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The seeking mind thinks that behind the superficial problems and apparent paradoxes, life is at heart a mystery to be explored, using faith. In the twenty-first century the new church will feed the seeking mind with the savory mysteries of Creation, Incarnation, Trinity, Atonement, transformation, and unity.

BRIAN MCLAREN

There can never be a culture-free gospel.

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

Mission is no add-on for the church. The church is to participate in God's mission to the world. It is to be a mission agent of a missionary God. When the church ignores mission, it denies one of its main reasons for existence.

MICHAEL MOYNAGH

Postmodernity, then, describes a world where people have to make their way without fixed referents and traditional anchoring points. It is a world of rapid chance, of bewildering instability, where knowledge is constantly changing and meaning "floats."

ROBIN USHER AND RICHARD EDWARDS

Doing Your Own Thing: The Evangelical Weakness

Luder G. Whitlock

EVANGELICALISM FLOURISHING

Evangelicalism flourished as a movement during the last fifty years of the twentieth century. Bruised and diminished and stripped of massive amounts of resources by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, subsequent divisions, and the Great Depression, evangelicals regrouped in the 1940s and have been thriving ever since.[1] While the evangelical movement may create some frustration for academicians who find it difficult to arrive at a definition of evangelicals that is widely embraced, evangelicals continue to grow like weeds—springing up everywhere in all kinds of conditions, spreading erratically and relentlessly across the landscape. So numerous did evangelicals become in the twentieth century that they could be described in biblical language "like the grains of sand on the seashore" and "the stars of the sky." It has been observed, somewhat facetiously, that in some states in the South there are more Baptists than people!

During the nineteenth century, most Protestants would have been perceived as evangelical. But that changed toward the end of the century when eventually the disturbing influence of liberal church leaders precipitated a full-blown crisis: namely, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Ferocious

in its intensity because the stakes were so high, the clash erupted into vitriol that permanently scarred and irrevocably polarized both groups. Although some evangelicals separated from mainline denominations as a result of that controversy, others did not. Quite a few moderate evangelicals remained in the older mainline denominations and continue in them today. In most instances, lingering tensions continued due to the divergent theological commitment of liberals and evangelicals within those denominations, adroitly described by Robert Wuthnow in *The Struggle for America's Soul.*[2]

Spurred on by the major social upheavals of the last half of the twentieth century, evangelicals solidified their overall strength, gradually eclipsing the mainline denominations that steadily hemorrhaged members over the last thirty years. Further enabled by their increasing acceptance and national affluence, evangelicals energetically evangelized and expanded their membership, constantly innovating to adapt to changing needs, interests, and available technologies such that they accounted for an increasingly large percentage of total church membership.

One mark of this thriving evangelicalism is its dynamic diversity. The rapid proliferation of churches, parachurch ministries, educational institutions, publishing ventures, media ministries, and denominations has been quite a remarkable phenomenon. The huge number and variety of evangelical organizations that came into existence has been described as "the vast tent of evangelical faith." And this diversity has intensified during the last fifty years as it adapts to a constantly changing context.

Richard Quebedeaux directed attention to the dynamism and diversity of evangelicals with detailed descriptions and analyses, eventually churning out three volumes on the subject. His descriptions of young evangelicals and worldly evangelicals, plus the accumulating body of literature about evangelicals, riveted our attention to the sprawling, incongruent, and incessant growth of evangelicalism.[3]

The remarkable resilience and enduring tenacity of this movement surprised many sociologists and historians who

expected evangelicalism, following the denominational divisions in the aftermath of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, to become marginalized and perhaps even die out. Harvey Cox, reflecting on his earlier prognostications about this likely scenario in *The Secular City*, raised the question: "How could we have been so wrong?"[4] The fact that evangelicals flourished contrary to such expectations has stimulated a serious reexamination of earlier assumptions.[5] Peter Berger, influential in developing the secularization thesis that pluralism undermines faith, eventually reversed his position.[6]

For evangelicals, the answer is found in their unshakeable biblical and theological moorings. Their evangelical message, centered in the gospel, continues to supply both identity and primary impetus. Since God has promised that he will build his church and the gates of Hell will not be able to stand against it, they are not surprised that God has blessed evangelicals with such growth, although others may find it difficult to understand.

Recently, Christian Smith offered a plausible analysis: "Evangelicalism utilizes its culturally pluralistic environment to socially construct subcultural distinction, engagement, and tension between itself and relevant outgroups, and this builds religious strengths."[7] Because evangelicals know who they are and what they believe, they know that the world needs what they have and are eager to evangelize and advocate their faith commitments. Therefore, they seize opportunities to advocate their distinctives in a public context that allows various religious groups to exist. Sensing hostility from the unbelieving secular community, as well as the mainline churches, they feel challenged and embattled, so they expend even more effort. In these circumstances, evangelicalism continues to thrive.

This description underscores the insights of Dean Kelly, elucidated in his *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing.* He emphasized the significance of commitment, discipline, or high-demand expectations among evangelical churches as a major growth factor.[8] It could be argued that these tensions between evangelicals and society are actually ideal conditions for evangelicalism to flourish. A quick glimpse at some

historical factors throws additional light on this subject.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Taking the National Period (ca. 1800–1830) as a point of departure, one of the most important developments of that period was the determined disestablishment of churches. As with private enterprise, it created an opportunity for all churches and religious organizations to function and flourish according to their ability and God's provision. Free enterprise and free exercise of religion went hand in hand. Whereas the experience of Christians in Europe had been primarily that of belonging to state churches, with hardship and persecution often the lot of dissenters, that pattern had prevailed to some extent in nine of the thirteen colonies. Life could be difficult for those who did not fit the system, as, for example, when Francis MacKemie was imprisoned in New York for preaching when he tried to establish Presbyterian churches there.[9] The Constitution and Bill of Rights addressed this problem.

The important factor constitutionally was that each religious group in this new nation—whether coming from another country or beginning anew in this land—would be guaranteed the freedom to organize and operate just as other already existing religious organizations. They could establish and promote their own congregations and denominations.[10] Advocacy and implementation would be their responsibility as well as their privilege.

This made it possible for voluntary associations to become a major part of the American religious scene during the early nineteenth century. Essentially, they permitted people to identify, support, and participate in causes that were important to them. A group of people or churches could organize to meet a perceived need in the community or in the nation; resources could then be attracted to this cause. This meant that your organization could prosper if it appeared to present a timely and suitable response to an urgent need. The rapid proliferation of these various organizations has been referred to as the Righteous Empire, or the Benevolent Empire.[11] Nathan Hatch says that the religious ferment of this

period is unmatched in American history. Another person described it as a sea of sectarian rivalries kept in constant agitation.[12] Apparently, assuring the free exercise of religion unleashed tremendous energy and activity.

Freedom of choice for individuals was a precious concept too. Just as there was freedom to organize churches, denominations, and parachurch ministries, so each individual had freedom of choice regarding association with any or many of these organizations—or perhaps none at all. A principal mark of this freedom was a very fluid system that enabled people to participate in these associations according to their interests and commitments.

It was also theoretically possible to transfer or switch church membership at any time. If you lost interest in an organization or church, you could switch to one that seemed better suited to you. One could join or drop out, depending on motivation and opportunity. Individuals did it because they wanted to, not because they had to. This ensured a consistently higher level of commitment and enthusiasm for these groups. In smaller communities, social and family ties definitely affected these choices, imposing some restrictions on such movement, but freedom of movement and association were assured as a result of American religious pluralism. And it was not just pluralism: it was striking diversity.[13]

It should be noted that this diversity surely limited the power of churches to control their members. Apart from persuasion, or in some instances, fear or intimidation, churches were unable to retain members who chose not to remain, because they could join other churches if they wished. In some cases, members withdrew from congregations to form new ones that were more to their satisfaction, with church splits as the result. This eventually left the older forms of church discipline essentially powerless since another congregation could, if it wished, receive these church members and reinstate their church membership privileges.

This fluid system is what made it possible for evangelicals to build large parachurch organizations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It also enabled evangelical churches

and denominations to regroup several times during the twentieth century. Consequently, evangelicals learned to innovate and evangelize with a passion, for the genius of the new American system was such that if you could recruit others to your cause and retain their loyalty, you could be highly successful. This fit quite comfortably with private enterprise, or free market, concepts, as well as freedom of choice for individuals. The whole democratizing trend of nineteenth-century America placed its unique stamp of approval on this free-flowing Christianity as it permitted and encouraged a continuing proliferation of religious organizations to serve the rapidly growing nation.[14] Toqueville correctly perceived the dynamic, formative influence of religious voluntary associations.

The open system that endorsed pluralism made it possible for evangelicals to grow and prosper tremendously. Innovative communication, rejection of hierarchical authority, and freedom of choice provided ideal conditions. It also allowed them to keep growing and proliferating endlessly, whatever the reasons may have been, since as long as you could attract followers and resources, you could have viable religious organizations. This undoubtedly has been one of the great benefits of the American experience.

Monopolistic systems can, by contrast, be oppressive, stifling both innovation and the human spirit. In America, creative enterprise and entrepreneurial energies were unleashed with remarkable results, as history clearly demonstrates. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries showcase the dramatic results.

THE WEAKNESSES OF PROLIFERATION AND FRAGMENTATION

Loose Networks with No Organizational Center

The result, as noted church historian Dr. Nathan Hatch has ably observed, is that modern American evangelicalism has evolved "like a supermarket, a consumer-oriented, highly fragmented religious marketplace." Your strength is often your weakness—and that appears to be the case, contends

Hatch, asserting that evangelicalism has gradually become a loose network of churches and organizations with no organizational center. Evangelicals, he aptly observes, are "entrepreneurial, decentralized, and given to splitting, forming, and reforming."[15] The strong dynamic that has fueled evangelicalism's growth has apparently also generated a somewhat amoebic structure with no command center.

It is easy for evangelicals, given the amorphous mass the movement has become, to neglect strategic thinking, since there is no effective way to implement it. Though individual ministries may thrive, the movement itself often seems directionless. If this is the case, one must ask: how will a future agenda be determined? If evangelicalism is passive-reactive, it will lose ground, because others, whether liberal or secular leaders, will self-consciously plot a path for the future. Evangelicals will unquestionably respond to that, whether individually or as a movement, but essentially they will forfeit the possibility of an intentional future unless this deficiency can be remedied. The inability to coordinate strategically will undoubtedly weaken influence, regardless of numbers, and increase the current marginalization.

SIZE AND GROWTH AS THE MEASURE

One of the biggest weaknesses of evangelicalism is a tendency to evaluate success primarily in terms of growth and the relative size and strength of the organization or congregation. Emphasis is placed on the results of the choices you make, the cause or organization you espouse, and how it prospers. Big or fast-growing churches are usually perceived as successful ones. On such terms, a congregation will not be successful unless it becomes effective in recruiting members. Now if this effort is focused on evangelizing the unchurched and unreached, that is one thing. But if it is proselytizing from other churches, that is another matter. The problem is that few evangelical churches are growing primarily through evangelism but instead by attracting members from other churches. If most evangelical churches grow by transfer of membership, even after discounting geographic movement, this can

create a very competitive environment with adverse effects. The small and medium-sized churches with fewer resources and less-appealing programs may tend to languish.

But should we assume that size and growth are the highest priorities? An honest answer is no; and that is not to discount the significance of numbers but rather to underscore the problem caused by a skewing of priorities. For if growth is the priority, the pressing question becomes: what must we do to grow? Many pastors are constantly under pressure to search for the key that will unlock the door to unlimited growth. Whether or not such emphasis on growth will be in the best interest of the church spiritually is a different matter, and, as we have noted, may not be the primary concern. This may contribute to unhealthy churches.

SELF-CENTEREDNESS

If every congregation puts itself first, striving to grow its own membership, it is very easy to cultivate a mentality that "only my church counts." Although ministry may be couched in kind, pious words about love for others, it may without notice degenerate into empty verbiage, concealing the self-centered, selfish orientation of a congregation that is overwhelmingly concerned to build and perpetuate its own operation without regard for others. Quite sadly, I know of a number of churches that fall into this category. Not only do they not care about the welfare of other congregations near them (although they would never admit that), they do not desire for these congregations to prosper, surmising that if other proximate churches prosper, it might hurt their own potential.

Self-centered churches may undercut or hurt other congregations by intentionally recruiting their members without regard to the damage it may cause, or by circulating false rumors (regarding matters such as doctrine, programs, or behavior) that could harm not only those churches but all the believing community, as well as the unreached. A self-centered church may also withhold cooperation or worthwhile projects of churches or groups of churches in the community.

Their motto could be: "If we can't lead it and control it, we won't participate in it." What does this kind of attitude and posture say to the world? It communicates clearly enough to the other churches that are affected by their behavior.

The comedian raconteur, Jerry Clower, caught the essence of this attitude when, during a television interview, he was asked for his opinion about prayer in the public schools. His reply was, "I'm for it"—then, after a moment's hesitation, added—"as long as it's a Baptist that's praying." My experience as a seminary president taught me quickly that this is how some Christians operate. Publicly they may smile and be nice, but they will maim or destroy you if they find the right opportunity, because their consuming interest is building their own ministry. If your ministry prospers, that threatens what they are doing. However, the Bible presents a totally different kind of model, reminding us that we are compelled to love and serve one another, seeking to benefit one another. Selfish behavior cannot be justified personally or corporately. Consider the following words from the apostle Paul:

> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.
>
> —Philippians 2:3–4[16]

> Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."
>
> —Galatians 5:13b–14

> Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.
>
> —Galatians 6:9–10

> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.
>
> —Colossians 3:15

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

—Ephesians 4:16

Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.

—1 Thessalonians 4:9–10

MEGACHURCH POWER

The rise of megachurches in huge urban areas, as well as the rise of large, prosperous parachurch ministries, has resulted from the unusually able leadership of evangelicals who have a heart for ministry, a clear vision, and a disciplined follow-through. Quite a large number of these megachurches have sprung up during the last forty years, most of them riding the crest of rapid suburban growth. The result of their concentrated membership and resources is impressive. Among Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, approximately 50 percent of their total denominational membership is found in 13–15 percent of these congregations—congregations with financial and people resources in huge quantities.

As a result, megachurches have become the new power centers of Protestantism, displacing the control of bureaucratic denominational hierarchies. Except for a few church bureaucrats, complaints about this power shift have been minimal, and it has further decentralized churches so that each megachurch usually does what is right in its own eyes. For this reason, they have occasionally been referred to as mini-denominations, and some seem to behave that way. Many smaller churches imitate their megachurch counterparts, desiring to gain in size and influence so that they also can become megachurches. This is the success syndrome that seems to have infected many evangelical churches. Visit the Saddleback or Willow Creek conferences, and you cannot miss the contagion among the wannabes.

The nature of leadership in such churches is typically charismatic—personality and gift-driven. Gifted preachers and persuasive, visionary leaders are able to readily gather followers. It should be acknowledged that most of them are extraordinary leaders, for few pastors have the abilities to handle such responsibility. This elite group of pastoral leaders is absolutely essential to the continued vitality of megachurches. Perhaps not always, but often, these pastors have mega egos to match the size of their churches. The leadership style that often accompanies this scenario is an autocratic, authoritarian style in an autonomous or semi-autonomous congregation.

If, in addition to this, the ties to theology and tradition should become weakened, it is easy for such a congregational ministry to quickly become rootless. This happens because the ministry is driven primarily by a message and methodology to bring the desired results, whether it requires a change of staff, style of music and worship, or anything else.[17] One can now see how it is possible within a relatively brief time frame to completely change the theology and ministry of a large church. In this respect, atheological megachurch pastors might be as likely as any to eviscerate their churches' heritage because they have the power to do it. This would probably not be a self-conscious decision, but the consequence of pragmatic, experience-driven decision making to remain successful. What does it take to recruit and retain members to maintain the ministry? That becomes the driving question. This is accentuated by the fact that consumer-oriented voluntarism is the hallmark of our current cultural and religious cafeteria. If this should occur in large, autonomous or semi-autonomous churches, who is in a position to do anything about it? If there is no outside circle of accountability, which is usually the case, it may not be possible to rectify the situation. Given the dependence of megachurches on their senior pastors and the longevity of their ministries, many of these churches are far more fragile than they appear to be.

FRAGMENTATION AND A SUSPICIOUS, CRITICAL SPIRIT

Massive fragmentation and divisions within the evangelical movement during the twentieth century left bruises and scars that have affected the attitude of many evangelicals, causing them to be suspicious or critical. They feel as if they must be on guard to avoid a repetition of past experiences with liberal theology or other doctrinal aberrations. They fear that if they do not remain vigilant, the work of a lifetime can be quickly lost. Those suspicions can flare up into full-blown controversies with charges and countercharges, as was the case with the recent Evangelicals and Catholics Together statement and successive statements emanating from that dialogue. The role of women in the church has also stirred some deep emotions and elicited heated rhetoric, as have gay rights issues in regard to same sex marriages or the ordination of homosexuals. Given these and a seeming parade of new issues, it is no wonder that many evangelicals feel an acute need to remain on guard.

Following the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, barriers quickly arose between evangelicals in regard to the issue of separation. In some instances, fellowship between evangelicals was broken because of disagreements about separation. In other instances double separation prevailed—that separation of evangelicals from other evangelicals who would not leave their denominations, although those denominations now held untenable beliefs. Double separation is still practiced by some evangelicals. A critical, judgmental spirit frequently emerged from these experiences and has been discovered among both separating and non-separating parties.

The apostle Paul warned against just such a spirit: "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:15). Moreover, he reminded the Corinthian church that not only are we one body, but we need each other. It is reprehensible to suggest that I do not belong or for me to say that you do not belong. When we are believers, for me to say that I don't need you or that you don't need me is equally wrong (1 Corinthians 12:12–26). We do need each other, and we need to help one another if we are to build up the body of Christ. It is past time for us to

acknowledge that we belong to—and need—one another. Moreover, we need to help each other in every way possible for our mutual benefit and for our testimony to the unbelieving world.

RATIONALIZING FRAGMENTATION

Once Christians found it necessary to form separate denominations or churches in order to preserve and perpetuate their faith, it was possible to decide that other disagreements (though not essential to the Christian faith) could justify further division. In some instances, tertiary issues such as the form of church government were elevated to the level of primary issues and declared essential to maintain biblical fidelity and authority. In other cases, decisions were made in order to perpetuate distinctive doctrinal positions. Whatever the importance of the distinctions, they were deemed significant enough to warrant a perpetually separate existence.

Presbyterians provide a good case study for the propensity to divide based on various reasons. Matthew Arnold observed that Presbyterians are born to schism as the sparks fly upward. Charles Finney, a strong-minded evangelist, claimed that the devil and all the demons in hell rejoice every year about the time of the General Assembly.[18] Whatever the reason, Presbyterians have sustained a fractious history, including sufficient divisions that the multiple Presbyterian denominations, often referred to by acronyms, have sometimes been called "split P's." Nor are the Presbyterians alone. The Baptists have seemed equally ready to go their separate ways on more than one occasion. It has been suggested that the real secret to growth among Baptists is congregational splits! Rather than feel guilty about these divisions, the various groups expend considerable energy justifying them. Seldom do they persevere in attempting to resolve conflict by reconciliation. Tragically, in some instances, the process of rationalizing a separate existence has bred a sectarian spirit.

IMPACT ON CULTURE

Nonetheless, in spite of its deficiencies and mistakes, the evangelical movement has grown tremendously. We have big

successful churches. We have resources. We have flexed our political muscles and waged culture wars. We have engaged academic and intellectual circles. We have attempted to influence public policy. We have targeted key issues.

Yet for all of that, the evangelical movement has had minimal impact on the culture. If anything, an argument may be made that evangelicals have been influenced by the culture more than they have influenced it. Of greater concern is the fact that evangelicals seem to be oriented more around the motifs of freedom of choice, individualism, and size and growth than Scripture or Christ. Surely the first response would be to deny that, but it appears to be a plausible charge.

As I listen to the cacophony of evangelical voices making the most of the times, I seldom hear a lament for the lack of genuine caring, cooperation, community, and unity. We seem too busy doing our own thing to care about the importance of Christian unity and the impact it might have on the world as well as its direct benefit to us. Bonhoeffer rightly criticized us when he observed that it has been granted to America, less than any nation on earth, to realize the visible unity of the church.[19] That charge stings. And the evangelical community—not ignoring all the good that characterizes it—needs to feel the sting of his rebuke. It could also be directed to the broader failure regarding morally transformed lives, but that is not the focus of this paper.

In the 1940s, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was founded in order to form a united front among evangelicals and to develop a positive agenda for the evangelical movement. Much was accomplished in the ensuing years, and we are the benefactors of their effort. Now the NAE appears to be floundering, and there is no united evangelical front to lead engagement with the world and to shape the future direction of evangelical ministry and influence on the culture. Nor has there been an outcry from the evangelical community to rectify the situation. If anything, the finger of blame has been pointed elsewhere. This underscores the nature of the problem.

As we ignore this need and merrily continue to do our own thing, how much different are we from the one who fiddled while Rome burned? We may lose a lot of ground unless we awaken to the fact that, as Paul said, we need each other, and we need a grand strategy that will give direction to our common effort to worship and serve our Savior. The church at the beginning of the twentieth century awakened to the fact that it had become infested with many people who no longer believed the great truths of the Bible, or even the gospel. The church of the twenty-first century has awakened to the fact that its robust proliferation and fragmentation has spawned a number of new problems that will challenge its effectiveness in this new century.

It is possible that we may become so preoccupied with doing our own thing, building our ministries and dynasties, that we fail to realize how we are jeopardizing the future of the church. Ironically, we may be so busy winning the world that we become astonished to discover we have somehow lost the world.

How late must it be before we wake up to our situation? How urgent must the crisis become before we respond?

RESTORING THE BALANCE: POSITIVE STEPS

The evangelical church has so many commendable strengths that it would be tragic for some of the weaknesses alluded to above to cause irreparable damage. That need not be the case, but we cannot continue as we are. What can be done now to assure a better and more hopeful future for the Lord's people? The first step is to acknowledge that this problem exists so that it can be addressed. Then, when we reject a negative, reactive methodology and develop positive, constructive steps toward spiritual integrity—which are essential, we can turn our diversity and common faith into a strength rather than a weakness.

If there is a willingness to acknowledge that all who embrace the gospel and trust wholeheartedly in Christ for salvation are members of God's church, then we can acknowledge one another as members of God's family. Once we have

done that, there should be a commitment to love and help one another, regardless of differences. When that occurs, the Lord is glorified and we benefit. Conceptually, evangelicals agree, but experientially, they are usually consumed by their own local needs and ministries. A "kingdom" view rarely rises above denominationalism.

Building bridges of communication and cooperation is a solid initial step. As we spend time getting to know other Christians and discovering what God has done—and is doing—in their lives, we often find ourselves enriched and our horizons broadened. As I have visited believers in various parts of the world, as well as having spent time with them in my own community, I have been encouraged and strengthened in my faith. New friendships have been formed, and it has not been unusual to gain new insights. I come away with a new respect and appreciation for these Christians. I confess that such experiences have deepened and broadened my spiritual development in so many ways that I freely acknowledge that without them I would be greatly impoverished. What needs and projects might bring us together with believers outside our usual circles so that we are strengthened and our witness to the world becomes far more engaging and appealing?

One of the delightful discoveries about the body of Christ is that we can learn from those who are different. If we listen only to those who think like we do, our circle of learning and influence will be quite limited; but when we step outside that circle, we experience fresh stimulation and insight. As we listen to and learn from others in the Christian community, we learn to view them with new esteem and ponder the difference such friendships and alliances will make as unbelievers watch and listen to us.

Hopefully, new understanding and respect based on honest dialogue can begin to characterize the evangelical community, and a premium can be placed on strengthening relationships, for we are a believing community. Our relationships with each other are important, because they mirror our relationship to God.

This may be the ideal time for a fresh effort of cooperation

and support. Although particular congregations and ministries must be maintained, this does not preclude the possibility of cooperating in ventures of mutual benefit for the secular community, whether responding to an urgent need caused by a natural disaster, serving the elderly or disadvantaged, or engaging in a myriad of other possibilities. These may be some of the most appropriate ways to cooperate.

Pitching in to help another ministry when there is nothing to gain other than the satisfaction of giving help when it is needed is the sort of example that could begin to reverse current trends. Each community has more than its share of such needs if we would but take the time to identify them and allow our hearts to be touched. Think of the needs of the children and youth of our country. What could we accomplish in our communities if we worked as a team of believers for the common good of the young people? Cooperative efforts to serve and improve the communities or cities in which we live are especially attractive.

Instead of criticizing others or waiting for them to take the first step, now is a propitious time for evangelicals to say, "I need to make the first move—perhaps the second and third moves as well." Love and compassion, care and concern, will come before any other consideration. Then we will be in accord with Paul's admonition:

> You were born to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love.
>
> —Galatians 5:13-14

The following prayer for unity in the church might well become our prayer:

> Holy Spirit, as in the past you united different men and women and made them one, so bring us together in a oneness that celebrates our diversity of talent and ability.
>
> May our personalities blend in a superb harmony as, laying our egos aside, we learn to prefer one another and to delight in

encouraging the gifts we see in others. Let there be no star temperament, no prima donna behavior among us, but a sense of ensemble, as we try to be as anonymous as possible so that you can shine through our efforts to the glory of Christ. And when all is done, may we be in the wings and he in the spotlight, taking center stage and receiving all the applause!

Holy Spirit, you who are fully God and yet so anonymous, hide us that we may reveal him. Amen.[20]

Author

Dr. Luder G. Whitlock, Jr., currently serves as executive director of the Trinity Forum and president of Excelsis in Orlando, Florida. During his tenure at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS), where he served as president from 1978–2001, RTS became one of the ten largest seminaries in North America. In addition to serving on the boards of numerous organizations, Dr. Whitlock is the author of *The Spiritual Quest*, and also served as executive director of the *New Geneva Study Bible*, re-released by Zondervan in 2003 as *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*. He has contributed to several other significant volumes, including: *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, Reformed Theology in America*, and *The Dictionary of Twentieth Century Christian Biography*. Dr. Whitlock and his wife, Mary Lou, live in Orlando, Florida, and have three children and eleven grandchildren.

Notes

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7. Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89, 153. See also David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
8. Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
9. Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 32–33.
10. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 149ff.
11. Martin E. Marty, *The Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970).
12. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 64.
13. Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 65.
14. Hatch, *Sacred Cause*, 67–69, 126, 208–9.
15. Nathan O. Hatch, "Evangelicals in the New Millennium" (unpublished paper), 5.
16. Scripture quotes here are from the NIV.
17. Evangelical churches repackage rather than abandon their theology, Kimon Sargeant has observed, as an essential element of their strategy for effectiveness. But if doctrinal beliefs are deemphasized or neglected in favor of application of biblical principles for daily living, theological heritage and identity may be lost. The choice should not be either/or because it may easily be both/and; see Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 118.
18. Winthrop Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 102.
19. Nathan Hatch, *Democratization*, 212–13.
20. Bryan Jeffery Leech, from *The Worshipping Church: A Hymnal* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing Company, 1990), 707.

WELL, I'M NOT REALLY LOOKING FOR A DYNAMIC, LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCE, BUT I'D SURE LIKE TO GET MY SINS FORGIVEN.