive segments of American Christianity.

It is not surprising that the new visible location in American society has brought many attempts to understand and locate this burgeoning religious movement. The spate of books defining, describing and analyzing evangelicals is numerous. Two recent publications, Norris A. Magnuson and William G. Travis, eds., *American Evangelicalism: An Annotated Bibliography* (Locust Hill Press, 1990, 495 pages) and Edith L.

*Right,
Center,
Left and
Beyond*

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Blumhofer and Joel A. Carpenter, *Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: A Guide to the Sources* (Garland Publishing, 1990, 384 pages) point to the richness of interpretative materials. What is frequently described as “evangelical scholarship” now has currency in the larger scholarly fraternity. Bob Jones, Sr.’s comment of years ago no longer fits. When asked who an evangelical was he replied an evangelical is anyone who tells a liberal, “I’ll call you a Christian if you call me a scholar.” The truth nowadays is that there is probably more generosity by the mainline in recognizing evangelical scholarship than there is by evangelicals in accepting mainliners as Christians.

An Offering of Conceptual Grids

The center of American evangelicalism has historically been defined as a commitment to personal faith in Jesus the Christ, a high view of the authority of the Scriptures and an understanding of the Church as the missionary body of Christ in the world. Current discussions about the shape of the evangelical world tend not to be concerned with that center. What much of the scholarship points to is the pluralism of the evangelical world. It is the varying ways in which that shared center becomes linked to other theological, historical and cultural phenomenon that interests a good many folks. The list of recent scholars who have thought it important to recite the pluralism of the evangelical world reads like a who’s who among analysts of evangelicalism: Timothy Smith, Martin Marty, George Marsden, Leonard Sweet, Winthrop Hudson, Robert Webber, Max Stackhouse, Richard Quebedeaux, James Davison Hunter, Joel Carpenter, David Harrell, Jr., and others. Clearly the territory is now diverse. Easy generalizations about who and what evangelicals are need to be discarded.

Smith writes of the “evangelical mosaic.” Martin Marty (1976) carefully distinguishes between Evangelicals and Fundamentalists. Stackhouse finds three distinct branches in the evangelical heritage: Puritan Evangelicalism, Pietistic Evangelicalism and Fundamentalist Evangelicalism. Hunter (1983) notes there are four theological traditions in contemporary American Evangelicalism: the Baptist, the Holiness-Pentecostal, the Anabaptist and the Reformed-Confessional. Quebedeaux’s taxonomy varied with successive books. *The Young Evangelicals* (1974) isolated five groups: separatist funda-

mentalists, open fundamentalists, establishment evangelicals, new evangelicals and young evangelicals. *The Worldly Evangelicals* (1978) used political terminology to suggest a division between the Evangelical Right, the Evangelical Center and the Evangelical Left.

Cullen Murphy (1981) finds a circus metaphor more revelatory. He avers that under the “vast tent of evangelical faith there is a 12-ring circus with shows in progress by Peace-church conservatives, Arminian conservatives, Wesleyans, Baptists, conservative Calvinists, Immigrant churches, Pietistic churches, Adventists, Black Pentecostals, White Pentecostals, Black Evangelicals and Fundamentalists.”

These commentators obviously offer differing conceptual grids for understanding this diversity. Some link it to differing theological nuances. Others find its origins in denominational differences. Intriguing to several analysts are the possibilities of the political taxonomies. That is so because evangelicals in the Reformed tradition have been the predominant definers of American evangelicalism. They have been the culturally aggressive members of the evangelical family. Their theology led them into the center of American institutional and political life. While other evangelicals were nurturing their piety, perfecting religious ecstasy or silently building alternative communities the Reformed Evangelical engagement with the culture defined what it meant to be evangelical in American society. Furthermore, the recent upsurge of evangelical presence in American culture was significantly linked to its political activity (Wacker, 1990).

The political taxonomies can also illumine the theological diversity of evangelical subcultures as well as its political contours. They point us to the church-world issues that so dominate the Reformed mainstream tradition. The boundaries of any designations are sometimes hard to delineate with accuracy, yet there is clearly a continuum which separates right, center and left evangelicals.

Right Evangelicals

The Right Evangelicals are the leftover fundamentalists of the 1920s. Sometimes they are still called fundamentalists. This loose coalition of peoples across denominational lines became belligerent, reactionary and participated in a general repudiation of the culture, politics and science of modernity.

During the 1920s they allied themselves with various forms of anti-intellectualism and joined in a series of vulgar cultural eruptions. Their politics more recently were rooted in anti-communism and radical individualism. It was best symbolized by folks like Billy James Hargis and Carl McIntire.

Right Evangelicals characteristically work through independent churches, Bible institutes and other extra-ecclesiastical organizations. Their version of biblicism is strict inerrancy mixed with fervent premillennialism. Their alienation from much of American society in the 1920s and the following decades moved them towards a critique of the national culture. Today these rightist evangelicals are confused by the legacy of that alienation and their simultaneous appropriation of the nation as a special agency of God. They can both denounce the moral turpitude of the nation and proclaim it to be the guardian of all virtue against more evil nations.

Center Evangelicals

Center Evangelicals are those who in the 1940s rebelled against the obscurantism of the old fundamentalists. Though largely growing out of fundamentalism, they claimed exclusively for themselves the name "evangelical" and repudiated their ancestors. In their drive for respectability, they became sharp in their critique of fundamentalism. Carl F.H. Henry, leading theologian in the emergence of the Center Evangelicals, suggested his distance from them by writing that "fundamentalism is considered a summary term for theological pugnaciousness, ecumenic disruptiveness, cultural unprogressiveness, scientific obliviousness, and/or anti-intellectual inexcusableness ... extreme dispensationalism, pulpit sensationalism, excessive emotionalism, social withdrawal and bawdy church music" (Henry, 1956, 1957).

Center Evangelicals trace their emergence to the beginnings of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, the formation of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1949 and the establishment of *Christianity Today* in 1956. Influential leaders in the emergence of this movement included Carl F.H. Henry; Billy Graham; Harold Ockenga, former pastor of Park Street Church in Boston and President of both Fuller Theological Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Seminary; Harold Lindsell, former editor of *Christianity Today*; and Francis Schaeffer.

Today the Center Evangelicals have become a trans-

denominational community complete with an infrastructure of institutions, causes and leaders who identify and give substance to “evangelicalism.” These are the self-conscious evangelicals. They share much in common with denominational evangelicals, but have a different orientation than the Missouri Synod Lutherans, Southern Baptists, Wesleyan Methodists, Church of the Brethren, Mennonites or others who are theologically like minded but channel their energies into the programs and issues of their particular denominations. The Center Evangelicals tend to be the “card carrying” ones who know each other and are found in the boards of Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, L’Abri Fellowship, and other evangelistic organizations. They are frequently tied into the Billy Graham organization, the Christian College Coalition, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Evangelical Theological Society and are often graduates of Gordon-Conwell, Wheaton, Westminster and Eastern Baptist seminaries. George Marsden notes that for these folks being evangelical is a primary identity; denominational identity is secondary. They have created their own subculture with its own symbols, folkways and networks. They have created their own self-conscious community with boundaries and identifying marks. Thus George Marsden (1984) suggests that Billy Graham and Harold Lindsell are “more ‘evangelical’ than they are Southern Baptist,” though both are members of the Southern Baptist denomination.

The Centrist Evangelicals have clearly broken with the boisterous and sometimes crude politics of the right. They possess what is often referred to as the “custodial ideal” for American culture. That ideal assumes “that society is organic and that civil authorities have a custodial responsibility for the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of the organism” (Wacker, 1984).

Evangelical willingness to assume that responsibility is beyond the boundaries of this discussion. Suffice it to note that the Reform tradition, as the most informing element of the Center Evangelicals has seldom shrunk from a willingness to assume that guardianship. Jefferson’s wall of separation between church and state, in this ideal, has a different meaning for evangelicals than for other religious communities. One irony of this propensity observed by Martin Marty (1976) is that evangelicalism, while remaining a cognitive minority,

aspires to becoming a socio-cultural majority.

James Davison Hunter (1983) defines the difference between the Right and Center Evangelicals in complementary but slightly different terms. He notes that Fundamentalists (or the Right) defined themselves in opposition to the world view of modernity. The presumptions of the modern world were understood to be sinful and its emergence could only be understood by employing eschatological meanings. Being distinct from modern life was important. Until the emergence of the Center Evangelicals, this separation was largely defined in negative terms. Then separation was reappropriated to emphasize the superiority of Evangelicalism. Hunter suggests this latter approach required great evangelical involvement with modernity and consequently a greater cognitive accommodation.

Left Evangelicals

The Evangelical Left is a movement among younger evangelicals of the past twenty-five years. They are the children of the cultural contradictions of American society who during the 1960s opened to broader theological and political currents. They have generally repudiated the alliance between evangelicalism and republicanism. More generally they feel discomfort with the alliance of theological conservatism with political, cultural and social conservatism. Evangelical culture's identification with bourgeois values is also troubling.

The Left Evangelicals display a fresh interest in the social dimensions of Christian faith. Many have been influenced by the Wesleyan tradition of "social holiness." They seek a reappropriation of the social radicalism of an earlier American evangelicalism. Nineteenth century evangelicalism has a wholeness about it that subsequent movements with the same name have not always shared. It is this quest for embodied biblicism, evangelism and a culturally transforming gospel that gives the Left their coherence. Their relationship to culture is marked by greater interest in prophetic criticism than in priestly celebration.

The Evangelical Left has been nurtured by the likes of C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Current American spokespersons include Richard Mouw, John Howard Yoder, David Hubbard, John Perkins and Jim Wallis.

Mennonite Brethren and Evangelical Pluralism

Mennonite Brethren historically have formally identified with the organizations of Center Evangelicalism. Mennonite Brethren have been official members of the National Association of Evangelicals, supporters of Billy Graham evangelism and subscribers to *Christianity Today*. Yet the participation has been marginal. Today Mennonite Brethren are informally linked into all three groups of evangelicals. One suspects that many of the congregations lean into the Right and Center Evangelical groups while the institutions lean more into the Center and Left groups.

But the point of this brief characterization of evangelical pluralism is not to identify our location on this mapping of evangelical groups. The real point of any discussion of evangelical pluralism is to recognize that long ago evangelicalism ceased to be singular. It is a tradition in American religious life that dates back to the colonial period and has sheltered many kinds under its umbrella. There are innumerable ways to be evangelical — that is, to affirm the necessity of personal salvation, hold high the authority of Scripture and take seriously the missionary mandate of the church — instead of insisting on some sort of constricted orthodoxy.

Mennonite Brethren who have been drawn to alliances with the evangelical world should recognize that so long as we maintain the center of evangelical faith, there is no particular reason to try to adopt or to mimic much of the rest of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism in American history is the story of many different peoples with their own distinguishing traditions, history and language. It is the story of diverse peoples building their own cultural systems, developing institutional programs, and creating networks of association, work and play. Those institutions, traditions and networks, *en mass*, are no better or worse than ours. Some individually may work better, some no doubt worse.

What the language of evangelical pluralism pleads for is the recognition that denominations bring varying emphases, histories and traditions to this mosaic. Denominations that recognize the strength of their particularity and nurture it make a distinctive contribution. The notion of “evangelical pluralism” celebrates and affirms “evangelical distinctiveness.”

The Mennonite Brethren are the bearers of a distinctive religious tradition. God has gifted our past with his presence. Out of a 450-year story we have received affirmations and practices that offer salvation and renewal to people trapped in a largely decaying and desperate culture. Our emphasis on authentic conversion offers freedom from the seductions of the world; our vision of the authority of the Scriptures offers a standard of judgment and bearing amidst the relativism of the twentieth century; our understanding of the church as community, a family with expectations and discipline, stands in contrast to the corrosive individualism of the surrounding culture; our vision of discipleship that includes the way of peacemaking and justice speaks powerfully to a world growing more violent and oppressive; our commitment to evangelism stresses the inclusion of all peoples into the Kingdom of God. Ours is an expansive tradition. Ours is an appropriate tradition. Our task is to nurture this tradition, this gift from God. Insofar as we do, we maintain an evangelical witness and contribute to the vitality of evangelical pluralism.

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THE MENNONITE BRETHREN AND AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM: AN AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP

Richard Kyle

North American evangelicalism has been a source of tension and ambivalence to Mennonite Brethren, impacting both relationships within the fellowship and with other Mennonite bodies. Mennonite Brethren are ambivalent in their attitudes toward mainstream evangelicalism, ranging from a strong sense of kinship to one of near contempt. Also, the influence of evangelicalism on the Mennonite Brethren has produced some tensions with other Mennonite conferences, who are perceived as "less evangelical." Moreover, the incorporation of beliefs and practices from American evangelicalism into the Mennonite Brethren fellowship has fostered divisions within the conference—even threatening the unity of the denomination.

The issue of American evangelicalism roughly has divided Mennonite Brethren into two camps. One group would want to be known as Anabaptist-Mennonites because they emphasize doctrines going back to the radical reformers of the sixteenth century, namely the believers' church, discipleship, noncon-

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formity and the peace witness. Another segment of the Mennonite Brethren think of themselves as more evangelical than Mennonite. They feel a stronger affinity with mainstream evangelicalism than with Mennonite groups. They emphasize the pietistic tradition, with its focus on individual salvation and personal devotional life.¹

Definitions

The Mennonite Brethren are certainly evangelicals in the historic use of the term. They strongly emphasize the new birth and the proclamation of the gospel. But are they “evangelicals” in the sense that this term refers to American evangelicalism? To what extent are they part of this large, diverse movement? In part, one’s response to these questions depends on how one answers several questions. Who are the evangelicals? Are the Anabaptists part of American evangelicalism? To what extent are the Mennonite Brethren Anabaptists? The words *evangelical* and *evangelism* are often used incorrectly to mean the same thing (i.e., evangelical equals evangelistic). Both terms come from the same Greek word, *evangelion*, the good news. However, evangelical is something you *are*, evangelism is something you *do*.² But who are the evangelicals? In a very broad sense, an evangelical is anyone who stands in the biblical tradition and is devoted to the good news that we can be partakers of God’s redemptive grace in Jesus Christ.³

But the issue is not this simple. Evangelicalism is a complex phenomenon and despite many scholarly writings on the subject, it is very difficult to pinpoint.⁴ Evangelicalism can be defined both theologically and sociologically. Also, the term *evangelical* has taken on different meanings in divergent historical and cultural contexts.

Of importance for this essay is whether evangelicalism is defined in a broad or narrow sense. Whether the approach be theological, sociological or historical, any expansive approach to evangelicalism must include not only the Anabaptists but also the Mennonite tradition. However, some Mennonite scholars have defined evangelicalism more narrowly, regarding it as a twentieth century American phenomenon.⁵ Given this approach, the relationship of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition to evangelicalism is more tenuous.

North American Evangelicals: Defying A Common Stereotype

While evangelicalism is a global phenomenon, it originated in western Europe and has had its greatest force and vitality in North America.⁶ Thus, it may be understood as a religiocultural phenomenon distinctly related to North America. The world view of evangelicalism is deeply rooted in the theological tradition of the Reformation, in European Puritanism, and later in American Puritanism and the First and Second Great Awakenings in North America. In fact, evangelicalism has endeavored to remain doctrinally faithful to this generally conservative tradition.⁷ The theological core of contemporary evangelicalism can be identified by its adherence to the following distinctives: the belief that the Bible is the inerrant/infallible Word of God; the belief in the divinity of Christ; and the belief in the efficacy of Christ's life, death, and physical resurrection for the salvation of the human soul.⁸

Behaviorally, American evangelicals can usually be characterized by an individual and experiential orientation toward spiritual salvation and religion in general. The Christian faith is experiential. The individual must be born again. Individuals must have a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior from sin and a commitment to him as Lord. Following such a conversion, an evangelical in one way or another usually seeks actively the conversion of sinners to Christ.⁹

Contemporary American evangelicalism is highly diverse, drawing elements from several theological traditions. James Hunter sees four major religious traditions in contemporary evangelicalism: the Baptist, Holiness-Pentecostal, Anabaptist, and Reformed-Confessional traditions. Each of these traditions has its respective distinctives that have been passed on to contemporary evangelicalism. Of these four traditions, the Baptists are presently the dominant one.¹⁰

From these major traditions many subgroups have been drawn, each with their own particular emphasis.¹¹ As a result, American evangelicalism evidences a bewildering diversity. Timothy Smith has argued that evangelicalism is like a kaleidoscope. It is made up of fragments as diverse as black Pentecostals, Mennonite peace churches, Episcopal charismatics, Nazarenes, and Southern Baptists.¹² Thus, evangelicalism should be seen as a conservative movement. It is conservative insofar as it differs from liberalism, which does not maintain