



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH 12.8.16

WILL THE REAL EVANGELICALS PLEASE STAND UP?

By Dr. Riley B. Case

Tony Compolo and Shane Claiborne wrote an article for the *New York Times* op-ed section entitled "The Evangelicalism of Old White Men Is Dead." They argue that in the support of Donald Trump for president, white evangelicalism has lost its credibility among those persons who believed that the evangelical movement stood for morality and decency and sensitivity to others. In recent years, argue the authors, *evangelicalism* has been associated with anti-environment, anti-immigrant, and anti-gay sentiments and has championed guns and war. Now, say Compolo and Claiborne, is the time to replace the word *evangelical*. A new movement and new terminology is needed. As outdated labels have been retired before, so now.

I write not to comment on the political preferences of evangelicals nor even on the article's misrepresentation of evangelicals but to defend the word *evangelical* and the faith it signifies. Even some United Methodist evangelicals seem to think the word needs help. At the Wesleyan Covenant Association launch event in Chicago in October, several speakers added words like *traditional*, *orthodox*, and *conservative* on occasions evidently to beef up the word *evangelical*.

Some historical perspective. According to American dictionaries the word *evangelical* is associated with the word "Protestant" and emphasizes salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual. In Europe the word means basically "Protestant" as over against Catholic, or in the case of the Anglican Church, low church as over against high church. Salvation by faith is the focus instead of salvation through the sacraments.

In the Methodist literature in America during most of the 19th century the word *evangelical* was used of all the Christian groups except Roman Catholics, Unitarians, Swedenborgs, Universalists, and Mormons. Despite the

sectarianism and divisions of this time, there were truths that transcended the differences. The Methodist contribution was the linking of salvation by faith with the salvation experience, or the New Birth. .

Fueled by this message the Protestant world exploded in America. During the Second Great Awakening (1800-1850) while the population of the country grew fourfold the number of Protestant church members grew nearly nine-fold. All groups thrived but Methodists and Baptists not just added but multiplied the numbers. By 1855 these two groups accounted for nearly 70% of all church adherents. By 1850 there was a Methodist church in America for every 1,793 inhabitants. The Methodists accomplished this, it might be added, without the help of seminaries or boards and agencies. Methodism was also still the religion of preference for the poor. The average value of a Methodist church building was lower than any of the other denominations (including Baptists).

By mid-19th century the identifying marks of an *evangelical* Christian were the emphases on Original Sin, the Atoning work of Christ, the Authority of Scripture, and the New Birth. This is reflected in the dictionary definitions of *evangelical* through much even of the 20th century.

Of those Protestant churches, as the Methodist and Baptist that emphasize the salvation by faith that is in Jesus. (Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged 1971).

Of or having to do with the Protestant churches that emphasize Christ's atonement and salvation by faith as the most important parts of Christianity, as the Methodists and Baptists. (Thorndike Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary, 1956).

Pertaining to or designating any school of Protestants which holds that the essence of the gospel consists mostly in its doctrines of man's sinful condition and need of salvation, the revelation of God's grace in Christ, the necessity of spiritual renovation, and participation in the experience of redemption through faith. (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1961)

The 19th century evangelical consensus was compromised with the rise of liberal religious educators. Persons like Horace Bushnell began to teach that persons did not need a conversion experience but could "grow up" Christian through education and nurture. "Growing up Christian" de-emphasized or even denied the concept of original sin, the need for an atoning death by Christ on the cross, and the necessity of conversion. The Chautauqua Movement was the educators' attempt to replace revivals and camp meetings in an outdoor setting with education and uplifting cultural experiences.

Theological modernism, associated with the same liberal educators, deconstructed the faith even further. Original sin, the cross, the atonement, a

final judgment-these truths were simply cast aside in favor of building the kingdom by following Jesus and making the world a better place, often by political and social reform, which could include everything from eugenics to socialism and communism. Along the way the Scriptures became no more than one good book among many.

The evangelical reaction to modernism led to *fundamentalism*, a scholastic defense of basic Christian doctrines. Methodism, because it still emphasized conversion, was never caught up as much with fundamentalism as were some of the other denominations. When fundamentalism became associated with rigidity and separationism, many evangelicals disassociated themselves from the word *fundamentalism* and reclaimed the word *evangelical* to describe their understanding of the faith. In 1942 the National Association of Evangelicals was formed, in part as an alternative to the National Council of Churches, an association short on meaningful doctrine and long on liberal politics.

For most of its history the word *evangelical*, if associated at all with politics, was associated with reformist movements: temperance, women's rights, anti-slavery, and anti-big business. It tended to be anti-establishment and was never associated with ideas of theocracy.

Today the word *evangelical* covers a multitude of groups: Calvinists, dispensationalists, Pentecostals, charismatics, fundamentalists, restorationists, independent seeker-friendly megachurches, Sojourner-type progressives with an evangelical theology, most ethnic Christians, and almost all overseas Christians influenced by American missionaries. It also describes many and probably most common ordinary United Methodists even if they are not caught up in the theological debates. It is estimated and sometimes suggested by surveys that evangelicals make up from 25% to 40% of America's population.

Some in that group are an embarrassment to the rest of us. At the same time what the diverse groups have in common is what is essential and at the heart of Christian faith: an emphasis on Jesus Christ as Lord, and salvation and everlasting life through faith in his atoning death and resurrection through the New Birth. There is no other label that gathers up the essentials of the faith.

Evangelicalism is not the religion of old white men. It is the banner by which groups like The Confessing Movement march. It is Biblical Christianity for our day. We hold the banner high.