

EVANGELICALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

by RAY BANNER

MR. BANNER, a graduate of Grace Bible Institute, Omaha, Nebraska, of Bob Jones University and of Dallas Theological Seminary, has given what he regards as a "reporter's view" of American evangelicalism rather than a philosophical appraisal. He begins by defining his terms, and shows that "evangelicalism" in the United States, as widely used, has a more restricted connotation than it has on the continent of Europe, or even in Great Britain and Ireland.

THE Evangelical picture in America encompasses so many denominations, organizations, institutions, parties, doctrinal divergencies, and men, that the task of giving a succinct and yet comprehensive report is formidable.¹

There is no one book, or to my knowledge even an article, that presents an overall summary of contemporary Evangelicalism in the States.² When one pioneers in such an area he is inevitably attacked. He is too inclusive or too exclusive; he emphasizes one movement or party to the exclusion of another.

But since the writer sees no one else attempting to give a comprehensive survey of the present Evangelical situation in the world's largest Evangelical stronghold he feels that he must venture out into critical waters and leave his little splash in the great sea of church history.

¹ The principal abbreviations used in this article are:

A.C.C.C. American Council of Christian Churches.

E.F.M.A. Evangelical Foreign Missions Association.

I.F.M.A. Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association.

N.A.E. National Association of Evangelicals.

N.C.C. National Council of Churches.

N.S.S.A. National Sunday School Association.

² Perhaps the best representative books for such a study would be Louis Gasper, *The Fundamentalist Movement* (Paris, 1963); James DeForest Murch, *Cooperation Without Compromise: A History of the N.A.E.* (Grand Rapids, 1956); Ronald Nash, *The New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1964).

I. DEFINITIONS

I was tempted to use the title "Fundamentalism in the United States". It would have been much easier to define and control this more rigid title. But if "Evangelicalism" lets too much in by the door, "Fundamentalism" shuts too much out. So I thought it better to use the word Evangelical and qualify the meaning of it for this article.

The term Evangelical does not carry the same connotation in the U.S.A. as it does elsewhere. On the European continent it is used in conjunction with the state church (Lutheran). In Latin America it is practically synonymous with Protestant. And in Britain it is applied to a wider spectrum than in the U.S.A.

In Britain a sizeable segment of the Church of England is known as Evangelical. In the U.S.A. their Episcopal counterpart might be called conservative or orthodox but not likely Evangelical (at least not by more militant fellow-Evangelicals). The reasons for this difference are probably twofold: (1) in the U.S.A. the term Evangelicalism is more exclusive, (2) and in the U.S.A. Evangelicalism has tended to work outside of the established churches rather than inside as in Britain.³

This same preference for the words conservative or orthodox, rather than Evangelical, is evident among Biblically-minded Lutherans and to a lesser extent among Reformed and Presbyterian groups.

To be an Evangelical in the U.S.A. in the genuine sense is to accept all the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith including belief in an authoritative and inerrant Bible.⁴ It is generally understood that an Evangelical will testify to, and manifest, a personal relationship with Christ. Thus orthodoxy in doctrine and pietism in experience kiss one another in American Evangelicalism.

³ Of course, it is to be understood that none of the churches in America are established in the sense of being officially linked with the government or state. All are free churches. The word "established" in the U.S.A. has reference to the older and more organized denominations. These are often called "old line denominations" and most of them are largely controlled by non-evangelical sentiment.

⁴ In recent years there has been much discussion among Evangelicals in the U.S.A. concerning the inerrancy of Scripture. A few have veered away from this strict position. But as a body the Evangelical movement has stood firm on the doctrine of inerrancy. [This was a principal issue for debate at the Seminar on Scripture held at Wenham, Massachusetts, in June, 1966. Ed.]

II. ORGANIZATION

In the ferment of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy⁵ American Evangelicals were out at sea organizationally or, at best, loosely banded together in makeshift and spasmodic unions.

In the last twenty-five years a new solidity has appeared ecclesiastically, if not philosophically, among Evangelicals. At the centre of Evangelicalism is the National Association of Evangelicals. It includes a majority of the small and aggressive denominations. On its right are the more vociferous fundamentalists who make up the American Council of Christian Churches. On its left are a few institutions, a remnant of theologians and educators, a minority of preachers, and a sizeable number of laymen who remain in the liberal and neo-orthodox dominated National Council of Churches.

The N.A.E. was organized in 1942 to present a unified Evangelical front on the American scene. The largest denomination in this strictly Evangelical organization is the pentecostal Assemblies of God with 543,000 members. Practically all of the member denominations are less than one hundred years old. Total N.A.E. membership is estimated at two million plus.

The A.C.C.C. was begun at about the same time as the N.A.E. The A.C.C.C. and the N.A.E. both subscribe to a strong doctrinal platform including the tenet of an inerrant Bible. However, the A.C.C.C. rejects the pentecostal element of Evangelicalism; and it is more militantly fundamentalistic. Its membership is estimated somewhere around the one million mark.

Actually the majority of American Evangelicals are outside both the N.A.E. and the A.C.C.C. Evangelical denominations such as the Conservative Baptists (300,000), Church of the Nazarene (340,000), Church of God, Indiana (145,000), etc. do not hold membership in any of the three church councils of the U.S.A.⁶ This is also true of the huge Southern Baptist Convention (ten million plus) which contains a large number of Evangelical pastors and believers.

Even in the liberal and neo-orthodox dominated N.C.C., with its some forty-one million members, there is a decided remnant of

⁵ To understand contemporary American Evangelicalism well, one needs to understand the American Fundamentalist movement which began early in the century as a Biblically-centred reaction against modernism and which still strongly influences American Evangelicalism. Two critical but helpful books are Stewart Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* and Norman Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy*. See also Gasper, *op. cit.*

⁶ For a complete statistical summary of the three major church councils in the United States (N.C.C., N.A.E., and A.C.C.C.) see *Christianity Today*, IX (Jan. 29, 1965).

Evangelicals. Most of the militant Evangelicals have long abandoned the N.C.C. denominations. The fury of battle is not as at was during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy but among the American Baptists, United Presbyterians, and Disciples of Christ in particular, Evangelicals (largely broad Evangelicals) are an influential minority and often carry on a quiet battle within the denominations. An example of this ecclesiastical wrestling is currently brewing in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., where a more modernized confession of faith is up for adoption in 1967.

Finally, there are a few unique sects on the fringes of Evangelicalism. Chief of these is the Churches of Christ with some 2,250,000 members. Strongly orthodox, the Churches of Christ, for the most part, hold themselves aloof from all other denominations. Many of their local churches consider their particular group as the only true church. Eventually the Churches of Christ will probably align themselves with other Evangelicals if the ecumenical movement continues to develop. Another sect that has enjoyed friendly overtures from a few Evangelicals in recent years is the Seventh-Day Adventist with over half a million members.

III. DOCTRINE

The basic doctrinal definition of the Evangelical position was given above.

Quite a wide doctrinal divergence exists on minor theological points. Within the membership of the N.A.E. are strong Calvinists and strong Arminians; reformed, holiness, and pentecostals; amillennialist and dispensationalist.

The common belief in an authoritative Bible and a common foe in the octopus activities of the N.C.C. have brought these various Evangelicals together. Once the question asked in America was "What denomination do you belong to?" or "What theological tradition?" Over the past several decades a different question has evolved: "What do you think about the Bible and the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith; about the work of Christ?"

The mainstream of American Evangelicalism carries currents from many streams. Calvin and Arminius often merge in the theology of many of its preachers. It entertains the erudite Reformed theology of a Charles Hodge of old Princeton days while it may preach this same theology with the temper of the American revivalistic heritage. Segments of Evangelicalism preach the holiness of Wesley with the individual spirit of a Baptist evangelist. Intellectually and probably numerically Calvinism wields

the most influence in American Evangelicalism; but it is largely a modified Calvinism. And among some of the poor and humble of the Evangelical believers Calvinism is considered a curse.

IV. EVANGELISM AND MISSIONS

Evangelism has always been an important ingredient in the American church scene. Itinerant evangelists and revivalists have been common since the Great Awakening at the time of Whitefield and Wesley.

Evangelicals are presently carrying on a vigorous evangelistic thrust. Foremost of course is the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Many lesser evangelists are kept busy holding union campaigns and special meetings in local churches.

One of the prominent vehicles of evangelism in the U.S.A. is radio. Programmes like Back to the Bible, Back to God, the Old Fashioned Revival Hour, Radio Bible Class, the Lutheran Hour (Missouri Synod Lutherans), Billy Graham, and the pentecostalist Oral Roberts reach millions of listeners each week with the evangelistic thrust of the gospel.

In the realm of literature the American Bible Society and numerous tract societies supply a huge source of evangelistic literature as well as the Scriptures themselves.

There are a number of interdenominational organizations that exist for the purpose of evangelism and Christian fellowship. The Gideons provide an avenue for Christian fellowship as well as for effective witness through Scripture distribution and other evangelistic means. Christian Business Men's Committees may be found in many communities. Groups like the Christian Medical Society and the American Scientific Affiliation unite Evangelicals in the professions. Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade witness for Christ on many of the American college campuses.⁷ For teenagers are evangelistic organizations such as Youth for Christ, Young Life, and Word of Life.

An indication that the cause of the gospel has not passed hope in America is the slowly increasing number of Evangelical missionaries going out into every area of the world. The two largest Evangelical missionary agencies are the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (arm of the N.A.E.) and the Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association (which includes most of the indepen-

⁷ It should be noted that Inter-Varsity does not play nearly as significant a part in the U.S. as it does in Britain. It is one Evangelical organization which has been transplanted from Britain.

dent faith boards). These two agencies spent nearly \$60,000,000 in a recent year to support some 12,500 U.S. and Canadian missionaries.

Some 1,500 more missionaries are related to the A.C.C.C. Besides these are an unknown number of Evangelical missionaries serving under the N.C.C. and a substantial group under non-aligned auspices.

The E.F.M.A. and the I.F.M.A. began a jointly-sponsored quarterly journal in the fall of 1964. They sponsored jointly a Congress on World Missions in the spring of 1966.

V. EDUCATION

To be implemented, ideas and doctrines must have sources through which they can be conveyed. In recent years Evangelicals have made large strides on every educational level.

Liberalism made a rout of most of the existing seminaries and religious colleges from the years 1875-1930. The American Fundamentalist movement was left with a scant educational legacy. American Fundamentalism had to fight a herculean battle in every area; especially was this true in education.

In the vanguard of the Evangelical effort to rebuild educationally was the Bible Institute. Nyack Missionary Training Institute and Moody Bible Institute originated in the 1880s as the first such schools. Today there are over 250 Bible Institutes and Bible colleges in the U.S.A. and Canada. These institutions send a constant supply of man-power into foreign missions, home missions, and Evangelical pulpits. Some of the better Bible schools have formed an accrediting association which is recognized quite highly by many American colleges and universities.⁸

Since 1920 Evangelicals have established an impressive number of independent and denominational seminaries. Some of these young seminaries are Dallas, Fuller, Grace, Talbot, Westminster, Trinity, Faith, and Gordon. Some of the Evangelical denominations have their own seminaries with the Conservative Baptists alone maintaining four. Other seminaries such as Asbury, Northern Baptist, California Baptist, and Southwestern Baptist (largest seminary in the world, belonging to the Southern Baptists) supply Evangelically orientated men for the larger denominations.

Liberal Arts colleges also serve the Evangelical cause. Among those with a decided Evangelical stand are Wheaton, Bob Jones,

⁸ A excellent study of the Bible school movement is found in S. A. Witmer, *Education with Dimension* (Manhasset, New York, 1962).

Westmont, Asbury, Seattle Pacific, and Greenville. Many smaller schools are scattered across the U.S.A. besides these.

Evangelicals have not been content with developing only higher education. Christian high schools and grade schools are springing up each year.

The National Sunday School Association has augmented the quality of Evangelical Sunday schools through their programme of leadership training and curriculum development. The N.S.S.A. works largely as an arm of the N.A.E. but has a much wider influence than the constituency of the N.A.E.

VI. LITERATURE

It is inconceivable that any modern movement could survive without literature. One of the hopeful signs of American Evangelicalism is the renaissance of Evangelical literature during the past twenty years. Standard Evangelical publishing houses such as Eerdmans, Zondervan, Moody, Baker, Kregel, and Loizeaux Brothers have been enjoying steady growth while well-known secular publishers have increasingly opened their doors to Evangelical books.

While this revival of literature has included various types of books the most noticeable factor is the augmenting number of scholarly and provocative books.

The quality and quantity of periodical literature is in evidence as well. Most significant here is ten-year-old *Christianity Today*, edited by Carl F. H. Henry. It has a circulation five or six times greater than its liberal counterpart, *The Christian Century*, and an impact upon American religion appears unavoidable. *Christianity Today* and *Eternity* are the two leading propaganda organs of the current neo-evangelicalism in America.⁹

Christian Herald, *United Evangelical Action*, *Moody Monthly*, *Christian Life*, *The Sunday School Times*, *The Good News Broadcaster*, *The Sword of the Lord*, and *Bibliotheca Sacra* are other leading Evangelical periodicals with a combined circulation of nearly a million. Billy Graham's *Decision* magazine alone reaches a million circulation.

VII. LEADERSHIP

Probably few informed authorities would dispute the statement

⁹ Ronald Nash, *op. cit.*, presents this movement favourably while Robert Lightner, *Neo-Evangelicalism* (Findlay, Ohio, n.d.) points out weaknesses and possible danger signals. In short neo-evangelicalism desires to broaden Evangelicalism intellectually, carry on dialogue with non-evangelicals, and generally maintain a co-operative attitude as against a separatistic attitude.

that much of the Evangelical leadership of the world resides in the U.S.A. Thus is it the harder to attempt a listing of prominent names. Invariably some of the most deserving are omitted. And always we must beware lest the mention of men should usurp the glory of God. But with these apologies offered it seems that this study would be incomplete without at least a partial list of some of the important leaders of thought and action among U.S.A. Evangelicals.

Of necessity we have already spoken of the neo-evangelical element. It is from this movement that a new-breed Evangelical is emerging. Individually he may belong to an Evangelical or non-evangelical denomination; he may be a Calvinist or Arminian; a premillennialist or an amillennialist. It is largely from this group that the new Evangelical Renaissance in scholarship and literature has arisen.

Leading spokesmen of this somewhat ambiguous movement are Carl F. H. Henry, Edward J. Carnell, Bernard Ramm, Harold Ockenga, Vernon Grounds, Addison H. Leitch, Harold B. Kuhn, Gordon H. Clark, and John H. Gerstner.

At the right wing of Evangelicalism are the men of the Old Guard. They are usually more interested in saving souls than writing books. Many of them carry the scars of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. From personal experience and the lessons of church history they have gained the strong conviction that God's true people are always a remnant. They are convinced that this God-fearing, Biblically-centred remnant will always be hated, not only by the world but also by the forces of organized religion.

Some of the prominent prophets of the Old Guard are Carl McIntire, John R. Rice, Bob Jones, Sr., Bob Jones, Jr., Robert Ketcham, Richard Clearwaters, Archie Weniger, Noel Smith, Harvey Springer, G. B. Vick, and Charles Woodbridge.

Of course there are other Evangelical spokesmen that fit somewhere between the New Guard and the Old Guard. This group would include the Dallas dispensationalists such as John F. Walvoord, Charles C. Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost; it would include leaders of the N.A.E. like Clyde Taylor and James DeForest Murch; V. Raymond Edman, former President of Wheaton College; and Wilbur M. Smith, the greatest Evangelical bibliophile in America.

Perhaps we could sum up these three groups in the mainstream of Evangelicalism by offering a generalized comment on their attitudes toward the ecumenical movement. While the neo-evangelical is suspicious of the ecumenical movement and the middle group is

opposed, the Old Guard fundamentalist is hostile toward it.

A goodly number of Evangelical scholars might be mentioned. Some outstanding Biblical scholars are Edward J. Young, Merrill F. Unger, Charles L. Feinberg, Charles F. Pfeiffer, William LaSor, Gleason Archer, Everett F. Harrison, and Merrill Tenney. Prominent theologians and historians include Cornelius Van Til, John Murray,¹⁰ J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., Loraine Boettner, George Ladd, Harold Lindsell, William Childs Robinson, and Geoffrey Bromiley (originally of Britain).

Enemies and friends alike generally concede that Evangelist Billy Graham is the "Mr. Evangelical" of the U.S.A. He is the one Evangelical who reaches the masses. Several years ago a survey revealed that only the President of the United States was better known to the American people.

VIII. PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

The road ahead promises to be one cluttered by obstacles. Christ and His people have enemies among the brazen and the subtle. A giant among the enemies of the Evangelical cause is the continuing spirit of secularism. There was a time in America when most of the colleges maintained a basic Christian world outlook. That time has been long passed. An ever increasing number of young collegians are imbued with the spirit of agnosticism and secularism. No group of people are exempt from the vines of this godless branch including the common people. And Evangelicalism in America, somewhat contrary to Evangelicalism in England, has found its strength in the upper lower and lower middle classes.

An exceedingly obvious decay of personal morality has sprouted and grown like an unconquerable cancer throughout American society. Hedonism is a prevalent philosophy of life. One thinks of England before Wesley.

Then there is the population explosion. U.S. Evangelicals feel responsible for the evangelization of the added millions not only in their own country but in the other countries of the world. The Anglo-Saxon Protestant no longer carries the long whip of domination and influence that he once enjoyed. Great segments of large cities teem with various ethnic groups. How can one reach the Negro? the Jew? the Catholics of various nationalities?

The ecumenical movement is a portent to many Evangelicals, to

¹⁰ [Professor Murray, having retired from his Westminster Chair in Philadelphia, has returned to his native Scotland, to the great enrichment of Reformed and evangelical life and witness in the British Isles. Ed.]

whom the elements of apostasy, worldliness, and ecclesiastical power which they see in the movement call to mind the thwarting and persecution that God's people have suffered from organized religion in the pages of church history.

Finally, Evangelicalism must ever conquer her own internal problems. She must mutually respect and profit from the warnings of her Old Guard and the ideas and stimulation of her New Guard. While advancing in intellect she must be careful to advance in spirituality. She must exist not for the glory of her institutions but for the glory of God.

The problems are legion but the possibilities are as manifold as the goodness of God. Nowhere does Evangelicalism have such a rich heritage. America cannot forget her Puritan founders, her Evangelical revivals, her great system of free churches. The culture of America is imbued with the latent spirit and the resulting fruits of the Evangelical gospel. It can be hoped that the American soul is not dead, but only sleeping.

A growing ignorance of Biblical truth among the American masses and a growing indifference is evident. But to the contrary there remains a small army of alert and well-trained Evangelical workers. A remnant of Christians are carrying spiritual battle to the enemy of souls. In a recent article in a nationally-circulated magazine Billy Graham stated: "There are over a million prayer groups meeting regularly in this country."¹¹

If the American people grow weary and disillusioned with their materialism, their secularism, their immorality, and even their religiousness, they have sufficient opportunities to learn of the gospel in the United States. For Evangelicals have thus far been able to blanket the nation with the gospel and new vitality is not yet lacking.¹²

Mt. Ayr, Iowa.

p. 2.

¹²[On p. 162 Mr. Banner names Edward J. Carnell among neo-evangelical leaders in America. Quite recently Christian scholarship in America has received a severe blow in Dr. Carnell's death at the age of 47. ED.]

¹¹ Billy Graham, "Revolution in Religion", *This Week* (Dec. 26, 1965),