



WAS MURCH

Since the days of Alexander Campbell, members of Christian churches have been considering how to relate to the vast group of conservative Christians who call themselves evangelicals. Fifty years ago Christian church leader James DeForest Murch

Why Can't We Be Comfortable as Evangelicals?

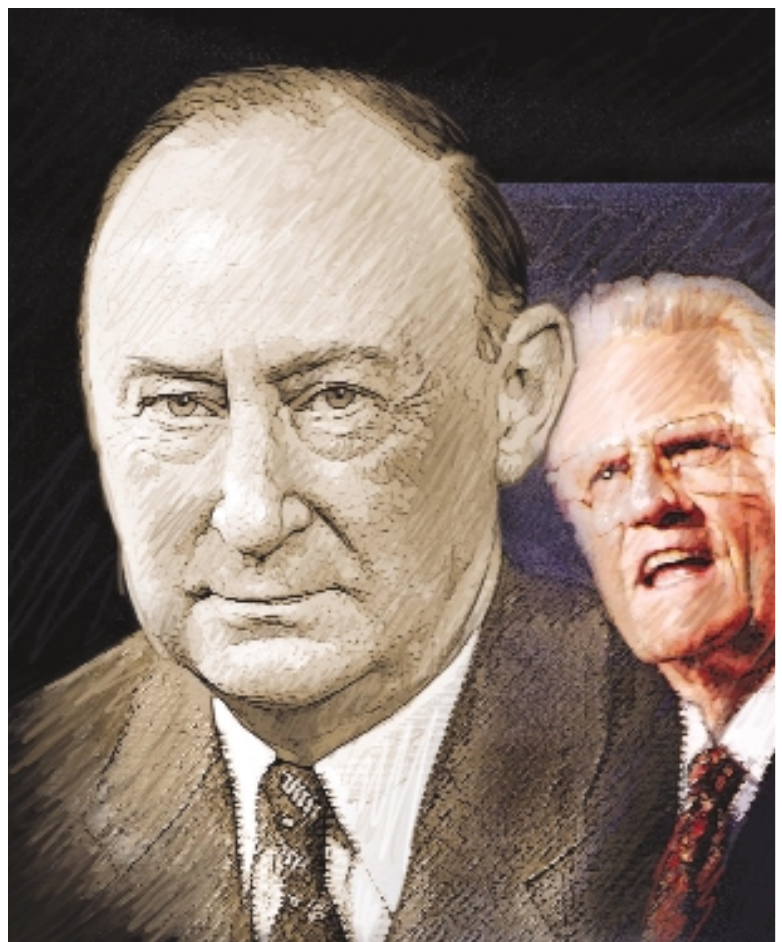
By William R. Baker

James DeForest Murch, probably best known for his book *Christians Only*, was a man way ahead of his time. He saw in the emerging evangelicalism of the 1940s a cultural train that had the potential to transform American Christianity. As a thoroughgoing advocate of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement he decided he had better jump on board. Not since Isaac Errett, founding editor of *CHRISTIAN STANDARD*, had anyone from the Restoration Movement thrust himself so thoroughly into a position of leadership among evangelicals.

Murch was active in the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), editor (1944-59) of its journal, *United Evangelical Action*, and wrote a history of the NAE, *Co-operation Without Compromise*. He served as president of the National Religious Broadcasters, the National Sunday School Association, and the Evangelical Press Association. He was the first managing editor (with editor Carl F. H. Henry), of what has become the voice of American evangelical Christianity, *Christianity Today*.

Current Restoration leaders like David Roadcup (board member of Promise Keepers), Allan Dunbar and Russ Blowers (who have worked with the Billy Graham Association), Gene Appel (who is actively involved with the Willow Creek Association), and Gary Weedman (provost of the evangelical Palm Beach Atlantic College), follow in Murch's footsteps.

Evangelical speakers are warmly received by most at the North American Christian Convention. Books from evangelical authors and publishers dominate Christian church



Bible college and seminary classrooms. Professors are active participants in the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), Bible college graduates commonly earn master's degrees at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Wheaton College's graduate school, and Fuller Theological Seminary. Soon to be published by significant evangelical publisher William B. Eerdmans is the *Encyclopedia of the*

See "EVANGELICALS" on page 8



Evangelicals: Comfortable?

Continued from page 4

Stone-Campbell Movement. This current, wide association of Christian church members with evangelicals should be seen as a positive extension of Murch's early vision and perspective.

Early Criticism

Murch was not without his vocal critics. James Van Buren, in a 1951 article in *CHRISTIAN STANDARD*, denounced Murch and evangelicalism with these words: "The danger is that by associating with the unrepentant, militant denominationalists in the NAE one may come to recognize, sanctify, and bless denominational systems and become a denominationalist oneself." Van Buren saw "denominations" as the enemy, and Murch as virtually a traitor by association.

Van Buren could not see what Murch saw and what is now crystal clear. The evangelicalism of the 1950s was beginning to move beyond its fundamentalist, anticultural, Calvinistic, premillennialist, Old School Presbyterian moorings to the dynamic, evangelistic, Bible-affirming, Christian mind-set that today cuts across every Protestant denomination as well as Roman Catholicism. Evangelicalism was and is a unity movement compatible with the unity emphasis of the Restoration Movement. It anchors the framework for Christian unity and action around a core of values and invites all to participate as they wish. Although there's much disagreement about issues on the fringe of the core, evangelicals clearly agree about their commitment to the Bible, zeal for evangelism, and need for salvation

through personal faith in Jesus.

Despite Van Buren's warning cry, there is not—nor has there ever been—an effort by evangelicalism to quash the distinctives of various historical expressions of Christianity, including those of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. Evangelicalism is the cultural melting pot of Bible-believing American Christianity. It is an aggregate, not a monolith. It is a self-sustaining movement with no one church or one individual controlling it, or determining who is in and who is out.

For a church in the Restoration

Every study of evangelicalism puts the Stone-Campbell Movement in the evangelical group photo.

Movement to deny it is evangelical is like a German immigrant family denying they are American. Affirming unity over biblical essentials and diversity over other issues is evangelicalism's strength.

Open Borders

Prominent a cappella Church of Christ historian Richard Hughes identifies evangelicalism as so dominated by those from reformed tradition that anyone from a Restoration tradition (which includes Stone-Campbell and Pentecostals, at least) cannot really be included. He asserts that only to the extent that those from the Stone-Campbell tradition have been won over to Reformation principles, particularly to justification by faith, are we evangelical.

In the 2002 book published by InterVarsity Press, *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, both Ed Myers (of Harding University) and

I, in our articles entitled, "Are We Evangelical?" strongly disagree with Hughes on this point. Though evangelicals are historically dominated by those from Reformed (and, we should add, Calvinistic) tradition, those from Arminian-Wesleyan camps participate widely in evangelical enterprises.

Many churches, individuals, and parachurch groups, with a wide variety of theologies and practices, identify themselves and are identified as evangelical. No one functions as the evangelical police, nor are they able to control the variations evangelicalism may take, despite the efforts of some ETS voices.

Robert Johnston helpfully depicts evangelicalism as an extended family, with long lost uncles and cousins who would, though sometimes barely, recognize each other at the annual family reunion.¹ Like Johnson, every other study of evangelicalism puts the Stone-Campbell Movement churches (specifically the a cappella and the independent, when they are aware of our three distinctive forms today) in the evangelical group photo. Timothy Smith uses the term "kaleidoscope," Cullen Murphy uses "12-ring circus," Robert Webber talks of 14 "sub-cultures," and Donald Dayton and Robert Johnson denote 12 "currents" under "the umbrella of American Evangelicalism."²

Campbell's Comments

As developed in my article, "Are We Evangelical?" in the book, Campbell watched hopefully and with enthusiasm the organizational beginnings of evangelicalism that occurred at the formational meeting of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846. More than 1,000 delegates from 150 nations repre-

Overview of Traditional, Pragmatic, and Younger Evangelicals

	Traditional Evangelicals	Pragmatic Evangelicals	Younger Evangelicals
Approximate Year of Origin	1950	1975	2000
In History	After World War II	After the 1960s	After modernism and Sept. 11, 2001
Leader	Billy Graham	Bill Hybels	Brian McLaren

Chart originally appeared in *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* by Robert E. Webber (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, a division of Baker Book House, ©2002). Reprinted with permission.

senting 50 denominations gathered for 14 days in London with a lofty purpose: “not to create unity but to confess it.” They hammered out nine “evangelical principles” they held in common. These helped them cooperate on a variety of common-cause ventures, among which would be Bible translation.

Campbell examines in detail each of these nine principles, fundamentally doctrinal, in five *Millennial Harbinger* articles.³ For the most part, Campbell endorses them, though, characteristically, he picks at some of the less than precise language. His most exacting critique focuses on the fifth proposition, “The justification by faith alone.” He points out that “alone” does not fully represent the complex, biblical evidence.

Despite his correctives, in the end Campbell says that he feels “great respect for the enlightened judgment of well-educated Christian men,” and even says he has “no objections to the great principles which they have promulgated in their three-times three foundation.” This, then, must temper our understanding of his critique of principle five, “faith alone.” Campbell does not object to the significant role of personal faith for justification, but to a statement of “faith alone” that oversimplifies and is overenthusiastic

about one aspect of salvation.

More importantly as a model for us, Campbell senses and expresses a deep kinship with the Evangelical Alliance. In his fifth and concluding essay on the alliance, he quotes 20 lines from Thomas Campbell’s 1809 “Declaration and Address,” which announced the formation of an association for the “sole purpose of promoting simple evangelical Christianity,” “precisely” the characteristic feature of the Evangelical Alliance.

To be sure, Campbell does not sign on with the alliance, believing the unity movement he advocates casts a wider net and is some ways ahead of them. However, he sees no reason not to cooperate with them as Christian brothers as much as possible.

Distinctive Expressions

I believe the theological differences we might have with some evangelicals, even in the area of faith and baptism, do not place those of us in the Christian churches and churches of Christ outside evangelicalism, but rather are our distinctive expressions within evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is an aggregate of many unique Christian traditions and expressions, of which we are one. I believe when we look around,

individually or as congregations, to find our next most compatible Christian neighbor, church fellowship, or Christian author, these are and will continue to be evangelicals.

Were Campbell alive today, I believe he would be a prominent ETS member and a consulting editor for *Christianity Today*. He would be involved with *Promise Keepers*, the Billy Graham Association, and the Willow Creek Association. He would be proud to have his scholarly and popular writings published by InterVarsity, Eerdmans, Baker, or Zondervan. He would expect Bethany College to be accredited with AACB and in the Christian College Consortium with Wheaton, Trinity, Messiah, and a host of others.

He also would have understood and applauded the pioneering effort of James DeForest Murch.

¹Robert K. Johnston, “American Evangelicalism: An Extended Family,” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 154-169.

²Timothy Smith, “Kaleidoscope,” *Christian Scholars Review* 15 (February 1986), 228; Cullen Murphy, “Protestantism and the Evangelicals,” *Wilson Quarterly* 5 (1981), 105-116; Robert Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 32; Dayton and Johnston, *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*.

³*Millennial Harbinger* (1846), 625-627; *Millennial Harbinger* (1847), 79-83, 165-170, 217-221, 253-255.

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