

EVANGELICALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Issues and Challenges

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The theme of this paper is Evangelicalism in the 21st Century. This is a very important and also very exciting subject to study. Let us look both at the issues that we face and also the challenges that lie ahead. First we need to understand why Evangelicalism is so attractive and then to show it does help us to plan for the future. Second, we need to look into some of the challenges that Evangelicalism faces. And thirdly, we need to consider some issues which will have increasing importance in the next century.

So we move to our first theme looking at the success of Evangelicalism. Why has Evangelicalism been so successful? In one sense this is a very dangerous question to ask. How do we judge whether something is successful? There is no doubt that Evangelicalism is growing numerically. Now, is that success? Well in one sense, it clearly is. Yet of course there is a real danger as well. It is possible for a Christian movement to become popular without maintaining its

integrity. For example, it could choose not to stress the cost of discipleship or present the gospel simply in terms of personal transformation and renewal. We need to remind ourselves so that the cross – the symbol of suffering and shame – is at the center of the Christian faith, and that the gospel demands us to take up the same cross and follow Christ. But my perception is Evangelicalism has been so successful precisely because it is trying to remain faithful to the gospel.

There are two areas in which this is the case. First of all, Evangelicalism is orthodox Christianity. The basic beliefs of Evangelicalism can be shown to correspond to the central teachings of the Christian Church down through the ages. Many Evangelical writers have stressed Evangelicalism is simply the basic orthodox Christian faith. Evangelicalism differs from many other expressions of Christian faith in certain emphasis it places. Evangelicalism stresses the authority of the Scripture not simply in theology but also in personal devotion. Evangelicalism lays a particular stress on the importance of the Death of Christ. It lays a particular emphasis on the need of personal conversion. It also lays a considerable emphasis on the importance of evangelism. In the 1960's, the credibility of the orthodox Christianity came under question. Many liberal writers argued that it was necessary to change the gospel in order to remain relevant in the modern world. The basic belief was that historic orthodox Christianity has ceased to be relevant. There was therefore pressure to restate the gospel in terms that a culture could understand. But more than this: to change the substance of the gospel to correspond to the belief of the age. Evangelicalism has resisted that trend. Evangelicalism has affirmed that it is not necessary to make Christianity relevant. Christianity is already attractive. Our job is to ensure that attractiveness is fully understood. Many in the mainline denominations now look back on the liberal experiments of the 1960's and feel they had gone badly wrong. This is where we can see one of the important strengths of Evangelicalism. Evangelicals believe there is a God-given relevance, and God-given attractiveness to the Christian faith. Our task is to uncover that relevance and attractiveness, in turn to be shown to those outside the church to discover and appreciate.

The second point I want to make is that Evangelicalism is committed to evangelism. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner once wrote these words: "The Church lives by mission as a fire lives by burning." Evangelism is something that is intrinsic to the identity of the church. For evangelicals, evangelism springs from the very nature of the gospel

itself. Because the gospel is so relevant we need to discover this for ourselves and then proclaim this exciting news to others as well. In Matthew chapter 13, Jesus compares the gospel to a pearl of great price. The pearl is recognised to be precious, valuable and attractive. And to take possession of this pearl overshadows everything else in life. Evangelicals approach the gospel knowing that here is something that will change people's lives. It must be stressed that there is no question of altering the gospel to make it more attractive. For Evangelicalism, the supreme error of liberalism is restating the gospel in terms more acceptable to modern culture. This restatement does violence to the nature of the gospel itself. So why is Evangelicalism so attractive? One answer is that it is because the gospel itself is so attractive. And evangelicals are determined to allow this attractiveness and relevance to be proclaimed to and discovered by every generation. Why do evangelicals place such an emphasis on evangelism? Because they recognise that there is something so wonderful about Jesus Christ and the gospel that this good news cannot be kept to ourselves. All of us want to share good news with our families and our friends. And for Evangelicalism, the gospel is such good news that we would be selfish if we kept this to ourselves. Therefore, the gospel is something that is to be preached as if it was something that could change people's lives for the better and give them a reason to hope and a reason to live.

In this section of the paper, I am asking why Evangelicalism is so successful. And in one sense, the answer I am giving is very unoriginal. It is not that Evangelicalism is attractive. It is that the gospel which Evangelicalism insists must be preached in its fulness that is attractive. And the success of Evangelicalism is directly related to its willingness to let the gospel speak for itself.

So as we look into the 21st century, we are asking the question, what is the future of Evangelicalism? The past success of Evangelicalism rests in its willingness to remain faithful to the Christian gospel. Its future success may well rest exactly at the point of faithfulness. In the second section of the paper, I shall look at the challenges that Evangelicalism is facing now and will continue to experience in the next century.

Now, clearly, what the above section has just said about Evangelicalism allows us to identify the first challenge. The success of Evangelicalism obviously leads to the danger of complacency. We feel

that we do not need to worry because things have gone well in the past. In fact, we need always to be asking ourselves whether we are remaining faithful to the gospel and whether we are presenting it in the most faithful and effective way. There is no room for complacency. Then we come to consider two challenges which arise from inside Evangelicalism itself.

The first challenge is the question of how we handle disagreements within the movement. At least some degree of disagreement over the interpretation and application of the gospel is inevitable. For example, within British Evangelicalism, there are friendly disagreements between Baptist and Anglican Evangelicals over some issues. These differences are not the source of great tension but they could be if they were mishandled. One of the issues was the very serious division that arose inside British Evangelicalism. The question being debated was whether Evangelicals should work for reform and renewal inside denominations or leave those denominations and form their own distinctive Evangelical denomination. The issue exploded in 1967. British Evangelicalism was divided in two for nearly twenty years. On the one hand, were Evangelicals led by Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones who felt Evangelicals should leave the denominations, and on the other hand, were people like John Stott and Jim Packer who felt they should stay inside and try to renew from within. Happily, things have improved enormously since then. British Evangelicals still disagree over this issue, but they have learnt to handle this disagreement in a godly and a gentle manner. And this reminds us of the importance of trying to understand each other, listening to each other, and above all, praying for each other.

The second issue as a challenge from within Evangelicalism is "personality cult". These personality cults arise when individual evangelical leaders allow themselves to be set up on pedestals. Now it is arguable that this is a relatively recent phenomenon. It can be argued this has been brought into existence by the financial pressure of religious television and the relentless search for sensational stories on the part of secular media. But it remains a serious danger. Many Evangelical leaders find themselves falling victim to temptation. They want to be admired, they want to be obeyed, they want to be taken with the greatest possible respect. And there is a very serious danger that they would encourage their congregations to trust them rather than trusting God. They want them to trust their interpretations of the Bible rather than reading the Bible for themselves.

Now again, I think this danger is not as great today as it may have been in the past. Many Evangelical leaders have learned the need for humility and responsibility. And many ordinary Evangelical Christians feel much more confident about their own faith and they are able to challenge the personality cult when this arises. For example, Billy Graham has modeled a lifestyle and ministry which are exemplary. He has avoided any form of personality cult. Yet, this remains a danger that we must be alert to. There is a serious danger that many Christians will lose confidence in their leaders and as a result lose confidence in the gospel. So there is a need for Evangelical leaders to be humble and also to have the greatest possible love and respect for those to whom they have ministered.

There is a story about the church in the city of Rome in the second century. The church was led by a man called Lawrence. And the Roman Emperor heard that the church was very wealthy. So the emperor brought Lawrence before him and asked him to bring the treasure of the church. The next day, Lawrence arrived before the emperor with four members of his congregation. He pointed to these four Christians and said to the emperor, "this is the treasure of the church." The emperor was not amused. That is why we remember Lawrence as a martyr. But Lawrence was right. All of us who are Christians are the treasure of the church. We are precious in God's sight. Each of us matters immeasurably to God. Evangelical leaders need to discover how enormously important the people they are caring for really are. And that, I think, helps put this personality cult in perspective.

We have looked at two challenges which arise from within the Evangelical movement. We now turn to the challenge that comes from outside. This challenge is a recent development especially within Western Evangelicalism. This is the challenge raised by religious pluralism. We find the following statements in many western newspapers and many western television programs: "All religions lead to God." "That may be true for you but it is not true for me." We shall look at those statements, which express cultural values, and see how they help us understand the challenge that faces us.

The first statement was "all religions lead to God." This implies that all religions are equally valid, and that it makes no difference which you choose and what you believe. To use one analogy which is widely quoted in this respect: "All the paths of a mountain lead to the

same peak even if they take different ways to get you there." This is a real challenge. It challenges the uniqueness of the Christian gospel. It challenges the uniqueness of Christ as a savior. And so we need to challenge this cultural assumption and its root. In the first place, we need to stress that not all religions actually believe in a god, so not all can lead to God. And secondly we need to challenge the analogy of a mountain. We could say that a better analogy offered to us is a maze. There are many paths but only one gets you out. We must emphasize the uniqueness of the gospel, its savior, and its message of redemption. There is no salvation in any name other than Jesus. No one else has ever been raised from the dead. No one else offers us forgiveness for our sins. And no one else gives us the hope of eternal life. So we need to affirm two things at the same time. One is the uniqueness of the Christian gospel. And the second is its unique ability to transform human life and bring hope before those who are in despair.

The second statement was "that may be true for you but it is not true for me." This statement is widely encountered in modern western culture. It implies that truth is a private and personal thing not a public matter. The implication is that we all have our own standards of truth. There is no reason why something you find persuasive should persuade anyone else. This view point is especially common among young people. It may be influential but it is impossible to sustain. It ignores the importance of evidence. If someone would declare that it was true for me that the language spoken by most people of Hong Kong was German, he would be wrong. It might be true for this person but this would just show his standards of evidence and truth were wrong. There is a real need for us to stress the importance of public truth. Leslie Newbiggin, in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture*, urges us to rediscover the public truth of the Christian faith. We need to talk about the excellent historical and intellectual foundations of our faith. We need to talk about the historical nature of the resurrection of Christ. We need to stress the personal transformation brought about by the gospel. In short, we must make sure that we affirm both the truth and the relevance of the gospel.

One of the reasons why the evangelicalism has been so successful is that it has made evangelism such a high priority. The gospel is something that is relevant but it is also something that is true. It is something we can trust. There are many philosophies today which are very attractive but which rest upon falsehoods. The gospel offers us

something that can change our life which we believe passionately is true. Yet, nevertheless, we must take care over the issue of relevancy. So often we assume that the relevancy of the gospel is self-evident to others. And very often one of the things that we must do is explain and demonstrate that relevancy to our audiences. Our audiences very often need help in understanding why Christianity is so wonderful and so exciting. It is a very exciting and very powerful challenge to all of us. Each of us needs to see ourselves as the catalyst which could make somebody a Christian. Each of us needs to see ourselves opening a door which could lead friends and families to discover the wonder of the gospel. Each and everyone of us has a very special purpose to play for God in bringing that good news to other people. We are the persons who could make life worthwhile for somebody else.

In England, we enjoy discovering our family history. And we trace our family tree backwards. I do not know whether you ever thought of this, but each of us has a spiritual family tree. You believe and somebody brought you to faith, and somebody brought them to faith, and it goes on and on into the past. Do you remember the great commission in Matthew chapter 28? "Go and make disciples of all nations." Between that event and us there is an unbroken chain of believers which has led to you, bringing you into faith. Isn't that an exciting thought? It is also a challenging thought. Because it is asking who will trace their faith back to you. Evangelicalism has always stressed personal conversion and evangelism. And so we have to face this question of who we will bring to faith. It is a very exciting thought; and one that reminds us how we depend totally on God who helps us to do things that we find difficult.

The third point is the issues for the future. These are not challenges, it simply means the things we need to think about. The first issue relates to the western impact on Christianity. I want to make clear that I am a westerner. I do not need to apologize, for it is just a matter of life. And western Christianity has had many successes. But it also has many failures. It seems one of the issues we need to think through for the next century is ensuring that western forms of Christianity do not corrupt Asian Christianity. There is no reason why Asian Evangelicals should feel the slightest need to worry about what the English or American Evangelicals are thinking. The issue is taking the Bible and applying it to each context. Here is a quote from David F. Wells, "It is the task of theology, then, to discover what God has said in and through the Scripture

and to clothe that in a conceptuality which is native to our own age. Scripture... needs to be decontextualized in order to grasp its transcultural content, and it needs to be re-contextualized in order that its content may be meshed with the cognitive assumptions and social patterns of our own time." So what Wells is saying is we need to read scripture and then ask what is there that I can take and use and apply in my own situation today. Now I may find what Martin Luther said or John Calvin said useful as I try to do this task in my own day and age. But they are trying to help us understand how they did this task in the past in order that we may do the same today. And Calvin's application of the gospel to Geneva in the sixteenth century may not be entirely appropriate to twenty-first century Hong Kong. So I think there is a challenge to Asian Evangelicalism. The challenge is to relate the Bible to each context without feeling constrained to make a detour by England or America. There will be many who will say to you. "Christianity is a western import." You need to be able to resist that by saying "here is something, that is authentic to us."

My next point is that we need to look to the future and ensure that we build a vision for that future. We need to try and identify how we can advance further in the next century. Evangelicalism has always been very good at ensuring that the relevancy of the gospel is fully understood. It has always been very good at evangelism. We should not cease to do those things and do them well. Now we are in a position to do other things as well as those. And one of the things I would like to suggest we think about doing is increasing the quality of the education we make available to evangelical laity. A story is told of a conversation between two leading German liberal protestant theologians of the last century. The theologians were Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack. More conservative sections of the German protestant churches have recently gained some important political victories. And Ritschl and Harnack as liberals were very worried by this. Ritschl's advice to Harnack went like this: "Never mind about the politics. Get on with writing the books that will change the way that the people think. In the long term, that is of decisive importance." And if we look at the sustained gains by Liberalism in German Protestantism until the First World War, the wisdom of that advice is clear. To win the long term victories, you have to influence the way in which the arising generation thinks. It seems to be an issue that we need to address. How are we doing to influence the way in which a coming

generation thinks? What are we doing to cultivate a Christian mind among the lay people?

Mark Noll recently wrote a book called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. In this book, he simply makes the point that Evangelicals have not been very good at making the connection between their faith and other aspects of their lives. It is the issue of education. In Hong Kong, you have excellent seminaries to train your pastors. But the Reformation reminds us that the laity has a major role to play. What are we doing to ensure that ordinary evangelicals have a full grasp of their faith? What are we doing to build up their faith? What are we doing to give them our vision of what God could do with them? How are we equipping the lay people to be evangelists in the shopping malls, the banks, and the schools of Hong Kong? In the beginning of this paper, I stress how important each and everyone of you is. There are things that God wants to do in you and through you. What can be done to help you deepen your understanding of your faith, to give you a vision of what you could do, and to equip you to carry out that vision in your life? So it seems to me one of the issues that Evangelicalism needs to face, and is beginning to face, is the importance of extending theological education to the laity as well as the pastor.

Now we move on to the final point. The third issue to address is that of social involvement. The gospel is good news for society as well as for individuals. It is certainly true that some Evangelicals argue that evangelism is simply about personal conversion. I want to stress the integrity and the importance of that understanding. Any account of evangelism which fails to do justice to the wonder of the good news for individuals is deception. Yet, in faithfulness to Scripture, it must be pointed out that the gospel is also good news for society. In the past, Evangelicals have been very active, for example, in the movement of abolishing slavery in the Eighteenth century. Some Evangelicals today are anxious about this side of things. They fear that looking at the social implications of the gospel may in some sense diminish its personal relevancy. This point is well taken. But it seems we also need to be aware that it is simply not enough to convert ourselves and our friends; there is a need to reshape society along the lines of what we know God wants to be the case.

In closing, I want just to make a few points. I, like many others, expect Evangelicalism to grow further in the next century. But as I

stressed there is no room for complacency. Whatever successes, there have been in the past and the present rests on the point of the faithfulness and the dedication of people. The promise of what might be in the future is equally dependent on faithfulness and commitment on our part. I would like to encourage you to be positive about the future. But I want every evangelical asks this question: "What can I do to make that future happen? What is God calling me to do so that things may advance in His way?" We cannot delegate this to somebody else. Each of us can make that difference. And I would like to courage each of you as you leave this room tonight to simply have this question in your mind: "What should I be doing?" "What should I be praying for?" "What is God going to do through me?" And my final point I stress the importance of evangelism. Now clearly, evangelism is of importance: it brings other people to discover the wonder of the gospel. But evangelism is also helpful in deepening the quality of our own faith. Now evangelism is about saying there is something so wonderful about the gospel that my family and friends will respond to it and receive it joyfully. But that encourages us to ask this question: "Have I discovered for myself the full wonder of the gospel before I try to bring it to others?" And that invites us to go deeper in our own faith.

I want to say I believe that there is much that the gospel will do here in the Asia. So let us trust the Lord. Let us move onwards to the future. Let us be confident in the Lord's goodness and guidance as He leads us to the next century.

ABSTRACT

The theme of this paper is Evangelicalism in the 21st Century. The writer points out that Evangelicalism has been so successful because of its attempts to remain faithful to the gospel, and because it is committed to evangelism. He states that the challenges to Evangelicalism in the 21st Century are the disagreements within the movement, the danger of personality cult, and the challenges of religious pluralism.

撮 要

本文旨在總結福音派在二十世紀成功發展的因素及展望二十一世紀會遇到的挑戰。作者認為福音派的成功乃在忠於聖經的教導及致力於福音的傳講。作者認為，在二十一世紀，福音派將要面對的挑戰是內部的分歧、個人崇拜，及多元主義。作者指出福音派信徒需洞察未來社會發展的趨勢，申明福音如何能對應人類在下一世紀的需要。