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A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) Bulletin (US)* can be found here:

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# TSEF BULLETIN

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<b>Introducing This Issue</b> <i>Vernon Grounds</i>	3
<b>Finis to Fratricide</b> <i>Vernon Grounds</i>	4
<b>Evangelical Diversity and Self-Criticism: Signs of Hope</b> <i>Thomas F. Johnson</i>	8
<b>Our Shared Evangelical Heritage</b> <i>Timothy L. Smith</i>	10
<b>The Black Contribution To Evangelicalism</b> <i>James Earl Massey</i>	16
<b>The Authority of the Bible: What Shall We Then Preach?</b> <i>Paul J. Achtemeier</i>	19
<b>The American Hour, The Evangelical Moment</b> <i>Os Guinness</i>	22
<b>CONFERENCE REPORTS:</b>	
<b>North American Evangelical Missions: The Last 100 Years</b> <i>Marvin Bergman</i>	24
<b>Missiology Students Form Society</b> <i>Thomas Russell</i>	26
<b>The Case of <i>Brave New People</i>: A Shadow and a Hope</b> <i>Stephen Charles Mott</i>	27
<b>Abortion: Four Reviews</b>	31
<b>Book Reviews and Comments</b>	34

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relented and ordered Niemoller to conduct a service. He writes of that event:

There were seven of us: a British colonel, a Dutch minister of war, two Norwegian ship-owners, a Yugoslav diplomatist and a Macedonian journalist, and me, the Lutheran pastor from Germany. When I realized what a task I should have to fulfill, I felt embarrassed and even desperate; for how should I—the German—find the right way to the hearts of this congregation, to men who hated Germany and Germans and who could not do otherwise?

But a sort of minor miracle happened. As Niemoller has recorded:

At noontime before Christmas Eve somebody knocked at my door. The cell was opened, and in came the Dutch minister of war with the Gestapo guard. "Good morn-

ing, pastor," he said. "I am just dropping in to ask you something. My comrades and I myself want to celebrate Holy Supper with you tonight after your sermon. You may be astonished, but we could not help asking you." In this way it happened that in the evening I preached my sermon: "Glory be to God in heaven and peace on earth to men of good will!" And peace there was when we knelt down, seven people of different nations, divided by hatred and war, but now united and bound together by the love of God and by the grace of Jesus Christ. The small cell widened, walls and wires disappeared. We felt liberated and, in a flash, we saw God's promise fulfilled: "Peace on Earth."

My brothers and sisters, let us pray and work to the end that our churches may be healingly "united and bound together by the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ."

# Evangelical Diversity and Self-Criticism: Signs of Hope

by Thomas F. Johnson

Nearly two hundred evangelical leaders gathered June 4-6, 1986, at Eastern College, St. Davids, Pennsylvania, for the third annual Evangelical Roundtable. The topic was "Evangelicalism: Surviving Its Success." In his opening remarks, Robert Seiple, president of the college and of Eastern Baptist Seminary, which sponsored the conference, welcomed those present, encouraged discernment, open dialogue, and understanding among the conferees, and warned them against dogmatism. A similar theme was sounded by *TSF Bulletin* editor Vernon Grounds in the morning Bible studies on Romans 14 and 15.

## Roots Of Social Concern

Johns Hopkins historian Timothy L. Smith led off a lineup of heavy-hitting addresses by providing a historical overview of evangelical involvement in "social idealism" (see article, p. 10). Evangelicals were in the forefront of liberation movements in the 19th century (women's rights, defense of the poor, anti-slavery, free public schools, etc.) He demonstrated that contemporary evangelical social concern has deep roots in their nineteenth century ancestors' passion for the kingdom of God.

## Southern Baptists

Roy Honeycutt, president of embattled Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, asked whether success would destroy the SBC. Documenting both its successes and its divisions, he warned that the Lord of history will judge the church with a divine perspective on success. Southern Baptists, he said, are a people searching for a new identity, with the loss of both the cultural and programmatic syntheses that have held the denomination together in the past. Will the new theological synthesis currently being "forced" by more conservative leaders work? "Not in my lifetime and certainly not in my tenure as president of Southern Seminary," Honeycutt vowed.

## Feminist Concerns

One of the highlights of the conference was the clash of

feminist perspectives represented by Elouise Fraser, Eastern Baptist Seminary theologian, and Elizabeth Achtemeier, Old Testament professor from Union Seminary, Virginia. Fraser struck hard against the sin of paternalism among evangelicals, the "fathers"-know-best attitude that stifles theology and leads to fruitless battles over inerrancy and creationism. "Do not marginalize the concerns of evangelical feminists," she warned.

Achtemeier, while asserting the bias against women in the church is a scandal, saved her strongest words for feminist theology itself, which, she said, by insisting on the use of female terms for God, is leading the church to a religion other than Christianity, a Canaanite goddess religion, that unifies creation with Creator and ultimately makes human history meaningless.

## Black Perspective

A black evangelical perspective was brought by Tuskegee Institute professor James Earl Massey (see article, p. 16). He noted that black churches are almost universally evangelical and that they have contributed to the movement in five ways: (1) by proving that Christianity is not a white man's religion (2) by a rich, musical heritage (3) through an active witness against racism (4) through celebrative and radical preaching and (5) by taking leadership in urban ministry. When asked why there is such a low visibility of blacks in evangelical theology, Massey replied, "Blacks and whites have had different agendas: whites have been preoccupied with theologizing, blacks with doing things."

## Evangelism

Evangelism was the primary concern of the first evening. Jay Kesler, former Youth for Christ national director and now president of Taylor University, spoke on "Jesus, Rambo and the Gates of Hell." He maintained that there are millions of pagan young people in America today with no personal or family ties to the church. YFC learned that they cannot be reached by youth who have grown up in the church and in Christian homes; rather, it takes an ex-pagan to reach a pagan. He warned that instead of taking on the new challenges of evangelism, the evangelical movement is succumbing to the siren song of civil religion. Both Jesus and Rambo are being

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solicited to bless America. But Rambo is Barabbas! So the question is: will evangelicals maintain an authentic Christ, even at the risk of crucifixion?

Samuel Escobar, missiologist from Eastern Baptist Seminary, added a Third World perspective. He noted that the church can be a hindrance rather than a help to evangelism. When that happens, he maintained, God raises up parachurch movements to spread the gospel. Evangelical survival depends upon letting mission set the agenda for theology, re-thinking authentic piety, and ceasing sterile doctrinal disputes.

Joel Nederhood, director of the Back to God Hour, concluded the focus on evangelism by advocating greater use of broadcast and video media. Yet he warned against selling out the integrity of the gospel for "effectiveness." There is a tendency to try to "zap" people in thirty to sixty minutes with a flamboyant, sensational, simplistic message. "Be effective," he urged, "but be authentic."

### **Biblical Authority**

The issue for the next morning was biblical authority. Bruce Waltke, an Old Testament scholar from Westminster Seminary, stressed the normativity and contemporaneity of the Bible. "It is the direct Word of God." One cannot separate "Word of God" from "Scripture."

Manfred Brauch, New Testament professor from Eastern Baptist Seminary, maintained that the highest view of the Bible is the one that is most faithful to the Bible's own intention. This intention focuses on God's saving, incarnational actions in history and especially in Jesus Christ. The inspiration and authority of the Bible must, then, be understood not deductively, but incarnationally, by an inductive study of the text itself, its statements and phenomena. When we make that examination, we find that the term "inerrancy" is not very helpful in conveying the essential authority of Scripture. Brauch argued that just as Jesus was divine yet came in human weakness, so the Bible speaks with divine authority, even though it participates in the normal, human limitations of its authors.

Paul J. Achtemeier, who teaches New Testament at Union Seminary, Virginia, emphasized the relation between biblical authority and preaching (see article, p. 19). Scripture is the vehicle for the Word of God to be addressed to the church. This happens when the Holy Spirit witnesses to the lordship of Jesus Christ in the context of the Christian community. It is in the community that we hear the Bible as God's Word spoken to us. Achtemeier also advocated a new approach to the historical-critical method. "Historical" helps us appreciate that the Bible comes from another time and culture; it puts a necessary distance between ourselves and the text. "Critical," though, must be understood as self-critical—critical of our own assumptions, values, and pre-understandings that often keep us from hearing the Word of God. Without the historical-critical method, we will preach ourselves, and not Jesus Christ, as Lord.

### **Thinking Styles**

In a less-focused afternoon session, mission strategist Waldron Scott defined three styles of thinking or categorizing: "bounded set," "centered set," and "fuzzy set." The first characterizes most Western thought, the latter two most non-Western peoples. He then offered the challenging insight that "most of our problems in evangelical theology have been caused by the more rigid, either/or, 'bounded set' thinking." We need to explore a theological style that emphasizes relation to a fixed center and an appreciation of paradox and ambiguity.

### **Brave New Publishers**

James Sire, senior editor at InterVarsity Press, asked whether we should be censoring "brave new publishers," a reference to the book by Gareth Jones, *Brave New People*, which IVP was forced to withdraw under pressure from militant Christian anti-abortionists. Sire said publishers must have the freedom to publish responsible, unpopular views. Christian readers also have a responsibility to read, think and change before reacting publicly. The Christian Right's response to Jones' excellent book, now published by Eerdmans, was not appropriate, he claimed.

### **Too Much Politics?**

Ex-Falwell staffer Cal Thomas, now a Washington-based columnist, warned that there is a limit to how involved evangelicals can become in politics without either being co-opted by the state or losing the church's distinctive message of salvation. Christians of the left and of the right have made the same mistake of identifying of the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world. Human government, however, will not solve our fundamental problems.

### **Justice**

Evening messages by Calvin College philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff and Eastern Baptist Seminary ethicist Ron Sider proclaimed the biblical mandate of justice. Wolterstorff outlined the case for caring about justice: people are being treated unjustly, true Christian piety demands justice, and the God of the Bible loves and does justice. The presence of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry and the continuation of his ministry in his body, the church, also demand that we work, and not just wait, for justice.

Sider raised the question whether evangelicals will ever agree about what the Bible says about justice, in view of the name-calling and malicious stereotyping that have marked their internal debates over social issues. He urged a Covenant of Evangelical Integrity that calls for careful listening to and appreciation of the critiques of the other side and for on-going dialogue between differing views, e.g., between the more liberal Evangelicals for Social Action and the more conservative Institute for Religion and Democracy. Many of those present signed the covenant at breakfast the next morning and hoped for its wider distribution.

### **Trueblood**

The final addresses came from D. Elton Trueblood, octogenarian and evangelical statesman, Roberta Hestenes, Fuller Seminary's professor of discipleship and Christian formation, and from Os Guinness, author and Brookings Institute fellow. Trueblood, in a moving address titled "The Basis of Recovery," called for more "great evangelical leaders," such as John Baillie, J.B. Phillips, and C.S. Lewis, for persons whose lives are characterized by the inner life of devotion, the outer life of service, and the intellectual life of thought. These distinctives have also characterized Trueblood's own career.

### **The Need for Evangelical Maturity**

Hestenes' message was the most exegetical of the conference. She interpreted present-day evangelicalism in the light of Paul's Corinthian correspondence. Her analysis noted that: (1) we have been seduced by success, confusing means and ends (2) we have Corinthian standards of leadership, valuing more the superstar than the servant (3) we have acquiesced to superficiality, seeking quick-fixes for problems that took generations in the making (4) and we have an affinity for Ayatollahesque "great Satan" theories to explain why things go wrong ("If you can link your opponents to some 'great

Satan,' then you don't have to address the specifics of their arguments"). It is time for evangelicals to mature, she concluded, especially by "putting behind us old formulas and old dichotomies."

### A European Perspective

Finally, in the most intellectually stimulating message of the conference, British evangelical Os Guinness offered a European perspective on American evangelicalism (see article, p. 22). He compared this moment in American history to the evangelical hour in 19th century Britain, which saw an opportunity for authentic revival and social reform. The American concern for religion is not superficial but deeply rooted. Evangelicals can play a strategic role if they maintain the

Christian faith's two major strengths, the lordship of Jesus Christ over every sphere of life and the challenge of being Christian in the world while living in tension with it. Are today's evangelicals doing this? No, Guinness maintained. They are compromising the gospel to gain "success" and conforming to American culture. "Even if we win all the 'right' Christian issues, we may lose America's soul." Will God be God to evangelicals, or will they turn away to idols? "Ascribe glory to the Lord before the darkness falls," he concluded in a somber challenge.

The complete texts of all the presenters' remarks will be printed and published by Eastern College and Seminary before next year's Roundtable, which will focus on "The Sanctity of Life."

## A Shared Evangelical Heritage

by Timothy L. Smith

It is a splendid kindness to be asked to comment on an aspect of American and British evangelicalism which has rarely been noticed by commentators or historians: its amazing non-sectarianism. Sectarian competition that once existed within and between various evangelical communities and traditions has steadily declined. Scores of conferences involving many evangelical movements and their supporting denominations take place with almost no expression of sectarian rivalry. Onlookers will find this amazing, since the legend, both in historical accounts and among recent secular observers, is that ecumenicity is a trait of liberal Christianity and sectarian strife a principal feature of old-time Protestantism.

Why is this degree of good fellowship and mutual cooperation possible? It arises from the broad agreements among evangelicals that date from their beginning as a self-conscious Christian movement two hundred and fifty years ago in Scotland, England, Germany, and America. An evangelical, historians can now perceive, is one who, since the time of John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and August Francke, has believed that his or her religious life should rest fully upon the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures; that the center of those Scriptures is the promise of moral and spiritual rebirth through faith in Jesus Christ and the gift of God's Holy Spirit; and that, on both these accounts, believers should be devoted to evangelism, that is, to persuading lost persons to trust in Christ, and in that faith be born again.

These central affirmations informed American Protestantism throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1740, for example, the greatest Puritan pastors of Boston invited George Whitefield to his first evangelistic engagement there. He preached in nearly all of their pulpits and a great religious awakening followed. What prompted them was the reprinting in Boston of several of Whitefield's sermons, including his discourse preached in England three years before on *The Nature and Necessity of the New Birth*.<sup>1</sup> Another example: the first Lutheran pastors in Pennsylvania and New York and southward to Virginia and the Carolinas were Pietists. They came chiefly from the missionary institution at Halle, Saxony, in response to the pleas of Lutheran lay people already in America. They forwarded their petitions through a graduate, Henry M. Muhlenberg, who became the great organizer of colonial Lutheranism.<sup>2</sup>

American Methodism's vitality stemmed from the same three commitments. Methodism came to America on the eve of the War of Independence, while still a spiritual community within the Church of England. It decisively influenced what became the Virginia and Ohio dioceses of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Though the Methodists separated from their parent communion in 1784, Wesley's followers grew rapidly and by 1850 had become the largest Protestant sect in the United States and Canada.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, a similarly evangelical Baptist movement emerged out of the most revivalistic wing of Connecticut Puritanism and, through American and English immigrants, in the maritime provinces of Canada.<sup>4</sup> Transferred to the South by two of its young men who had studied theology at Yale, it began spreading among the plain people of that section, both slaves and free, like a benevolent plague. Though both Methodist and Baptist communions were divided during the long controversy over slavery, the Southern Baptist Convention eventually replaced the Methodist Episcopal Church, North, as America's largest Protestant group.<sup>5</sup>

The followers of Alexander Campbell, a Presbyterian evangelist from Scotland who was briefly a Baptist, now form three denominations: the Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Churches of Christ and Christian Churches. Congregational independence and adult baptism by immersion have always been as important to them as to Baptists. The nineteenth century forebearers of all three groups rest their faith on the same evangelical principles, though they emphasized reason more in explaining the process of one's embracing the faith by which he or she was born again.<sup>6</sup>

So with the multitude of nineteenth-century Protestant denominations organized among immigrants from Northern Ireland, Scandinavia, Germany, and central and eastern Europe. Without reference to the much-vaunted American frontier environment and often in conscious rejection of some notions that were popular among older American denominations, they formed themselves into religious communities that drew deeply upon British and continental understandings of these same three evangelical ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, when American Blacks won the freedom to establish their own congregations—a right that white southerners granted them only after the Civil War—they became mostly Methodists or Baptists. Black Christians were not only one hundred per cent American Protestants, as has often been pointed out, but they were and have remained overwhelmingly evangelical, preaching a Bible-centered gospel of the

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Timothy L. Smith is Professor of History at Johns Hopkins University. This material was originally presented at the Evangelical Roundtable June 4-6, 1986, and is used by permission.