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CHAPTER ONE

Losing Our Religion?

Is there an evangelical mind active today? Nearly two decades ago Mark Noll concluded any evangelical mind had gone soft through lack of use. Today the question is whether a healthy evangelicalism exists to host such a mind. I am not sure, theologically, that such a thing still thrives.

We may all be victims of language at this point. The adjective "evangelical" appears to refer to something real. Yet as every child finds out on that fateful day when Santa Claus is discovered to be a stage name for Mom or Dad—or, as a trendy postmodern evangelical might say in surely unpretentious and helpful language, "a floating signifier with no extra-textual referentiality, rooted in a communal semiotic scheme designed to maintain an oppressive patriarchy"—words do not always refer to something that exists. "Santa Claus," "unicorns," "Batman," and "drinkable American tea" are all words or phrases that, despite their seeming reality, have no true reference point.

EVANGELICALISM: A REVEALING DEFINITION

"Evangelical" and "evangelicalism" seem to have become similar terms; at the very least, they mean much less now than they appear to mean. Consider the influential definition of evangelicalism offered by David Bebbington. The historian defines the movement with four hallmarks: (1) biblicism (a high regard for the Bible as the primary source of spiritual truth), (2) crucicentrism (a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross), (3) conversionism (a belief in the necessity of spiritual conversion), and (4) activism (the priority of publicly proclaiming and living out the gospel). Although many still debate the adequacy of this definition, it does capture the flavor of what has historically been understood by the term "evangelicalism."[1]

Three aspects of Bebbington's definition are of particular interest: the lack of any institutional or ecclesiastical dimension, the primacy of experience, and the nearly complete absence of doctrinal criteria. As to the first point, if for the sake of argument we grant evangelicalism an existence, then its lack of an ecclesiology highlights that it has always been, for want of a better word, transdenominational. Thus, like so many other "isms," from Puritanism to socialism, it can be difficult to determine its boundaries. Unlike, say, identifying Catholics, Anabaptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, who can be spotted by their church affiliations, determining who are evangelicals is a much trickier and ultimately subjective task.[2]

Second, the emphasis on experience arguably reinforces the definitional problem—it pushes evangelicalism further away from an ecclesiastical identity and toward mysticism and subjectivity. No doubt many evangelicals would respond with the obvious: Unless you have the experience, you cannot be part of our church; therefore, evangelicalism does have an ecclesiastical dimension. This response, however, merely exacerbates the third problem, the lack of

doctrinal criteria for the movement. If church membership is built on an experience, then where does doctrine fit in?

This, arguably, is the primary problem confronting evangelicalism. An emphasis on a defining experience does not mesh comfortably with an emphasis on doctrinal identity. Ultimately, the question of which is more significant, the experience or the doctrine, must be confronted. Like the medieval theologians who wrestled with whether theology was a theoretical or a practical discipline, most self-declared evangelicals would answer that both theology and experience are necessary. Yet that raises the complex question of how much weight is to be placed upon each. In practice, evangelical organizations and institutions typically adopt minimal doctrinal statements; many evangelicals place relatively little weight on a fully conceived theological statement or identity.

REMEMBERING ONE DOCTRINAL DEBATE

Some years ago I attended a meeting of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the North American accrediting agency for seminaries. As is typical at such gatherings, a wide variety of schools were represented, from Jewish to Catholic to Eastern Orthodox. At one point during the day we were divided along confessional lines to discuss particular issues facing our institutions. I was in the evangelical group, which included Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, and free-church people. In my group were two very unalike members—one sympathetic to open theism, a committed radical Arminian whose suspicion of metaphysics made his commitment to the language of Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy equivocal; the other a straight-down-the-line Westminster Confession Presbyterian, completely comfortable with the so-called five points of Calvinism and the traditional Western formulations of classical theism. Being familiar with the writings of both men, I decided to sit back and enjoy the ensuing fireworks display.

Sure enough, at some point during the vigorous engagement

between these two professors, the Presbyterian commented that he and the radical Arminian really did not have much in common. The Arminian responded to the Presbyterian with some exasperation, "But surely we can agree that we both love Jesus?"

I was tempted to pipe up, "Yes, you both do; it's just a shame you don't agree on who He was or what He did." Instead, I stayed politely silent and allowed my eyes to wander to other areas of the room—to the Catholic group and the Orthodox group, where I realized that, strange to tell, I had more in common with some members of each of those than I did with the radical Arminian.

So why was I in this group? How come he and I were both "evangelicals," and I was thus understood to be closer doctrinally to a virtual open theist than to a traditional, anti-Pelagian Dominican, whose basic doctrine of God would at least be substantially the same as my own?

It appears ATS was operating under an assumed definition of evangelicalism that took minimal account of doctrinal distinctives. It placed in the evangelical group those who were committed in some way to taking the Bible seriously, to evangelism, to the importance of Jesus Christ, and to some kind of existential commitment to God—additionally, those who were not Catholic or Orthodox. My vague qualification of "in some way" is deliberate, pointing to what I believe is a lack of clarity about any kind of hard and fast doctrinal identity for evangelicals. However the ATS viewed its working definition, it seems to have amounted in practice to little more than a judgment based on demographics or aesthetics: Evangelicals presumably look, sound, and act in ways that are unlike Catholics and the Orthodox.

While one might dismiss this grouping as the action of an accreditation body that is simply clueless about evangelicalism, the selection of seminaries and schools for inclusion in the evangelical group was scarcely exceptional. Westminster Seminary in California, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity

School, Baylor University, and Wheaton College were all represented, to name just a few. Such a list could not be considered mainline or Catholic or Orthodox; without question, it would have to be regarded as evangelical, whether or not every member of the group was comfortable with such a designation. This dilemma highlights my basic point, that evangelicalism lacks clear doctrinal definition within the wider Christian community.

GOSPEL PEOPLE?

At this point, some readers might want to respond that evangelicals are, by definition, gospel people. I have a hunch that many Catholics, Orthodox, and liberal mainliners also regard themselves as gospel people. In fact, this designation begs the question of what one means by the word "gospel" and thus cannot advance the discussion very far. Typically, organizations and institutions that regard themselves as evangelical have sought to flesh out their doctrinal identities beyond the Bebbington quadrilateral—biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism—and unqualified references to the gospel. The results, however, have often been less than satisfactory, at least in providing a thorough theological definition of what evangelicalism might be.

Thus, the Evangelical Theological Society's statement of faith is forty-three words long and affirms only the Bible's inerrancy in the autographs and the doctrine of the Trinity.[3] If evangelicalism is supposed to be doctrinally distinctive, this statement gives no clue as to what makes an evangelical different from, say, a conservative Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Anglo-Catholic believer—all of whom could sign the statement with integrity and without compromise, though most would protest any suggestion that they are evangelical. Indeed, the ETS statement heightens the problem of a definition rather than pointing toward a resolution.

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (which, to be clear about my own leanings, is a group with which I am affiliated) has

a faith statement that affirms the five solas of the Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, and the glory of God alone.[4] This statement is certainly more adequate than that of the ETS; it could not, for example, be signed in good conscience by a Roman Catholic. However, it belongs to a group that is not simply "evangelical" but also "confessing." In other words, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals self-consciously presents itself as a distinctive subset of the wider evangelical phenomenon. As such, it offers little help in producing a general doctrinal definition for the movement as a whole.

Indeed, "confessing" is just one among a plethora of adjectives that can be used to qualify evangelicalism, including "open," "Arminian," "Anabaptist," "Lutheran," "Reformed," "conservative," "emergent," and "postmodern," to list but a few. It should become clear, then, that the essence of evangelicalism cannot be defined by any particular view of the sacraments, predestination, atonement, free will, justification, ecclesiology, or even God's knowledge of the future. Seen in this light, the question again raises its awkward head of whether we can speak in any meaningful, doctrinally defined way about evangelicalism as a cohesive movement. The ATS's apparent assumption that an evangelical is anyone who is a Christian, takes the Bible and Jesus seriously, but is not mainline, Catholic, or Orthodox, is arguably as good a definition as we have.

Furthermore, if in practice evangelicalism lacks a doctrinal center beyond taking the Bible and Jesus seriously (in some sense), then even an emphasis on the new birth is insufficient to give it coherence. Experience without doctrine is an unstable, often mystical, and wholly inadequate tool by which to define a movement. "To repent of sins," "to trust in Jesus for salvation," "to be born again"—the expressions used by evangelicals to describe conversion imply doctrinal content. But if there is no consensus about what repentance means or why it is necessary, about what constitutes sin or a sinful nature, about who Jesus was and is, about what

Jesus did and does, and about what terms like "born again" mean, then the problem of a lack of doctrinal coherence stubbornly remains. Experience without content—or experience about which there is no agreement on the meaning of the words used to describe it—remains incapable of providing any clear identity for evangelicalism.

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

It seems the Bebbington quadrilateral is increasingly less useful in understanding evangelicalism today, whatever strengths the definition may retain for historical analysis. Nowadays, evangelicalism is so diverse that its identity cannot be discovered in shared doctrine or experience, apart from what little can be stated about its members negatively (as in, evangelicals are not Catholic and not mainline).[5] Instead, the most accurate way to define evangelicalism may be through its institutions and organizations.

To be an evangelical in this understanding is to be connected in some way to an interrelated network of seminaries, liberal arts colleges, publishers, and other parachurch groups (including the Gospel Coalition, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, the Evangelical Theological Society, *Christianity Today*, Crossway Books, Baker Publishing, and so on). Seen thus, evangelicalism becomes more of a social, cultural, or even marketing term than a theological one—the only time problems arise in this understanding is when the term "evangelical" is used as if it has doctrinal meaning, when in fact it does not.

A NEW, INSTITUTIONAL EVANGELICALISM

If the Bebbington quadrilateral points toward a historic evangelicalism with minimal or ill-defined doctrinal content, then the new, institutional evangelicalism is even less theologically grounded. The old definition attempted to hold together some level of doctrine (biblicism, crucicentrism) with experience (conversionism)

and activism (particularly evangelism). Yet the latter two areas of experience and activism ultimately won out at the expense of theology. One can see anecdotal evidence of this throughout evangelicalism's history. For example, Charles Hodge regarded the piety of the great liberal theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher—particularly his practice of singing hymns with his family—as clear evidence of true Christian faith. More recently, I read an online discussion between a student and a scholar who was advocating critical views of the biblical text; the professor defended his self-designation as an evangelical on the grounds that he still prayed with his children every night. In both cases, piety won out over doctrinal commitment as an indicator of evangelical identity.[6]

Institutionally defined evangelicalism faces a similar problem. Clearly, there are powerful non-doctrinal forces that shape evangelical institutions and organizations, and these forces can be antithetical to clear and detailed doctrinal identities. Consider a magazine like *Christianity Today*. The success of this publication depends in part on its ability to cover costs, which is predicated on maintaining a sufficiently large readership to generate income from subscriptions and advertising. Indeed, readers and advertisers are symbiotically connected. It is not simply the case that the magazine advertises what its readership wants; what it advertises both reflects what readers want to buy and influences their buying habits. Thus, we can identify at least two factors—the need to reach a large enough reading audience and the need to reach enough advertisers—that inevitably shape the magazine's editorial policy. Neither factor naturally lends itself to exclusion and narrow boundary drawing.

The same issue confronts other evangelical institutions. Niche marketing and clear doctrinal identity are in no way antithetical: Certain Reformed, Brethren, Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and dispensational seminaries possess clear doctrinal identities. But niche marketing has its limitations; an institution cannot become a really big beast in the evangelical world if it majors too strongly

on doctrinal or ecclesiastical distinctives. Schools like Fuller and Wheaton have avoided narrow theological statements and built their sizes around generic evangelical identities and generous readings of the doctrinal bases they do have. Other schools, such as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Dallas Theological Seminary, have in recent years downplayed their historic distinctives, particularly in the area of eschatology.

Mass movements are formed by coalitions, and in the parachurch arena as in politics, coalitions are formed by setting aside some particulars in order to establish a popular front. Thus, the largest evangelical umbrella groups that aspire to pack a punch in their respective realms—organizations such as the ETS, the National Association of Evangelicals, and Focus on the Family—have carved out market identities without precise doctrinal measures.

BOUNDARY LINES AND OUR CULTURAL MOMENT

Whether due to a focus on religious experience, the nature of coalitions, market forces, or, indeed, a synthesis of some or all of the above, evangelicalism appears virtually impossible to define any longer by specific doctrinal commitments. In one sense, this does not concern me at all. I consider myself a Christian first, a Protestant second, and a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church third. When asked if I am an evangelical, I generally respond with a question: What exactly do you mean by that term? In a world in which everyone from Joel Osteen to Brian McLaren to John MacArthur may be called an evangelical, I want to know into what pigeonhole my answer will place me.

The implications of evangelicalism's lack of definition are manifold. As a common-sense, empirical sort of person, I am left to wonder about conferences and books that discuss the future of evangelicalism or its relationship to various subjects (Barthianism, culture, Catholicism, etc.). Without a clear definition, how can evangelicalism be studied in connection with phenomena that are,

comparatively speaking, much easier to identify and analyze? Furthermore, if evangelicalism has no substantive existence in the present but is merely an oft-used term, then how can it have a future worth speaking of?

More importantly, evangelicalism's lack of definition makes the drawing of boundary lines very difficult, if not impossible. Given that orthodox doctrine has provided a set of basic boundary lines for Christianity since biblical times, the lack of a clear theological identity for evangelicalism means that, whatever boundaries are drawn, they are probably not typical of historic Christianity.

It is worth noting that this state of affairs comports nicely with our cultural moment. Doctrines seem to imply propositional truth claims, after all, and such claims have become passé in many quarters. Boundaries are meant to exclude, and if contemporary Western culture hates one thing above all else, it is the notion of exclusion.

BATTLES OVER BOUNDARIES

Ironically, the minimal doctrinal confessions of some evangelical institutions can exacerbate, rather than mitigate, the problem of boundary drawing. In 2004 a storm of protest followed when former Wheaton College president Duane Litfin did not renew the contract of a Wheaton faculty member who had converted to Catholicism. The faculty member claimed that he could still sign the institution's doctrinal basis in good conscience. In 2007 Baylor scholar Francis Beckwith resigned from the Evangelical Theological Society when he too left for Rome. Yet belief in inerrancy and the Trinity, the ETS's two doctrinal criteria, are entirely compatible with Roman Catholicism, while individuals with less orthodox beliefs than Beckwith, such as open theists, have been allowed to remain within the ETS.

Such examples highlight the difficulty of drawing boundaries in a movement where doctrinal bases are minimal or vague, and

where an instinctive understanding of what constitutes an evangelical is generally assumed. Sadly, the individuals excluded above both had a legitimate claim to being mistreated: They were in effect held accountable to a hidden confession behind the written confession rather than to a clearly stated public standard, the meaning of which was open to scrutiny and discussion.

Admittedly, there are good historical reasons for the wider cultural fear of boundaries. The exclusion of Jews in Germany, segregation in the American South, and apartheid in South Africa all led to great evil. Exclusion has often been based on bigotry and used as a means of control, manipulation, and worse. Seen in this light, an ill-defined evangelicalism is in tune with the cultural moment, more kind and gentle and tasteful than an exclusive movement.

However, the cultural distaste for boundaries is also connected to the cultural distaste for truth claims. Such claims necessarily exclude, and in a world where the "it just feels right to me" mentality of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is more acceptable than the authoritative "Thus says the Lord!" of Old Testament prophets, affinities between the cultural mind-set and the nebulous doctrine of much of evangelicalism are clear. Some evangelical theologians now argue for a communitarian notion of truth, where doctrinal claims are regarded as true only in a local sense, inasmuch as they can be agreed upon and applied to a given community. Others, even more skeptical, seem to root whatever remaining notions of truth they have either in practice (praxis) or process.[7]

"CONVERSATION," THEOLOGY, AND DRAWING BOUNDARIES

An interesting and related development has been the growing enthusiasm for "conversation" in recent years. Conversations are wonderful as small talk or as discussions to clarify respective positions (though "dialogue" may be a better term, perhaps).

However, when conversation rather than content becomes what is truly important, something critical is lost. Thus, as theology becomes a "conversation," traditional notions of truth face the danger of assuming less importance than mere aesthetics or modes of discourse. Indeed, doctrinal indifferentism can creep forward in a way that ends only with the sidelining or even repudiation of orthodoxy in any meaningful sense. Such a "conversational" approach to theology can find a welcome home within a movement where doctrinal boundaries are few, far between, and often equivocal.

For many evangelicals, boundary drawing and theological enforcement have come to be seen as offensive and fundamentally unchristian. My own institution, Westminster Theological Seminary, faced howls of disapproval from within and without when it addressed the writings of an Old Testament professor whom some thought had wandered outside the bounds of his faculty vow to the Westminster Standards. As a church confession, the Westminster Standards are far more elaborate than any evangelical doctrinal statement; what was interesting was not that the Standards were vague or unclear, but that holding a professor to a voluntary vow was deemed offensive by so many. Cries for academic freedom and, more bizarrely, appeals to the First Amendment of the Constitution—which limits government power, not the power of private bodies—abounded.

What drove the protests was less a belief that the professor's writings were within the bounds of Westminster orthodoxy and more a commitment to a kind of Christianity that, while not rejecting exclusive truth claims, certainly regarded exclusionary action on the basis of such claims as tasteless and to be avoided. Those in the Reformed fringe have no monopoly on such struggles, either: The open theism battles within the ETS revealed a collective unwillingness to take decisive, exclusionary action over clear digressions from historic orthodoxy. Neither the doctrinal state-

ment of the organization nor the personal constitution of various members were, apparently, up to dealing with heterodoxy.

From the time of Paul, the church has drawn boundaries. Such has been considered necessary for her well-being and even her survival. A movement that cannot or will not draw boundaries, or that allows the modern cultural fear of exclusion to set its theological agenda, is doomed to lose its doctrinal identity. Once it does, it will drift from whatever moorings it may have had in historic Christianity.

NOTES

1. See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). A good collection of essays interacting with Bebbington's proposals is Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham, U.K.: Apollos, 2008).

2. A Catholic might argue at this point that this problem has been part of Protestantism from the start: abandon the teaching magisterium of Rome, and you are left with nothing to stop the multiplication of sects. Such criticism is valid perhaps when it comes to the hostile application of labels (as in a Catholic writer lumping both Calvin and Servetus together as "Protestant"), but I am here thinking of self-conscious identity. I think of myself as Presbyterian: I can point to a certain set of doctrinal standards and ecclesiastical principles that define the term. An Anabaptist can do the same with her church, as can a Baptist or a Methodist. We each know our distinctive histories and doctrines. This is not the case with the rather nebulous concept that is evangelicalism.

3. "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory." http://www.etsjets.org/about.

4. These affirmations are embodied in the Cambridge Declaration: http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0..PTID307086_CHID798774_CIID1411364.00.html.

5. In the wider culture, even these exclusions are now negotiable: In 2005, *Time* listed Father Richard John Neuhaus, the well-known Catholic intellectual, as one of North America's 25 most influential evangelicals. The list also included Rick Warren, Brian McLaren, and J.I. Packer, indicating precisely the irrelevance of significant doctrinal criteria for being designated

an evangelical. http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101050207/index.html.

6. Hodge's comment reads as follows: "When in Berlin the writer often attended Schleiermacher's church. The hymns to be sung were printed on slips of paper and distributed at the door. They were always evangelical and spiritual to an eminent degree, filled with praise and gratitude to the Redeemer. Tholuck said that Schleiermacher, when sitting in the evening with his family, would often say, 'Hush, children; let us sing a hymn of praise to Christ.' Can we doubt that he is singing those praises now? To whomsoever Christ is God, St. John assures us, Christ is a Saviour." *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), II, 440.
7. See, for example, John R. Franke, *Manifold Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009); Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).