

RIGHT?

paved the way for meaningful associations with the evangelical community. Should we follow today in his footsteps? Should we move past association to identification? Should we consider ourselves as evangelicals?

Why Can't We Be Just Christians?

By Robert F. Hull Jr.

When I was a senior student at Milligan College in Tennessee, I began my first ministry in a small town in Harlan County, Kentucky. Plucking up my courage, I decided to participate in the monthly luncheon meeting of the local ministerial association. I was surprised and puzzled to find that some of the attendees were a bit standoffish and seemed suspicious of me. I later learned that one of my predecessors in the church had asked to address that ministerial association and had used the occasion to try to convince the “denominationalists” of the error of their ways and the truth of the “Restoration Plea.”

Fortunately, ministers in the Christian churches and churches of Christ are mostly beyond such smug and self-righteous behavior. We have learned we can associate with, and even have friendships with, people from other church traditions without compromising our convictions. We have also learned there are other Christians with Bible names (members of the Church of God, for example) who

also are fervent restorationists.

In fact, I think we have seen a limited kind of ecumenism emerging, which is reflected in worship patterns, devotional reading, and social and political interests shared with many other Christian groups, particularly those identified as evangelicals. For example, many leaders in the Christian churches and churches of Christ have made common cause with popular conservative parachurch organizations, including Focus on the Family and Promise Keepers. And it has become common practice to invite prominent conservative evangelicals to speak at special sessions of the North American Christian Convention.

Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that many people, both within and outside the Stone-Campbell Movement, consider us to belong to the evangelical camp. Randall Balmer, an “outsider,” thinks we are evangelicals, and devotes four columns to “Christian Churches” and “Restorationism” in his *Encyclo-*

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Illustration ©Jeff Whitlock

James DeForest Murch (far left) would feel right at home with leading evangelicals (left to right) Billy Graham, Bill Hybels, and James Dobson. Should we?



pedia of Evangelicalism (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). William R. Baker, an “insider,” encourages us to acknowledge that our home is in the evangelical camp, and has edited a book designed to make this case (*Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, InterVarsity Press, 2002). But should we, in fact, embrace evangelicalism? I think we should not, and here are my reasons.

We Have Nothing to Gain

Historically, we have been suspicious of “isms” of all kinds. We have chosen to be known simply as Christians, with no other label attached. We have traditionally understood ourselves to be, not a denomination, or a sect, or church, but rather, a movement within the whole church, calling the church to continual reformation of its life and practice by means of the spiritual standards of the New Testament.

Thomas Campbell’s first proposition of the “Declaration and Address” has been one of our essential guideposts: “The Church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one, consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct.”

If it is still possible to be only a Christian, there is nothing to be gained by adding qualifiers, such as “Bible-believing,” or “conservative,” or “evangelical.” As a community of understanding and concern within the whole church, we have the freedom to associate with Christians in all kinds of sociological and theological camps.

I have been spiritually nurtured

A REVIEW *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*

Author: Robert E. Webber

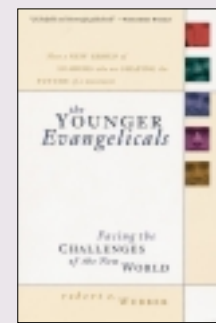
Baker Book House; ©2002; 283 pages; \$15.99; paperback

Every few years a book comes along that I find so helpful I send copies to all the ministers of the churches being planted by GYCM in the Northeast. *The Younger Evangelicals Facing the Challenges of the New World* by Robert E. Webber was delivered to our ministers in December.

Webber is a prolific writer who has already made his mark with books on worship and the early church. With *The Younger Evangelicals* he brings his significant skills to bear on the rapidly changing evangelical world.

He gives cohesion to the thoughts wandering around one’s mind that have yet to gel. This roadmap to the evangelical landscape separates recent history into three different periods: “Traditional Evangelicals” were prominent from 1950 to 1975; “Pragmatic Evangelicals” led the way from 1975 to 2000; and “Younger Evangelicals” have been moving into leadership in the past few years. This easy-to-read book is well-researched and optimistic.

Some of its most helpful features are the 19 tables that define the similarities and dissimilarities between the various groups. We’ve included a table on page 9 to give you a taste of this encouraging book.



—Paul Williams
East Islip, New York

and instructed by literature and worship practices from a wide spectrum of theological traditions, including Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, as well as mainline Protestant and evangelical. Indeed, this openness to the mind of the whole church is one of the joys of belonging to a movement that seeks common ground with all who serve God through Jesus Christ.

If our emphasis on restoration inclines us to seek for uniformity of belief and practice, our twin emphasis on unity ought to incline us toward a greater appreciation of the variety in church life, not only today, but also in the New Testament itself. To the question, “Are we evangelicals?” a good response is, “Why

should we care? Isn’t it enough just to be Christians?”

We Have Much to Lose

If we settle down into the evangelical camp, we will surrender two critical convictions that have been characteristic of the Stone-Campbell heritage: a high view of the church and a high view of the sacraments (or ordinances).

Historically, we have emphasized the universality of the church over its particularity (“all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures...”). Protestants have emphasized the particularity of the church, as seen in denominational structures.

If we settle down into the evangelical camp, we will surrender two critical convictions that have been characteristic of the Stone-Campbell heritage: a high view of the church and a high view of the sacraments (or ordinances).

We have also insisted that baptism is a normative response to God's grace in Jesus Christ, a part of one's turning toward God in faith and confession for the forgiveness of sins. In general, evangelicals sit much more loosely toward baptism. The insistence on salvation "by grace alone, through faith alone" has meant for many of them that baptism is an add-on, a human "work." The same underappreciation is true of the Lord's Supper. While Christian churches and churches of Christ have historically emphasized the importance of the Lord's Supper in weekly worship, Protestants in general and evangelicals in particular have been satisfied with infrequent observance of this essential element of worship, along with an underdeveloped theology of Communion.

What is striking and significant is that our high view of the church and the sacraments is not something distinctive about the Stone-Campbell Movement; it is just the opposite. Our theology of the church and the sacraments has been shared with most Christian people during most of the history of the church. We are closer to the Episcopalians than the Baptists in this regard. To give up these historic emphases would be a serious loss.

Complicated, but Not Uncomfortable

It is undeniable that we in the Christian churches and churches of Christ have much in common with evangelicals. A sociologist of religion hanging around one of

our conventions would probably peg us as evangelicals, especially since we always seem to have some high-visibility evangelicals on the program. But a theologian, probing the seminal writings of this movement, would see a much more complicated picture, as I have tried to indicate above.

It has always been difficult to locate Christian churches and churches of Christ in the ecclesiological lexicon, but we should not worry about this. I think it is possible to be evangelistic without being evangelical, catholic without being Roman,

orthodox without being Eastern, mainline without being Protestant, and even congregational without being independent.

Although many people may want to put us in the evangelical "group photo," as Bill Baker suggests, I think we'll be forsaking our own birthright unless we find ourselves in a much bigger picture than that.

Dr. Robert F. Hull Jr. is dean and professor of New Testament at Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, Tennessee.

A REVIEW *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*

Editor: William R. Baker

InterVarsity Press; ©2002; \$23; 256 pages; paperback

Over several years, pairs of scholars from the Christian churches and the noninstrumental churches of Christ made presentations to the Evangelical Theological Society on various topics related to salvation and the church. These scholarly papers, now published in this book, represent good scholarship, and the reader will find much of worth here. These articles certainly indicate that in most theological areas little difference stands between the instrumental Christian churches and our noninstrumental brethren. If nothing else, this book marks a milestone in the mutual recognition of our ideological and genealogical kinship.

A disappointment, however, is that the book does not seem to fulfill the promise of its title. The first two chapters provide an overview of evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement, but the remaining chapters come across as self-standing scholarly papers with little integration into the broader topic. Dr. Baker's introductory and concluding chapters strive valiantly to draw all this together, but the book still seems to fall short of an integrated, holistic analysis of the topic of evangelicalism and the Restoration Movement.



—James B. North
Cincinnati, Ohio