

LOOKING BACK AT THE FORCES AND FACES OF AMERICAN EVANGELISM

Introduction

The editors of *Christianity Today* recently asked a number of evangelical thinkers to assess the evangelical movement since its beginning following World War II. They examined it from the viewpoints of preaching, theology, missions, biblical scholarship, education, media, and parachurch organizations. The writers found that the movement, after more than 30 years, is still vital and more influential than ever. They also discovered many shortcomings and unfulfilled tasks. Here is their report:

A Strange Turbulence

Theologically, this period of 30 years has been strange and turbulent. It began with a small evangelical movement and dominant theological figures; it is ending with a large evangelical movement and few established thinkers. Between then and now lie the decades that belonged to Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Tillich, and the Niebuhrs, giants whose voices are now stilled and whose influence has faded. Their successors could well have come from the evangelical world, but a vigorous, creative evangelical theology has not appeared to seize this moment.

Thirty years ago leadership was provided either by those who articulated a characteristically different way of evangelical thinking - such as Cornelius Van Til, Gordon Clark, John Murray, and J. Oliver Buswell - or who symbolized its growing ability to play on the same academic turf as everyone else - such as E.J. Carnell and Bernard Ramm. Thus were the seeds of discord unwittingly sown, seeds that have now produced deep internal disarray, for the responsibilities to Athens (the academy) and Jerusalem (the people of God) have become loyalties that are often in fierce competition with one another.

The laity 30 years ago was more doctrinally conscious and theologically literate than it is today. Indeed, the combined effects of "relational theology," charismatic experience, and the self-movement might have eliminated theological interest altogether but for a group of remarkable - and remarkably patronized - popularizers: C.S. Lewis, who pungently kept evangelicals thinking; Francis Schaeffer, who kept alive the reali-

ty of a Christian world view; Martin Lloyd-Jones, who showed that theology could and should be preached; John Stott, whose seminal writings have shown how wholesome the Bible can be; and J.I. Packer, whose *Knowing God* in particular demonstrated that beneath all the evangelical fizz there is a deep spiritual hunger.

In the absence of fresh systematic writing from America, translated imports, such as G.C. Berkouwer and Helmut Thielicke, have taken on special significance, as have reprints from the Reformation period onward. Dictionaries have had to take up the slack, too, such as Colin Brown's *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* and, most recently, Walter Elwell's *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.

In this period of fragmentation, when there has been little corporately owned theological understanding, particular issues have taken on a life of their own, often following erratic and even bizarre courses. Most troublesome have been the debates about Scripture (and inerrancy), women (and ordination), and evangelical commitment (and who may and may not be considered in the movement).

Some theologies, however, have been written. Donald Bloesch's *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* is a good update on key themes; Millard Erickson's recent three volumes of *Christian Theology* is also an able contribution. But pride of place must go to Carl Henry's six volumes, *God, Revelation and Authority*. It is a powerful, vigorous assertion of an orthodoxy whose toughness and stringency are precisely what evangelicalism needs to hear but apparently has been unwilling to read. That says only a little about Henry (whose style unfortunately does oscillate between being racy and being Teutonic) and much about evangelism.

It also raises an interesting question. There are rumors of various systematic theologies in the works. The time is undoubtedly ripe for theologians to capitalize on the rich harvest of biblical studies of recent decades, the maturing awareness of evangelical responsibility in culture and society, and the absence of serious competitors in the wider theological world. But if these theologies are written, will anybody read them?

This is the question of overall survival for twentieth-century evangelicalism. Given the pressures it must face, both from academia and our secular culture, it can hardly perpetuate itself intact if it reduces itself to being merely "born-again religion," sheared of a doctrinal structure, ethical seriousness, and a comprehensive world-view.

By David F. Wells, Andrew Mutch Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Biblical Scholarship

Small Beginnings, Rapid Progress

In 1956 evangelical Bible scholars had just begun to emerge from the intellectual wilderness. The public defeat of “fundamentalism” in the 1920s had meant that conservative views on the Bible almost disappeared from the American academic landscape. At Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, theologically orthodox scholars like Ned Stonehouse had continued to interact rigorously with academic literature. Stonehouse played a particularly important role in the 1940s by showing how cautious acceptance of certain procedures in modern scholarship could coexist with, and even enrich, evangelical faith. But this was an exception for the evangelical world that focused almost all of its attention on devotional uses of the Bible.

Several sources contributed to a rejuvenation of evangelical Bible scholarship in the 1940s and 1950s. First in time were developments in Britain under the umbrella of Inter-Varsity Fellowship that had been under way since the 1920s. Scholars from Scotland (such as F.F. Bruce), England (John Wenham), and from the British Commonwealth (Australia’s Leon Morris) put university training to work in their efforts to understand the Scriptures. The publication of Bruce’s *Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (1951), and soon thereafter of Inter-Varsity’s *New Bible Commentary*, marked the visible return of first-rate evangelical work on Scripture. Soon Bruce and a number of other individuals not prejudiced against orthodox convictions were directing doctoral studies by American evangelicals at several major British universities.

Another source of renewal came from the “new evangelical” movement, which inspired, among other things, the founding of Fuller Theological Seminary. By the mid-1950s several Fuller scholars, especially George Ladd, were pointing the way to a restrained, yet academically responsible engagement with modern criticism. The series on *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, edited by Carl Henry (1957), as well as J.I. Packer’s *“Fundamentalism” and the Word of God* (1958), showed how a high view of biblical authority could coexist with honest scholarship.

Soon evangelical publishers began to solicit scholarly volumes. In the forefront was Eerdmans in Grand Rapids, which published not only individual works by scholars such as Bruce, Ladd, Henry, and Morris, but also sponsored the *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, the first academic series under evangelical auspices since the fundamentalist era.

From small beginnings, evangelical Bible scholarship has made rapid progress. Now the major evangelical seminaries employ Bible faculties with training from the best universities in the world. Evangelicals contribute roughly 10 percent of the articles to the major New Testament journals and fill about the same proportion of slots at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature. Organizations such as the Evangelical Theological Society, the Institute for Biblical Research, and the Wesleyan Theological Society also encourage detailed work.

With progress, of course, come also new problems. In the 1980s evangelical organizations and institutions have had to struggle with the degree to which believing perspectives can accommodate the latest results from the academic establishment. Old Testament scholars still find it harder to reach common ground with nonevangelicals than do those who study the New Testament. As always, evangelical scholars face the twin dangers of compromising the solid results of research for fear of offending traditionalists in the church. However, unlike the situation in 1956, a large corps of professionally capable scholars exists today to offer guidance for work on these knotty matters.

By Mark A. Noll, professor of history at Wheaton College, and author of the book *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelical Bible Scholarship since 1880*.

Preaching

Matter-of-fact Intensity

“The faith of Christ does not parallel the world, it intersects it. In coming to Christ, we do not bring our old life up onto a higher plane; we leave it at the Cross.”

So preached A.W. Tozer thirty years ago. Now better known for his devotional writings, Tozer, along with men like Charles E. Fuller, Walter Maier, Jack MacArthur, and Billy Graham epitomized the preachers of the 1950s, offering a no-nonsense gospel in their straightforward style.

Thirty years later, the tone of preaching has become less prophetic. Pastors seem less willing to risk being offensive, emphasizing instead the therapeutic value of their messages. “A generation ago, preaching aimed at rending the conscience,” said one long-time preacher. “Today it seems every sermon must address some personal or family need. The pulpit has become a counseling tool.”

Not that the preaching art was without its problems in the fifties. A 1946 editorial in *Christianity Today* lamented, “Even some of the soundest

evangelical congregations have little appetite for the meat of the gospel. Nor may the preacher presuppose any diligent study on the part of the pew in preparation for the message. He must make the message light and airy to sustain interest." In 1986, no longer a lament, it has become an accepted fact: preachers cannot *assume* listeners are interested; they must *earn* a hearing. But today's preacher has also learned that messages need not be "light and airy" to sustain interest. Substance can be communicated in ways congregations will accept.

Preachers today, largely inspired by the example of Charles Swindoll, find one key is to *identify* with the audience. While pulpits in the fifties tended to preach God's Word to "you," preachers in the eighties tend to explain God's word to "us." An example is one pastor's recent sermon on adultery. Instead of directly condemning it, he identified with the problem: "It's not hard to see why people commit adultery. A chill sets in at home. Fatigue or stress or minor irritations add to the growing distance between you and your spouse..." This pastor made it clear that he understood the problem, then went on to discuss the self-consuming side of this potential addiction and God's promise of freedom. Such sermons are not light and airy, but they sustain interest by realistically describing life's situations.

A second recent emphasis in preaching has been the importance of using well-told *stories and illustrations*. "The Bible says" carries little weight in today's secular audience. The person responsible for communicating God's Word to modern man must make it come alive. While the power of Scripture is unchanged, today's preacher has shifted the emphasis more toward a judicious use of contemporary examples to illustrate Scriptural principles.

Finally, the effect of television has profoundly affected preaching *style*. Television has conditioned viewers to get information quickly in short blasts or "capsules." Real-life dramas are developed and solved in 30 minutes. In newscasts, world issues are given 90 seconds, and experts are asked to sum up "in the 15 seconds we have left." Most preachers meet this challenge by composing shorter sermons.

Television, an intimate medium, also zooms in close, and viewers have learned to watch for subtle expressions rather than grand gestures. Sweat-drenched preachers with arms flailing might have communicated well in cavernous convention halls or outdoor amphitheatres 50 years ago, but with the advent of TV, the new model of credibility and clarity is the network newsman who speaks with a matter-of-fact intensity. This calm authority is the trademark of speakers like James Dobson, and is, perhaps, one factor in their popularity.

Are these changes progress or regress? It is difficult to say. But the

goal of preaching remains the same: to apply God's timeless Word in timely ways.

By Marshall Shelley, managing editor of *Leadership*

Missions

World Evangelism

One word says it all for 30 years of North American foreign mission agencies: *growth* — staggering, surprising growth.

The economic prosperity of American churches (and American society generally), religious freedom, and the entrepreneurial spirit have all coalesced to give birth to more agencies than there have ever been. While some smaller agencies threw in their lot with larger ones, new ones arrived and hit the trail for money and recruits at a feverish pace. Today some 700-plus agencies serve overseas.

The younger agencies tended to seize on some unique, narrowly focused ministry, or they successfully captured youth's zeal to do something on short notice that could be seen to make a difference in some hurting part of the world - Youth With a Mission and Operation Mobilization, for example. Some new agencies, like Mission Society for United Methodists, owed their birth to new evangelical groupings in U.S. mainline churches.

In terms of money, agencies reporting figures to the latest Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center (MARC) survey said they have received more than \$1 billion for overseas work, which is an all-time high. Less than 20 years ago the total was \$317 million. In terms of personnel, in 1956 there were some 30,000 North American Protestant missionaries; today there are 68,000.

Hidden in that 68,000 total is a highly significant trend: 30,000 of these people are short-term, as opposed to career, missionaries. Only 6 years ago short-termers numbered 18,000 and 30 years ago the idea was barely thinkable. You volunteered for a lifetime commitment to foreign missions - or not at all.

What missionaries actually *do* has also changed, from traditional pioneering to institutional work. Probably no more than a quarter of today's missionaries are now front-line troops doing raw evangelism. This is true partly because churches have been planted in astounding numbers in the last three decades - foreign missionaries have an enviable track record of accomplishing what they set out to do. It is also true because institutional work absorbs more and more money and more and more people in such ministries as schools, hospitals, radio stations, and

printing and publishing establishments. Today the missionary vocation, short-term or long-term, is basically the same as any existing vocation in the U.S.

But pioneering hasn't been forgotten, thanks to new impetus to track down and evangelize pockets of people yet to be touched with the gospel. If the church-growth movement forced missionaries to use social science research to plant churches among responsive peoples, the unreached-peoples movement has forced them to forge unique strategies to gain a hearing among narrowly focused tribal entities.

Also, in the last decade or two, U.S. missionaries have looked over their shoulders to find thousands and thousands of co-workers joining their ranks - not from stateside churches, but from churches that previous generations of missionaries had founded. World evangelism is in fact now the task of the world church. And that is perhaps the most significant trend of all.

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Education

Proliferation and Cooperation

Over the last three decades, evangelicals have been prolific, creating more than 40 new Christian liberal arts colleges, nearly a dozen new theological seminaries, and numerous Bible institutes and schools, many based in local churches. Prominent television preachers have put enormous effort into founding and marketing Christian colleges like CBN University, Liberty University, and Oral Roberts University - showing once again just how closely intertwined are the church's dual tasks of evangelism and education.

With the maturation of postwar "baby-boomers," Christian college enrollments surged, in part because many parents saw these institutions as relatively safer than the turbulent public mega-universities awash in student protest, drugs, and sexual liberalism.

More noteworthy than this growth in the number, size and diversity of institutions of Christian higher education has been the rapid improvement in the quality of academic programs and facilities during the last 15 to 20 years.

Most dramatic, however, have been the gains made in assembling a dedicated, well-prepared group of Christian scholar-teachers. The colleges have insisted on their right to appoint men and women to their

faculties who are avowedly Christian - even when the teachers' subject areas are not explicitly religious. This practice has sometimes been challenged by private plaintiffs and governmental agencies alleging discrimination on religious grounds. But Christian liberal arts colleges find their essential distinctives in the active integration of the Christian faith with each of the disciplines and across the entire curriculum.

Faculty members are now expected to lead and coach students in the development of a comprehensive Christian world view in which biblical perspectives are shown to be relevant to all fields of study. Since the early 1970s scholars in nearly every discipline have organized a professional society for those intent upon developing Christian perspectives in their specialties. These "guilds of believing scholars," such as the Society of Christian Philosophers, the Conference on Faith and History, and the American Scientific Affiliation, constitute a powerful resource for Christian higher education.

The Christian colleges have also recognized the benefits of cooperation. The 13-member Christian College Consortium and the larger Christian College Coalition (with approximately 70 institutions) offer mutually helpful programs and shared resources. Similarly, the Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents unites more than 40 theological schools in mutual support. Such close cooperation would have seemed impossible 30 years ago.

Evangelicals have also been attending seminary in record numbers. Some seminaries have experienced five- and even tenfold increases in their student bodies. Equally striking has been the increased diversity of the student bodies, including more minorities, women, and second-career people.

In the last 15 years, typical seminary course offerings have proliferated and new degrees have appeared. Instead of one basic divinity degree, most seminaries now offer a number of graduate degrees, including in-service continuing education leading to the Doctor of Ministry.

Of course, evangelical higher education still faces some serious challenges and questions. Will there be a top-flight Christian research university (now no closer to realization than when it was first discussed 30 years ago)? Will evangelical colleges and seminaries be able to sustain their enrollments as the traditional pool of students continues to shrink? Will students and their parents sufficiently value a distinctive Christian education or will they opt for more vocationally oriented, less costly training in state universities and community colleges? And will Christian colleges be able to maintain their identity as sectarian secularism, the courts, and governmental agencies, challenge them at

the point of their theological and moral distinctives?

By George K. Brushaber, president, Bethel College and Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Media

The Language of the Age

In 1927, G.K. Chesterton visited America and observed the lack of spiritual culture among its people. "Their culture comes from the great cities; and that is wherever all the evil comes from." His central objection was not so much that the cinema goes to places like "Oklahoma, as that it does not come from Oklahoma."

Since 1956, however, American culture has been penetrated, and some would say saturated, from places like Oklahoma, Virginia, and Illinois.

Thirty years ago radio dominated Christian communication. It was a remarkably appropriate and effective vehicle for the evangelical church, whose central mission was the preaching of the Word. The mighty voices of men like Charles E. Fuller and Theodore Epp brought audiences back to the Bible for old-fashioned revival.

In October, 1961, M.G. "Pat" Robertson established his Christian television station, giving birth to the Christian Broadcasting Network. CBN attempted to reach Christian and non-Christian audiences by mixing religious programs like the "700 Club" with family entertainment.

The print media has paralleled both the dramatic rise of broadcasting and the evangelical and charismatic movements. The publishing work of Pat Zondervan and the revolutionary publishing of Kenneth Taylor's Living Bible whetted an appetite for reading in an age of electronic media.

One of the most significant changes since 1956 has been the evangelical response to the cinema. In its first year of publication, a contributing editor of *Christianity Today* questioned whether he should "support Hollywood or the Kingdom of God." Three decades later a CT survey revealed that clergy attend more films than their church members.

In 1956, Cecil B. DeMille lured a neglected church audience to his "reverential" spectacular, *The Ten Commandments*. Today, *Chariots of Fire* and *The Color Purple* draw the faithful into the film fold. Television, in part, enabled the film industry to invade the home and thus attract evangelicals into the once-forbidden theatres.

Recognizing that "faith comes by hearing and sometimes by seeing," World Wide Pictures began to preach through films like *The Hiding Place*. With them, however, and alternative Christian cinema is now evolving behind the talents of Ken Curtis, John Schmidt and others.

Although gospel radio missions, such as Far Eastern Broadcasting Company and Trans World Radio, now stretch across international boundaries and reach millions in restricted areas, radio has been eclipsed by the phenomenal growth of television evangelism.

The dominant ritual of our technological civilization has become television viewing. Malcolm Muggerridge declared that TV and the media are “incomparably the greatest single influence in our society today,” and a destructive and malign one at that.

In contrast to the witty but dour pessimism of Muggerridge, Billy Graham in 1978 attributed the effectiveness of evangelism “not only to the power of the Holy Spirit, but to the fact that the broadcasting media have been open to us. I believe one of the greatest factors in the religious resurgence in this country has been the impact of religious radio and television.”

Rex Humbard pioneered television evangelism, joining the ever-popular Fulton J. Sheen on the small screen. The first to buy network time for religious programming, Humbard introduced his “Cathedral of Tomorrow,” a rousing, evangelistic Ed Sullivan-like church service with entertainers like Mahalia Jackson attracting a wide audience.

Encouraged by Humbard, Oral Roberts entered the new medium, showing God’s miraculous workings on prime time, and bringing a slick, contemporary flair. Others, like Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, and Robert Schuller, followed, adopting either the old radio preaching format or the increasingly popular talk-show approach.

Over 30 years ago, C.S. Lewis identified the missionary task of the church as presenting “that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today and tomorrow) in the particular language of our own age.” The dominant language of our own age continues to be the mass media, and our business continues to be to use these tools to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ.

By Terry Lindvall, associate professor of communications at CBN University, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Parachurch

Impatient to Do God’s Work

No other trait more sharply identifies contemporary American evangelicals than their parachurch pattern of organization. While many millions of Americans can affirm evangelical doctrines, the people and congregations who identify most strongly with “evangelicalism” are those who feel at least as much at home with this vast network of independent

religious agencies as with their particular denominations.

“Evangelicals” and “parachurch” have become nearly synonymous in recent decades because evangelicals have been, by and large, the “displaced persons” of mainline Protestantism, whether or not they have actually left the older denominations. The fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s prompted evangelicals to found independent organizations to carry out their gospel mandate. Bible institutes, colleges, seminaries, publishing and broadcasting works, mission agencies, evangelistic ministries, interdenominational and professional fellowships, and eventually public action committees all have been spawned by evangelicals’ grassroots religious vitality and distrust of the liberal Protestant establishment.

Trends since World War II have accelerated this pattern. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, a new generation of evangelical leaders began to emerge. They were impatient with both churchly and sectarian efforts to do the Lord’s work, seasoned in the methods of modern business and publicity, and hopeful of pursuing a “world vision” of Christian revival and expansion. From their efforts came the National Association of Evangelicals, Youth for Christ, World Vision, the Christian Business Men’s Committees, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, *Christianity Today*, and scores of other ministries.

The success of these “flagship” agencies of evangelicalism has encouraged a seemingly endless proliferation of such groups. Parachurch growth accompanied later evangelical surges, such as the charismatic movement, the drive for evangelical social action, and the recent mobilization of the religious New Right.

The parachurch pattern of organization has obvious advantages. It allows Christians to band together quickly in a common cause where there is an apparent need for collective witness. They need not lobby for support within a large and diverse denomination, or fear censure within a tightly controlled sect. Parachurch organizations encourage innovation yet pose no risks to other ministries. And because of new rules that enforce church-state separation, special-purpose organizations may provide the only opportunities for Christian witness in public affairs.

However, these independent agencies pose problems as well. Often controlled by one person or a coterie, such groups offer few chances for constituents to help shape their direction. And despite the standards set by the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, the books of many agencies remain closed.

Since the parachurch often favors corporate models of management and “marketing,” its agencies seem no closer to biblical standards for decision making and leadership than bureaucratic denominations. Self-

seeking individualism threatens to unravel our churches and nation, but parachurch groups, as enclaves of the like-minded, cannot reconcile diverse people and provide true community.

As long as evangelicals remain minority parties outside the Protestant establishment, they will need parachurch groups to pursue their callings. But as long as they preach a gospel that accepts all penitents “just as they are” and grafts them into Christ’s body, they will need congregations and denominations. Para-church, after all, means alongside of, in support of, the church.

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