

# The Fragile Vision Trends In Twentieth Century Evangelical Thought

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## SUMMARY

In the nineteenth century steps were taken to provide an evangelical world-view which could challenge the outlook of 'modernity'. Such an effort is again needed today

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im neunzehnten Jahrhundert strengten sich Evangelikale an, ein Weltbild zu entwickeln, das die Moderne herausfordern konnte. Heute brauchen wir wieder solche

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## RÉSUMÉ

Au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, on s'est efforcé d'élaborer une vision du monde évangélique pour répondre au point de vue de la Modernité. Une entreprise semblable se révèle

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Questions about the present and future need somehow to be connected with the past. The past forms the background of both present and future and provides the historical framework for such an inquiry. Though in a Christian understanding of history the past does not control the future (God does!), it nonetheless influences it. Among many things else, we are our story and inevitably so. Our story does not necessarily tell us what we will be, but it says something about us that has to be taken into account. Our story is always complex, stratified, multifaceted.

In recent years, there have been many attempts to trace the story of Evangelicalism as a historic and global movement. Perhaps, the turn of the century and millennium has stirred attention concerning our past. In any case, our goals depend on our heritage. Our future is related to our past. This brief article is not a survey of recent historical liter-

and must learn lessons both from the early twentieth century when evangelicalism became too reactive and from the late twentieth century when evangelical social thinking perhaps lacked a vision sharp enough for it to be able to provide a real alternative.

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Bemühungen. Doch dürfen wir nicht in die Fehler der Evangelikalen vom Anfang der 20Jh.s verfallen, die zu negative auf die Moderne reagierten. Wir dürfen auch nicht die Evangelikalen der 2. Hälfte des 20. Jh.s kopieren, weil ihrer Sozialethik eine klare Vision fehlte, so dass sie keine echte Alternative darstellten.

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aujourd'hui de nouveau nécessaire. Elle doit tirer des leçons du passé, tant du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, où les évangéliques ont souvent réagi de manière excessive, que de la fin du même siècle, où l'approche sociale évangélique n'a pas été suffisamment bien pensée pour constituer un réel apport différent.

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ature on the Evangelical movement not is it aimed at providing a new piece of scholarship. Rather, it is an evocative sketch which tries to indicate some significant trends in contemporary Evangelical thought. It singles out three approaches which can be found in our recent history.

This reflection could be used as a starter for further debate and as a basis to reflect on present-day questions. In this attempt many interpretative issues are simply assumed and not spelt out (e.g. how do we define Evangelicalism theologically and historically? How selective is our interest? How fair is our evaluation of complex issues, tendencies and authors? How Westernised is our whole understanding?).

Many more things could be said about the details and even the main points. The important thing is to pick up the challenge to think through the Evangelical vision with a minimum degree of

historical awareness. The risk of over-generalisation is certainly present but is worth taking.

### 1. A Comprehensive Vision Seeking to Respond to the Modernity Project

At the turn of the XX century, the widespread self-perception of Evangelical thought is that of a coherent, biblical worldview which competes with other worldviews, especially the ‘modernity project’ (J. Habermas). Both visions are comprehensive and have a project. While theological Liberalism tries to accommodate Christianity to modernity, Evangelical thought seeks a more confrontational way to respond to its challenges while providing an intellectual, cultural and spiritual alternative to it.

In 1847, the Dutch historian Groen van Prinsterer published a series of lectures on *Revolution and Unbelief* which epitomised a confessional and awakened Protestant thought coming to grips with the ideological basis of the French Revolution and its Enlightenment roots. According to Groen, this kind of modernity clashes with Christianity for its autonomous project which abolishes God and deifies man. Building on Groen’s heritage, Abraham Kuyper developed a more refined cultural analysis based on religious principles. The 1989 *Lectures on Calvinism* show the comprehensiveness of the Christian worldview which also nurtures the arts, science and society at large, while opposing ‘modernism’ and its self-pretending autonomy from God. The Gospel is thought of as the salt and light of the world. Being aware of the danger of ecclesiocentricity, the church must engage culture and society with a distinctly Christian option. The sphere-sovereignty category helps Christians to have a sense of the distinction between church and state, family and person, arts and economy, and so on.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, James Orr suggested important ways of confronting modern thought without feeling a ‘minority complex’ and offering an intellectually viable alternative for modern man (e.g. the 1893 *The Christian View of God and the World*). Meanwhile, Old Princeton theologians upheld Reformed orthodoxy while being sensitive to new cultural trends, especially coming from science. A similar trend is found in the French-speaking world (e.g. Auguste Lecerf).

There is a sense in which the ‘modernity project’ can be faced with an alternative vision based on the Gospel and in line with classical Evangelicalism. Not every expression of early 20th century Evangelical thought is equally developed, alert and

engaging. However, there is a diffused conviction that the Gospel is to be lived out in every sphere of life within the context of an on-going ideological battle.

### 2. A Reduced Vision Engaged in a Fierce Battle against Liberalism

In the first half of 20th century, the battle against the ‘modernity project’ became fiercer, at least on the Evangelical side. *The Fundamentals* (1909-1019) highlighted the basic doctrinal contours which were threatened by theological liberalism. A strong defensive attitude became the prominent feature of a vision under attack. In 1923 Gresham Machen published a book – *Christianity and Liberalism* – in which the two religions are considered as being mutually exclusive. According to Machen, they are utterly incompatible.

Neo-fundamentalist tendencies further ignited the conflict, while reducing the Evangelical ability to present an alternative to every dimension of life. Some apologetic elements inherited from the previous generation were kept, but its creative faithfulness in shaping a different culture was progressively lost. While it was clear who and where the enemy is, what was missing is the Christian vision for the modern world.

The word fundamentalist becomes synonymous of a person with a closed mind and harsh attitude. Reaction overturns the ability to nurture a Christian vision and to shape a Christian project which is feasible for the modern world. Paradoxically, the battle for the preservation of one’s identity erodes its contours and its ability to shape the structures of life. The ‘over-against’ feature becomes dominant at the expense of an Evangelical constructive strength. A theological anxiety for purity is not matched with a passion for its cultural implications. Theology runs the risk of becoming a rhetorical exercise.

The rise of Pentecostalism has added spiritual force to the Evangelical movement but is basically channelled in this reactive mood in terms of the wider vision. This counter-cultural mentality stresses the opposition side of the Christian calling while leaving aside the challenges of the cultural mandate.

### 3. A Liquid Vision Looking for Renewal in a Global World

After the Second World War, a wide-spread wind of renewal began to blow in Evangelical circles. In

1948 Carl Henry called Evangelicals to deal with *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. The siege mindset needs to be overcome by a renewed sense of the Christian mission which would recapture its theological identity and cultural breadth. The Lausanne Congress (1974) launched a strong Evangelical engagement in mission which is aware of social issues on a world-wide scale.

In the aftermath of Lausanne, Klaus Bockmühl argued that social responsibility is an integral part of an *Evangelikale Sozialethik* (1979) while Francis Schaeffer suggested ways of interacting with contemporary culture within the context of a strong apologetic awareness. John Stott invited Evangelicals to address *Issues Facing Christians Today* (1984), not being afraid to face the complexity of the modern world with a Biblical approach. The Evangelical vision was evoked, but its outworking in terms of worldview seemed to have little impact. The systemic element in this reflection was still underdeveloped. The attention towards individuals and particulars was still primary.

While Western Evangelicals struggle to survive, non-Western Evangelicalism grows dramatically in numbers. The geography of the movement changes significantly though increasing numbers

do not bring social changes automatically. 'Holistic' mission becomes the expression of the time. This emphasis does not necessarily mean that holism is achieved with integrity. There are signs that point to a growing number of problematic areas as far as the integrity of the Evangelical vision is concerned.

Renewal is also a feature of other sectors of the Christian world. The Roman Catholic Church is experiencing it after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The World Council of Churches is also in constant movement. Theological borders are less clear than in the past. Cultural common battles overshadow doctrinal issues. Fundamentalism seems over, but ecumenism comes in and the Evangelical identity seems to have become greyer.

The world is also changing in a global village. The 'modernity project' has become more nuanced and stratified. The enemy is less clear than in the past. The battle lines are more subtle and elastic. A liquid vision is in danger of being embraced and synthesised by a more pluralistic version of modernity. Is the Evangelical vision a viable alternative? Does it want to be an alternative? Is it capable of approaching things in structural terms? Does it make a difference anyway?

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