

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR AMERICAN EVANGELICALS

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American evangelicalism is in a state of transition. We are now witnessing, as it were, a changing of the guard in the leadership of the evangelical movement. The founding fathers of modern American evangelicalism—Harold John Ockenga, Edward John Carnell, Wilbur M. Smith, Carl F. H. Henry, Billy Graham, Harold Lindsell—have either gone home to be with Christ or are now in the closing years of their earthly ministries. The torch of leadership will be passed to a new generation.

It was only a generation ago, in 1947, that Ockenga coined the phrase “the new evangelicalism.” The new evangelicalism differed from liberalism in its adherence to the historic doctrines of the Christian faith, from neo-orthodoxy in its conviction of the objective inspiration of the Scriptures, and from fundamentalism in its inclusive ecclesiology and commitment to comprehensive social concern.¹ This new reforming movement within American Protestantism, unlike some expressions of the older fundamentalism, was to be characterized by intellectual openness: “The theologian could not be obscurantist in treating such matters as the time of the Creation, the age of man, and the universality of the Flood; Christian theology was declared to be relevant to every phase of life.”²

Ockenga had been instrumental in the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, conceived of as an alternative to the more theologically liberal National Council of Churches. The NAE later spawned the National Religious Broadcasters Association, the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association, the World Evangelical Fellowship, the National Sunday School Association, and later *Christianity Today* and the work of Billy Graham.

By 1976 a self-styled evangelical had been elected president, and *Time* magazine announced that this was the “Year of the Evangelical.” And yet *Newsweek* also astutely observed: “1976 may yet turn out to be the year that the evangelicals won the White House but lost cohesiveness as a distinct force in American religion and culture.”³

In 1978 Ockenga said, “Great visibility is being given today to the word ‘evangelical’ and to the evangelical movement. Hopefully, it will not be vitiated

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¹H. J. Ockenga, “From Fundamentalism, Through New Evangelicalism, to Evangelicalism,” in *Evangelical Roots* (ed. K. Kantzer; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978) 41.

²*Ibid.*, p. 44.

³Cited by K. Kantzer, “Evangelicals and the Inerrancy Question,” in *Evangelical Roots* 88.

by a division of the movement or by loss of fidelity to evangelical content and practice."⁴

Today, in 1986, it is indeed appropriate that we reflect not only on the past accomplishments of our evangelical tradition but also on the future shape of its mission and the basis of its theological unity.

I would propose to sketch very briefly a proposal for future directions for American evangelicalism in terms of the following rubrics, or points of emphasis: the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the mission of God. Such emphases are, of course, very partial and selective, but they are, I believe, worthy of our special attention.

I. THE WORD OF GOD

We are all aware of how for over a century conservative American Protestantism has had an ongoing and all-too-often bruising and painful encounter with the historical-critical study of the Bible. From the struggles of A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield with Charles Briggs in the Presbyterian Church in the latter part of the nineteenth century, through the fundamentalist-modernist controversies in the earlier part of this century, and through the *Battle for the Bible* and its repercussions in recent evangelicalism, the struggle has been intense, often leaving scars on individuals and institutions. This wrestling with historical-critical methodology was an expression of the larger encounter of the Enlightenment and the spirit of modernity with the historic faith of the Church. It is a struggle that is yet to be concluded.

In a significant sense the tradition of Old Princeton, of Hodge and Warfield and Machen, has been continued and even reached a culmination in the work of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy—an organization in which Roger Nicole and J. I. Packer have played significant roles. In its carefully nuanced statements the ICBI has, I believe, expressed the essence of the concept of Biblical inerrancy in the phrase "true in all that it affirms." God's word is truth—and by "inerrancy" we understand that the Bible, when properly interpreted, is true in all that it affirms. This emphasis on the truthfulness of the affirmations or teachings of Scripture is an evangelical nonnegotiable and must be maintained if the evangelical enterprise is to continue as a cohesive and spiritually potent movement.

At the same time we must heed the admonition of Kenneth Kantzer that evangelicals must "relate their doctrine of inerrancy to current New Testament scholarship."⁵ Evangelical commitment to the actual text of Scripture, rather than to traditional interpretations of the text, implies continued openness to new ways of understanding the precise nature of the truth of Scripture and the ways in which the Biblical authors affirm that truth.

New methodologies such as the "canonical criticism" being developed by Brevard Childs and James Sanders may offer new categories and paradigms for understanding the unity and diversity within the Bible and the nature of

⁴Ockenga, "Fundamentalism" 46.

⁵Kantzer, "Evangelicals" 97.

the harmony of Biblical revelation.⁶ The disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, and the sociology of religion can supplement the traditional literary and historical approaches to the text and assist the Church in its mission of projecting the Word of God into new cultural settings.⁷

We honor the tradition of Old Princeton not by simply repeating the categories of Hodge and Warfield but in wrestling, as they did, with the frontline scholarship of the day—all the while with the unwavering conviction of the complete truthfulness of the Holy Scriptures in all they affirm.

Furthermore, and even more fundamentally, I would propose that the time is now ripe for evangelical Biblical scholars and theologians to experience a “paradigm shift” in the study of the Bible, a shift in the center of gravity of our focus away from the agenda of the Enlightenment and the historical-critical methodology and toward the contest of the Biblical word with the great world religions—with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—heretofore so largely resistant to the Christian message.

Peter Berger has astutely noted that the agenda of the old liberal theology (and, we might add, of much of twentieth-century evangelicalism) “was the contestation with modernity. That agenda has exhausted itself. The much more pressing agenda today is the contestation with the fullness of human religious possibilities.”⁸

“Most sterile of all,” he goes on to say, “is any renewed effort to make Christianity palatable to what is deemed to be the secular consciousness of modern man. Such an effort is ironically futile in that precisely this modern secularity is in crisis today. The most obvious fact about the contemporary world is not so much its secularity, but rather its great hunger for redemption and for transcendence.”⁹

In other words, the fundamental preoccupation of evangelical scholars should not be the defense of the Bible from its critics—although this is in good measure needful—but, rather, the proclamation and demonstration of the biblical gospel in cultures where that message is not being heard. The essence of the evangelical tradition and the core of its theology is not a theory of inspiration but a message of redemption from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Building upon and affirming the labors of a generation of evangelical scholars—from Warfield and Machen to Carl Henry—who have defended the divine authority of Scripture, I would argue that our primary focus now become the communication in power of the gospel message in those Islamic, Hindu, Bud-

⁶See e.g. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); J. A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); *Canon and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); *God Has a Story Too* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

⁷C. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), is one recent attempt by an evangelical along these lines.

⁸P. L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979) 183.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 183–184.

dhist and Chinese cultures where so many have not yet heard. This missionary focus for evangelical scholarship is consistent with the best insights of the evangelical tradition. This implies as well that the study of comparative religion and cultural anthropology should have a more significant role than is presently the case.

II. THE SPIRIT OF GOD

David S. Barrett in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* tells us that the three main streams of world Pentecostalism—the classical Pentecostal denominations, the charismatic movements within the traditional churches, and what Barrett calls the “indigenous non-white churches” of the third world—as of 1980 included over one hundred million believers and could grow to 250 million by the year 2000.¹⁰ In the not-too-distant future, notes Barrett, Pentecostals will number almost as many as all other Protestants together.¹¹

The full significance of this dramatic moving of the Spirit of God around the world is only now beginning to make its impact on evangelical theological reflection. W. J. Hollenweger, a missiologist who has studied the Pentecostal movement for over twenty years, writes:

It is no secret that the Pentecostal churches have so far not produced a charismatic theology. Even their doctrine of the Spirit is nothing new and often only a weak re-hash of the position of the Holiness movement of the nineteenth century, dressed up with the doctrine of the ‘initial sign’ (speaking in tongues). . . . It is my conviction that the Pentecostals’ theological articulation does not adequately represent their practice and experience.¹²

There remains much fruitful work to be done in this area.

At the same time those of us who, like myself, stand within the Reformed theological tradition have much to learn from the Wesleyan, Holiness and Pentecostal experiences of the Spirit. Both Scripture and experience attest that the Spirit of God is not only the Spirit who illuminates the Word and regenerates the soul but also the Spirit of power and of praise.

The term “power evangelism” is a relatively new term in the evangelical vocabulary. It denotes a type of evangelism accompanied by the kind of supernatural power—including healing and exorcism in the power of the Spirit—described in the gospels and Acts. Worldwide there has been a growing trend since about 1950 toward the recognition and practice of power evangelism, especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America.¹³

¹⁰Cited in W. J. Hollenweger, “After Twenty Years’ Research on Pentecostalism,” *Theology* 87 (1984) 403.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²W. J. Hollenweger, “Creator Spiritus: The Challenge of Pentecostal Experience to Pentecostal Theology,” *Theology* 81 (1978) 32.

¹³C. P. Wagner, “Power Evangelism: Carlos Annacondia,” *Christian Life* (November 1985) 17. Wagner’s *Spiritual Power and Church Growth* (Creation House) relates the story of the Pentecostal explosion in Latin America.

Such power evangelism is really nothing new. It is the recovery, in part, of the spiritual power known by the early Church. Historian Ramsay MacMullen notes that such "power encounters" were an integral part of the Church's spiritual arsenal:

Driving all competition from the field head-on was crucial. The world, after all, held many dozens and hundreds of gods. Choice was open to everybody. It could thus be only a most exceptional force that would actually displace alternatives and compel allegiance; it could only be the most probative demonstrations that would work.¹⁴

Tertullian could issue this challenge to the pagans of his day: "Let a man be produced right here before your court who, it is clear, is possessed by a demon, and that spirit, commanded by any Christian at all, will . . . confess himself a demon in truth." Cyprian declared that the demons behind the pagan idols, "when they are adjured by us in the name of the the true God, yield forthwith, and confess, and admit they are forced also to leave the bodies they have invaded; and *you may see them*, by our summons and by the workings of hidden majesty, consumed with flames."¹⁵

"The manhandling of demons—humiliating them, making them howl, beg for mercy, tell their secrets, and depart in a hurry—served a purpose quite essential to the Christian definition of monotheism," notes MacMullen. "It made physically (or dramatically) visible the superiority of the Christian's patron Power over all others."¹⁶ The God of these Christians, like the God of Elijah, was no impotent idol but a God "who answered by fire."

The Spirit of God continues to work with power today. C. Peter Wagner tells of the remarkable ministry of Carlos Annacondia, an Argentinian lay evangelist who in a forty-night crusade in the city of San Justo saw some 62,000 decisions for Christ. Healings of all kinds and exorcisms occurred nightly. "There is so much spiritual power in the meetings," writes Wagner, "that when Annacondia gives the invitation, people literally run and push each other to get under the rope to the tables in order to register their decision for Christ."¹⁷

Yes, there is a sense in which, one day, "we will all be Pentecostal." To our evangelical experience of the Spirit as Illuminator, Regenerator and Sanctifier we can add the experience of the Spirit as Healer and Liberator and of the Spirit who inspires the free and joyful praise of the risen Christ. The ascended, victorious Lord at the right hand of the Father is even now pouring out the Spirit in all his fullness upon the Church, in order that we might carry the great commission with power into those Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese cultures where Christ is not yet fully known.

¹⁴R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984) 27.

¹⁵Cited in *ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁷Wagner, "Power" 17.

III. THE MISSION OF GOD

As American evangelicals we need to extend our understandings of the Word and Spirit of God because the greatest missionary task of the Church is still ahead of us.

We are of course aware of the paramount challenge of reaching the "hidden peoples"—those 2.5 billion people hidden in some 16,750 cultural groups that are hidden from existing Christian outreach by invisible barriers of language and culture. These people represent three out of four of the non-Christians in the world.¹⁸

There is less awareness of the great opportunities presented by the "hidden peoples in our own midst"—those Asian, Hispanic and other national groups that have migrated to the United States as refugees. Over 650,000 refugees from Southeast Asia have resettled in America. Political and social instability in Central America and Mexico promises to increase the growing stream of legal and illegal Hispanic immigrants. These people come with great human needs and often with considerable openness to the gospel, and reaching them should be a high priority on our denominational and missionary agendas.

I would like to underline yet another dimension of the world missionary challenge—namely, the third-world "megacity." By the year 2000 the population of Mexico City could reach 31 million. By the turn of the century 20 out of 25 of the urban centers with more than 10 million inhabitants will be in the third world.¹⁹ Cities in the third world, now home to one billion people, will balloon to nearly four billion by 2025.²⁰

This explosive growth in third-world urban populations threatens to overwhelm all human resources. "Sprawling slums, massive traffic jams, chronic unemployment, regular failure of electric and water services, strained educational and recreational facilities, and skyrocketing food and fuel costs," notes one observer, "are the stuff of daily existence."²¹ Two thousand tons of garbage and trash litter the streets of Calcutta on a given day, a city where the average earnings of a family of five are thirty-four dollars per month.²²

These third-world megacities have "megaproblems" that, in the short run, seem humanly unsolvable—and yet preach the gospel we must. "If not now, then when? If not by us, then by whom?"

It is encouraging to recall that it was precisely in the great urban centers of the Roman empire—Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome—that early Christianity experienced its greatest growth.²³ Christian churches offered

¹⁸*Five Global Facts* (Pasadena: United States Center for World Mission, 1982) 3.

¹⁹S. Bessis, "Tomorrow's World," *World Press Review* (October 1984) 40.

²⁰R. W. Fox, "The Urban Explosion," *National Geographic* (August 1984) 179.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²O. Friedrich, "A Proud Capital's Distress," *Time* (August 6, 1984) 26 ff.

²³See e.g. A. H. M. Jones, "The Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity," in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (ed. A. Momigliano; London: Oxford University, 1963) 18.

a sense of community, of belonging, in an impersonal and uncertain social environment. The early urban Christians were in a more than verbal sense "members of one another," observed the British classical scholar E. R. Dodds. "I think that was a major cause, perhaps the strongest single cause, of the spread of Christianity."²⁴ By the grace of God, that same dynamic can be demonstrated in the third-world megacities of today and tomorrow.

Without abandoning our commitment to the needs of our suburban and rural constituencies we need to self-consciously sharpen our missionary focus on the burgeoning needs of the third-world megacities. Such a focus is deeply consistent with the great commission itself.

IV. CONCLUSION

As American evangelicals we must reaffirm our commitment to the complete truthfulness and authority of Scripture, but with a focus not on the agenda set by the Enlightenment and the historical-critical method but rather on the coming contest with our world religions—with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam; that to our knowledge of the Holy Spirit as Illuminator, Regenerator and Sanctifier we add the knowledge of the Spirit as Healer, Liberator and Spirit of praise; and that our missionary agenda be re-oriented toward the needs of the hidden peoples, and especially toward the megacities of the third world.

It is indeed an exciting time in history to be a Christian. It is an exciting time to be serving Christ in ministry. I believe that the time of the greatest expansion of the Christian Church in all of human history is just ahead of us. May God help us, individually and collectively, to be on the cutting edge of the growth of Christ's kingdom as we approach the twenty-first century.

²⁴E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965) 138.