Evangelical Conversion, the Responsibility Ethic, and the Spirit of Individualism

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"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." (Romans 1:16).

That the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for both man and society is readily understood in evangelical circles. Within the Caribbean, evangelical leaders continue to seek to see the gospel given its rightful place in man and society. Evidence of this concern for reformation, for the application of biblical ethics to culture, is seen for example in the academic works of leading evangelicals in the Caribbean (Mullings 2003; Palmer 2003). Mullings astutely points out that:

> Sustainable civilization is based on respect for other persons, thus restraint of our natural appetites and tendencies. Or, rephrasing in terms of respect for rights, your right requires my duty, whether to life, liberty, reputation, property, or to an environment that can sustainably support your needs, or whatever. (Mullings 2003, 64).

The importance of this interplay between rights and responsibilities can hardly be overstated. It is the argument of this essay that only Biblical Christianity is able to provide an adequate base to tolerate and sustain the level of individual rights, freedoms, and thus individualism presently enjoyed in Western civilization. In other words, only Christianity in its purer forms can consistently produce sufficient

individual virtue to tolerate the emphasis on individual rights we presently see. To rephrase our point above, the emphasis on individual rights must be matched by an emphasis on individual responsibility, what we will call a "responsibility ethic."

The term "individualism" has had broad usage, beginning with the writing of Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century. He coined it in an effort to explain the phenomena of American life. Since that time various studies have confirmed what is generally perceived: that the incidence of individualism is higher in Western than in non-Western societies (Hofsteede 1984). We use the term here to designate the primary emphasis on the rights and responsibilities of the individual, rather than the collective. In no sense are we suggesting that individualism is an ideal that should be pursued as an absolute in itself, nor are we seeking to argue for its validity as against collectivism; this article places greater emphasis on the need for a balance between rights and responsibilities.

This study argues that though other factors contributed to the rise of the uniquely individualistic society we see today in the West, the Protestant expression of Christianity in post-Reformation Northern Europe and in early North America was necessary for the development of the virtues conducive to Western society's tolerance of individualism. In a related study we look into this by means of quantitative research.[1] The quantitative study essentially supports the relationship described below: that Protestant evangelical conversion leads to an increased sensitivity toward one's fellows, which on a widespread scale across the population can be theorized to produce a climate in which greater individual freedoms can be granted and reasonably tolerated.

The use of the term "Protestant" or "evangelical" is not intended to suggest that similar dynamics do not occur or have not occurred outside of what is known today as evangelical Protestantism. Renewal movements within Christian non-Protestant or non-evangelical bodies are themselves often very evangelical: emphasis is placed on individual responsibility, on

[1] The present essay is adapted from the doctoral dissertation by Glen Martin, "Biblical Truth Transforming Culture: A Quantitative Analysis of the Relationship Between Evangelical Conversion, Basic Values, and Cultural Individualism-Collectivism Among Latin American University Students" (Atlanta: American University of Biblical Studies thesis, 2004).

the need for a personal conversion experience, a personal faith, and the preaching of the gospel to the lost.[2] It is not coincidental, however, that these individually-oriented messages come more frequently from a fountain that also recognizes the individual priesthood of every believer.

In the present essay we consider six characteristics of the development of what we could call the "responsibility ethic" in the context of evangelical conversion. The responsibility ethic is 1) the result of genuine inner transformation, 2) it develops in a natural and organic manner, 3) it affects family relationships, 4) it affects economic relationships, 5) it is related to volunteerism, and 6) it provides community in the midst of chaos.

The choice of this term "responsibility ethic" is related to Max Weber's terminology (Weber 1948, 1958). Though the legitimacy of some of his claims have been called into question (Stark 2004), Weber's identification of what he called a "Protestant work ethic" established him as a central figure in the past century of debate over the relationship between religion and society or the influence of gospel on culture. Weber posited that Reformed theological influences were fundamental to the rise of democratic capitalism in the Western world. His work can at least be credited with pointing to the influence of religious movements on material culture. Because the present study is concerned not only with a work ethic or with economic and political variables, the broader implications of the term "responsibility ethic" seem to make its use more appropriate than the use of Weber's terms (Weber 1958, 91).

The first point to be mentioned about the responsibility ethic in the context of evangelical conversion is that it is the result of genuine inner transformation. As Kenneth Latourette recognized in reference not only to Augustine but to many others, "Christianity worked the moral transformation which it demanded. Augustine was by no means the first or the only morally defeated individual who found victory in the Gospel. This was so frequent as to be almost normal" (1997, 107).

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[2] For a definition of evangelicalism see Daniel Reid et al., Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 123. See also José Míguez Bonino, Faces of Latin American Protestantism, trans. Eugene L. Stockwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 27-28.

Samuel Escobar notes that in Latin American Pentecostalism, the prohibitions against alcohol and tobacco "went along with a strong emphasis on an emotional conversion moment, an anointing with the power of God, which in some cases was the point of breaking away from old habits" (2002, 56).

The encounter with God leads to a changed life. The Gospel begins as a re-orienting of the individual's vertical relationship with God, and then broadens to a consideration of the horizontal implications of that. This fits Rene Padilla's contention that repentance of necessity must have social implications (1986, 19). As Padilla says, "Repentance is not mere remorse of the conscience – the 'worldly sorrow' that produces death (2 Cor. 7:10) – but a change of attitude, a restructuring of all values, a reorientation of the whole personality."[3] The oft-overlooked reality of genuine Biblical Christianity is that God Himself offers to bring about that necessary inner transformation: He said "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people."[4]

In second place, the development of the responsibility ethic in the context of evangelical conversion develops naturally and organically. This implies the absence of political motivation, and that its impact on the economic sphere as well is unintended. Some commentators on Weber have expressed precisely that. We begin with a closer look at Weber's theory.

Weber contends that the predestination doctrine of Calvinism or of the Reformed church led to a zealous pursuit of good works, since good works were taken to be a confirmation or proof of election, putting at ease the troubled consciences that were unsure of their election. This zealous commitment to good works Weber called "worldly asceticism" in contrast to the asceticism manifested in earlier centuries of Christianity in monasticism, etc. Weber also notes that this attitude, and the predestination doctrine, had an individualizing effect on society, in that the

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[3] "Y el arrepentimiento no es un mero remordimiento de conciencia – la 'tristeza del mundo' que produce muerte (2 Co. 7:10) – sino un cambio de actitud, una reestructuración de todos los valores, una reorientación de toda la personalidad." Trans. mine.

[4] As quoted in Hebrew 8:10.

believer stood alone before God; no church or priest could help him, in contrast to the Catholic idea of salvation coming via the church (1958, 104-105, 115, 127).

While many have since critiqued Weber's analysis, it provides us at least with a starting point for discussion. What Weber saw has been observed by many others and is not easily dismissed;[5] his interpretation of what he saw is probably less accurate.

It is doubtful, for example, that Calvin would have agreed with Weber's assessment of Calvin's own influence. On the contrary, H. Richard Niebuhr contends that while "It is true that the teaching of the Genevan reformer supplied one of the main foundations for the development of modern democracy, it was far from Calvin's intention to promote either civil liberty or democracy" (1957, 41). This is interesting. Peter Berger similarly posits that the affinities between Protestantism and these other entities (including individualism and the "Protestant work ethic") are, in the main, unintended, and "are the result not of explicated doctrine, but of the unanticipated behavioral consequences of both doctrine and religious experience" (1990, ix).

The fact that the development of the "responsibility ethic," the counter-agent to individualism, is an unintended by-product of Protestantism's spread is especially significant in the Latin American and Caribbean context. It has been repeatedly alleged by opponents that the spread of evangelicalism in Latin America is a conspiracy financed and promoted by North American political and business interests. Though this theory has been discredited on various counts, it continues to surface in surprising contexts (Bonino 1997, 1-5; Escobar 2002, 90; Stoll 1993, 1).

Not only is the development of the responsibility ethic natural and organic, the third characteristic of the development of the responsibility ethic is that it affects family relationships. Some especially interesting testimony of the gospel's impact on family life has come in recent years from Latin America. Philip Jenkins notes that evangelicalism in Latin

[5] It has not been "politically correct" in recent decades to attribute progress to cultural values, which is equivalent to declaring some cultural values – and hence some cultures - better than others. A recent work that flies in the face of this tendency is aptly titled Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress. Edited by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Basic, 2000).

America "has encouraged a new and exalted view of the family and of domesticity, placing much greater emphasis on male responsibility and chastity" (Jenkins 2002, 75). The acceptance of male responsibility in the family is very highly related to development, as documented not only in Latin America but also in the United States (Bennet 2001, 87-94; Dobson 2001, 53-66).

Elizabeth Brusco reports from Colombia on the profound impact of evangelicalism on family life:

> My data on Colombian evangelical households support the conclusion reached by other analysts of Latin American Pentecostalism: that conversion of both a woman and her spouse improves the material circumstances of the household. Quite simply, no longer is 20 to 40 percent of the household budget consumed by the husband in the form of alcohol. Ascetic codes block many of the other extra household forms of consumption that characterize masculine behavior in Colombia, such as smoking, gambling, and visiting prostitutes. Furthermore, an emphasis on marital fidelity for both partners prohibits a man from keeping other women outside his marriage, so a man's limited resources are no longer split among two or more households dependent on his wage.
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> . . . Yet the tangible improvement in the lives of women and children is only one indicator of a much more remarkable trend. With conversion, machismo, the culturally shaped aggressive masculinity that defines the male role in much of mestizo Colombia, is replaced by evangelical belief as the main definer of expectations in husband-wife relations. The *machista* personality and the male role defined by evangelical Protestantism are almost diametric opposites. (Brusco 1993, 147-148)

Brusco notes in summary that "evangelicalism reforms gender roles in a way that enhances female status. It promotes female interests not only in simple, practical ways but also through its potential as an antidote to machismo" (144). Writing from the Guatemalan context, Linda Green concurs, noting that "Women point to the prohibition of alcohol use by the *evangélicos* as an attractive feature of 'conversion'" (Green 1993, 175).

As alluded to above, the fourth characteristic of the responsibility ethic is that it affects economics. This is the point Weber especially emphasized. Many others have seen it as well, and it is best understood in the context of the above points about family and about inner transformation.

Consider the opinion of the famous evangelist D.L. Moody. George Marsden reports that Moody held that:

Conversion inevitably led to personal responsibility and moral uplift, qualities which the conventional wisdom said the poor most often lacked. . . . Once wanderers came 'home' and the poor acquired the sense of responsibility found in strong Christian families, poverty would cease. So individual conversions would eventually bring social reform. (Marsden 1980, 37)

In concrete terms, conversion to evangelicalism is usually associated with abstaining from alcohol consumption and the related fiestas. That can mean tremendous economic savings. Consider for example that one study indicated that between 20 and 40 percent of the income of one group of rural Colombians was spent on alcohol (Brusco 1993, 156).

That the poor who come into the kingdom tend to rise on the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline again attests to the transforming power of the gospel. That this process of change is mediated by a change in the individual's conception of individual responsibility has been noted earlier.

That the worldly asceticism Weber speaks of is conducive to the creation of wealth is readily supported. Many concur with it, from Paul's writings forward. John Wesley specifically lamented that "For religion must of necessity produce industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches."[6] Of the material success of the early American

[6] See Darrow L. Miller, Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures (Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, 1998), 247; Niebuhr, Social Sources of Denominationalism, 54-55, 70.

Puritans, Cotton Mather had this to say: "Religion begat prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother."[7]

Niebuhr also affirms the relationship between Calvinism and capitalism, though perhaps not to the extent suggested by Weber and others:

The conservative conclusion which may be drawn for the purposes of our study from the evidence amassed is that the Calvinistic denominations in general are representative middle-class churches, whose rise and development as religious groups were conditioned by the economic interests of the bourgeoisie and the economic rise of whose members as a middle and capitalist trade class was strongly influenced by the faith of Geneva. (Niebuhr 1957, 80)

Niebuhr's work on the Social Sources of Denominationalism is also interesting in its analysis of the relationship between religious conversion and practice. Inverting Weber's contention that religious convictions give rise to economic and sociopolitical results, Niebuhr's thesis is that denominations are essentially born out of class differences, and are caste-bound. He describes denominationalism as the story of the religiously neglected poor, coming into the kingdom and fashioning an organizational entity around their identity, rising then on the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline, and then in their new-found cultural respectability in turn neglecting and rejecting the new poor succeeding them on the lower plane (17-21, 28).

This does seem to be borne out to some degree in the Latin American Protestant context, where the older "mainline" denominations are now primarily made up of the middle-class, who have risen from their earlier status. The Pentecostal churches, newer than the above, are still primarily of the lower classes (Escobar 2002, 8).

The fifth characteristic of the responsibility ethic in the context of evangelical conversion is its relationship to volunteerism. This does have profound political implications, and has been variously noted by writers as diverse in time as Alexis de Tocqueville, and by Robert N. Bellah in the

[7] Stephen Foster, Their Solitary Way (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). See also Richard M. Weaver, Ideas Have Consequences (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 15.

landmark study Habits of the Heart.[8] In the Latin American religious context, Escobar contends that in their practice of volunteerism, Latin American evangelicals reflect the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (102). Escobar also notes Roman Catholic Church frustration over its inability to match popular Pentecostalism in mobilizing all its members in the task of evangelization (92-93).

Protestant church government is often much more democratic than Roman Catholic Church government. In a study on culture and democracy, Ronald Inglehart reminds us that "Historically, the Roman Catholic Church was the prototype of a hierarchical, centrally controlled institution; Protestant churches were relatively decentralized and more open to local control" (Inglehart 2000, 91).

The sixth characteristic of the responsibility ethic in the context of evangelical conversion is that it provides community in the midst of chaos. This is increasingly important, and provides ample explanation for Christianity's expansion in the developing world today. Jenkins notes that evangelicalism in Latin America provides radical community, and addresses the social needs of the poor. Jenkins goes on to argue that in the chaos of life in the developing world today (like in the declining Roman Empire or in eighteenth century England), the Christian faith is able to bring individuals what their societies are not able to provide: a place of refuge in the storm, caring community, and personal contact with a God that truly "intervenes directly in everyday life" (Jenkins 75-77). Escobar notes that the evangelical churches "are observed to create an atmosphere of community and family for the poor in the city" (Escobar 95). Other authors have similarly noted that evangelicalism's growth in Latin America is related to its ability to provide a refuge for the poor, and especially for women.[9]

A dissenting opinion certainly applies, questioning whether the growth and impact of Protestantism is caused as much by internal

[8] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. by Henry Reeve, (original 1835; reprint, New York: Bantam, 2000); Robert N. Bellah et al. Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, updated ed. (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996).

[9] See especially the articles by Elizabeth Brusco, by Linda Green, and by Lesley Gill, in Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America, edited by Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll.

transformation as by external dynamics. In Michael Novak's The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Democratic Capitalism, obviously titled in reference to Weber's work, Novak acknowledges that Weber did not err in finding "a moral and cultural dimension internal to capitalism," yet he contends that:

The weakest part of Weber's thesis, as we have seen, lay in its theological analysis. For it may well be true that the effects of the Protestant ethic, whether in the countries singled out by Weber or in Latin America today, lie far less than Weber thought in strict ideas of predestination and calling, and rather more in the delegitimizing of the old order effected by a new nonestablished religion, whose converts feel free at last to be acting persons in their own right. Thus Jews, Catholics, and indeed other men and women who have rejected the old order in the name of initiative and creativity have done as well as the Calvinists Weber singled out. (1993, 7, 231-232)

Specifically regarding the transforming role of evangelical conversion in Latin America, Novak argues that moral/religious conversion has power to transform those who experience it by replacing the static old order, in which they were stuck, with a new sense of self, hope, and possibility (230). This objection notwithstanding, the consensus of history still favors the argument that the advance of economic and political freedoms has followed the advance of evangelical Christianity. Novak's point is also well taken that evangelicalism's advance has in turn been enhanced by the delegitimization of the old establishment in the current environment of globalization. Perhaps it is most accurate to say with Garrard-Burnett that "religious mobility is both a product and a cause of economic change" (1993, 203).

In summary, from the dawn of biblical revelation, the revealed word and will of God as contained in Scripture have been declared to be normative for the behavior of His people. This has been understood to be the case throughout church history among Christians, indeed to the present day among those who now call themselves "evangelicals." Consider Latourette's admission that "Christianity worked the moral transformation which it demanded" (107).

In regard to the factors, then, that have given rise to the individualism of Western civilization, while consideration needs to be

given to the influences of Enlightenment rationalism and environmental factors such as the hardships and isolation on the frontier, the primary explanation lies in the ability of evangelical Protestantism to "deliver" in the above sense of working the moral transformation it demands. This fact prompts the contention that were it not for the influence of evangelical Protestantism in the development of Western culture, there would not have arisen a sufficient base of virtue (the responsibility ethic) to be able to make the West governable in the democratic tradition. The North American colonies would then have undoubtedly experienced the authoritarian or autocratic leadership experienced by most of the rest of the world at that time. As for the Caribbean, we see great diversity from nation to nation in degree of individual freedoms, perhaps reflecting that the influence of evangelicalism on Caribbean development varied greatly from island to island. Some study has been done in this direction, suggesting a relationship between the role of the church in society in colonial times and the influence of the church today (Hegeman 2002).

The future expectation for specifically North American and Western European civilization is a mixture of good and bad, however. Without a return to personal responsibility, the increasing emphasis on individual freedom will eventually produce anarchy, chaos, and thus trigger an authoritarian reaction. As for the developing nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, given the indicated relationships between evangelical growth and positive social implications, and given the present rate of evangelical growth, the best is clearly yet to come. For the Caribbean, caught as it is between a dying traditionalism and a new awakening, a lot depends on the next few years. Will the increasing pressures of social breakdown, of crime, of HIV/AIDS infection, and of globalization's squeeze on the Caribbean economic situation, push the Caribbean church to a renewed expression of the responsibility ethic?

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