

American Evangelicalism and Anglicanism

(The following is based on a talk I gave as part of a TSM panel, addressing the question “What is Evangelicalism?”)



I teach at “Trinity School for Ministry: An evangelical seminary in the Anglican tradition.” What does that word “Evangelical” mean? In what sense am I an Evangelical Anglican? There are at least three ways in which the word “Evangelical” could function in relationship to Anglicanism. First, it could simply be pointing to the Reformation heritage of Anglicanism. Like Lutheranism or the Reformed tradition, Anglicanism traces its roots to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, including such definitive markers as the three (or five) *solas*: *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*, *solus Deo gloria*. The term could also refer to a particular movement within Anglicanism that focuses on Anglicanism’s Reformation identity. An extreme version of this kind of Evangelical Anglicanism would understand pristine Anglicanism to have existed for the short number of years during the reign of Edward VI between Cranmer’s second Prayer Book of 1552 (definitely not the 1549), and the beginning of the reign of Queen Mary. Definitive identity markers would include the 1552 BCP, the 39 Articles (1563) and the Book of Homilies (1547, 1562, and 1571). Much later Anglicanism (beginning with the Caroline Divines and perhaps Richard Hooker) would be interpreted as a “falling away” from these original pristine touchstones. I intend rather to use the term to refer to a more recent distinctly American phenomena –

North American Evangelicalism of the mid-20th and early 21st centuries. This is the context of my own upbringing, but also the church background of the majority of TSM's faculty and students. What might an orthodox 21st century North American Anglicanism have to offer this American version of Evangelicalism?

I will begin with a bit of autobiography. I was raised a Southern Baptist. During my high school years, I got involved for a short period of time in what was then called the "Jesus Movement," and attended a Friday night service every week where people raised their hands and sang in tongues. I was also involved in the youth group of a Southern Baptist megachurch. At the same time, I discovered the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and in a two-year period read all of Lewis's major published writings.

I attended an Evangelical liberal arts college in Denver where I majored in philosophy. Evangelicals were not writing theology at this time, but they were interested in apologetics, and I thought that philosophy would be a handy tool for apologetics. I discovered Thomas Aquinas, but Aquinas at this time was being read primarily as a philosopher. During my senior year in college, I discovered the writing of Wolfhart Pannenberg, but I was interested in Pannenberg because of his value for apologetics. Pannenberg defended the historical verifiability of the resurrection of Jesus. Pannenberg was the first "real theologian" I ever read, and I called myself a "Pannenbergian" for awhile. I used terms like "proleptic anticipation of the eschaton."

Toward the end of my time in college, a number of theologians produced a document called *The Hartford Appeal*, a criticism primarily of trends in liberal Protestant theology. In the collection of essays that the participants entitled *Against the World For the World: The Hartford Appeal and the Future of American Religion*, Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus,

eds. (NY: Seabury, 1976), Richard Mouw of Fuller Seminary contributed the essay, "New Alignments: Hartford and the Future of Evangelicalism."

In that essay, Mouw identified three groups of American Evangelicals existing at the time.

1) Fundamentalism was a group that came into existence in the early twentieth century in opposition to and as a rejection of Liberal Protestantism in the mainline churches.

2) NeoEvangelicalism was identified with successors of Fundamentalism who broke with its narrowness in the mid-twentieth century: Billy Graham and the journal *Christianity Today* were two of its cultural identifiers.

3) In contradistinction from both Fundamentalism and NeoEvangelicalism was "Confessionalism," identified with members of historic Reformation denominations who did not trace their roots to American sources: Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopal, Mennonite. These groups sometimes formed an uneasy alliance with Evangelicalism although they did not share its historic roots, and each had its own distinctive confessional identity.

Mouw pointed to four new influences within Evangelicalism at the time

1) "Neo-Pietism" was a new face on the scene, sharing some characteristics of earlier "pietist" and "revivalist" movements: the "Jesus Movement" and the beginnings of charismatic renewal.

2) Neo-Orthodoxy was represented by theologians like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Evangelicals were divided, with some repudiating Barth as a new form of "liberalism" and others embracing Barth as someone from whom Evangelicals could learn much.

3) Among some Evangelicals, there was a rise of "Political Consciousness," motivated by the anti-war movement, civil rights movement, and feminism. Journals such as *Sojourners* and *The Other Side* were associated with this movement.

4) Finally, Mouw identified a group he called "Progressive Evangelicals." Mouw clearly identified with this group and wrote: "[N]eo-evangelicals usually become 'progressive' by moving in the direction of confessionalism." (And, I would add, reading Karl Barth.)

Keep these identities in mind, as I will later ask "What of these identities continue in contemporary Evangelicalism?"

After college, I knew I was no longer a Southern Baptist, but I did not know what I was. I received my MA at a Roman Catholic seminary (St. Thomas Seminary, Denver). While there, I set myself the task of thinking through the differences between Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism, focusing on Reformation distinctives such as justification by faith and the relationship between Scripture and tradition. I studied Roman Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner.

During this time, I read a book and an essay that influenced the direction of my thought:

The *Chicago Call* was another conference, this time led by Evangelicals, whose essays were published as *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, Robert Webber and Donald Bloesch, eds. (Thomas Nelson, 1978). This was a call for Evangelicals to rediscover their Pre-Reformation roots, and would lead to Webber's later career, writing about *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, and his *Ancient-Future* project. (TSM now hosts something called the "Robert E. Webber Center," which holds annual "Ancient Evangelical Future" conferences.) When I read the Chicago Call, I came across senior theologians saying the kinds of things that I was thinking at the time.

In an essay entitled "The Reformation in Recent Roman Catholic

Theology," *New Theology No 1*, Martin Marty, ed. (Macmillan, 1964), Per Erik Persson, a Lutheran, endorsed a new historiography that viewed the Protestant Reformation in terms of its continuity with Medieval theology rather than in contrast or discontinuity – which had been the traditional view of both Protestants and Catholics for four hundred years. This new historiography focused on the Reformation as a “reforming movement” within the Western Catholic Church rather than a radical break. Similar views would be argued by historians such as Heiko Oberman. This “new Reformation historiography” has been a major influence on my thinking. I wrote my master’s thesis on Jacob Arminius, arguing that Arminius was influenced by Thomas Aquinas.

At the end of my time at St. Thomas, I became an Episcopalian for “theological reasons.” I was confirmed by Bishop Bill Frey, who went on to become Dean/President of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry. I did not view myself as abandoning my Evangelicalism, but as embracing a more Catholic view of the church.

After graduating from St. Thomas, I received my PhD at the University of Notre Dame, where I studied under both Roman Catholics and non-Catholic faculty. The theology faculty at Notre Dame was intentionally ecumenical during this period. Non-Catholics included Methodist Stanley Hauerwas (for one year), Jim White, a Methodist liturgist, and John Howard Yoder (a Mennonite). Visiting Anglican faculty included liturgists Kenneth Stevenson and Paul Bradshaw. Roman Catholics who influenced me included my dissertation director, David Burrell (an expert on Thomas Aquinas), and Edward Kilmartin, a liturgical theologian. (Hauerwas and Burrell were both “Yale” graduates, and influenced by George Lindbeck and the “post-liberal” Yale school.)

Burrell suggested to those of us who were his students that every theologian needed to have a historical mentor, whose writings we should know well. By this point I had two, Thomas

Aquinas and Karl Barth. I now read Aquinas as a theologian, not primarily a philosopher. During my time at Notre Dame, I also began to study my own Anglican heritage, Anglican writers such as Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel, Richard Hooker, Caroline Divines like George Herbert, John Donne, and Thomas Traherne. (I wrote my dissertation on Jacob Arminius, again.) One of my key theological concerns became the relationship between Medieval and Reformation theology, focusing on continuities rather than discontinuities.

Skipping forward to our current setting, I mention a final set of distinctions from George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Hunsinger distinguishes between three contemporary approaches to theology:

1) In academic “liberal” theology, “modernist norms reign supreme.”

2) Hunsinger identifies “enclave” theology as “a theology based narrowly on a single tradition that seeks not to learn from other traditions and to enrich them, but instead to topple and defeat them, or at least to withstand them.” I would suggest that “enclave” theology is a dangerous temptation for “confessional” theologies. Evangelicals can become “progressive” by becoming “confessional” (as Mouw wrote), but they can also become reactive, pursuing the “pure” version of “Reformed” or “Lutheran” or “Roman Catholic,” or “Evangelical” or “Anglo-Catholic” Anglican theology.

3) Finally, “ecumenical” theology “presupposes that every tradition in the church has something valuable to contribute even if we cannot discern what it is.”

Where does American Evangelical theology stand today in terms of Mouw’s earlier categories? I would suggest the following:

1) The borders between fundamentalism and “popular Evangelicalism” are increasingly blurry. If, in an earlier

generation, Billy Graham was an “Evangelical” and Jerry Falwell a “Fundamentalist,” it is not clear today whether these distinctions would hold between Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell, Jr. Are they Evangelicals or Fundamentalists?

2) The “renewal”/charismatic movement of the 1970’s seems to have “morphed” into what are now called “contemporary worship” and “seeker churches,” or (among Anglicans), the “charismatic stream.” (Is “contemporary worship” the dominant form of worship in Evangelical churches these days?)

3) Narrow confessionalism still exists within groups like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and “continuing Anglicans.”

3) Finally, “Progressive confessionalists” have been succeeded by ecumenically theological Evangelicals who read not only Karl Barth, but also the church fathers. (This would now seem to be the center of academic Evangelical theology.) Calvinists like James K. A. Smith write about the importance of liturgy; the late (Evangelical) Anglican theologian John Webster was not only an expert on Karl Barth, but was reading Thomas Aquinas; Kevin Vanhoozer discusses Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar in his books, and is friends with Catholic theologian Matthew Levering; Methodist D. Stephen Long writes books on *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation* (Fortress, 2014) in which he defends Roman Catholic von Balthasar’s interpretation of Barth over that of Presbyterian Bruce McCormack, and *The Perfectly Simple Triune God: Aquinas and his Legacy* (Fortress, 2016), in which he discusses Aquinas’s influence in Protestant Reformation theology. Evangelical biblical scholars are now the leading heirs of the earlier “biblical theology” movement formerly associated with figures such as Walther Eichrodt, Oscar Cullmann, or Joachim Jeremias.

Where do (American) Anglicans stand in the midst of the current American Evangelical setting? I think we have a unique

opportunity because of the historical nature of Anglicanism. Historically, Anglicans have embraced Reformation concerns such as the primacy and sufficiency of Scripture and justification by grace through faith, but also catholic liturgical worship, the historic creeds, the first four ecumenical councils, a (relatively high) sacramental theology (we're not Zwinglians!), and episcopacy. Our historical identity is found in a kind of "evangelical catholicism" or "catholic evangelicalism" that resonates with an Evangelical ecumenism. If more recent Evangelical Anglicans such as John Webster read not only Barth, but also (later) Aquinas, earlier Anglo-Catholics such as Michael Ramsey could also read Barth! And Anglicans have always read the church fathers!

At the same time, I have concerns about signs of a resurgence of "enclave" theologies among some Evangelicals. I do not know what to think about the reappearance (among both Catholics and Protestants) of an earlier historiography that emphasizes Reformation discontinuity with the Medieval church. (Is this a sign of retrenchment to earlier positions or simply the tendency of scholarship to move in "waves," with the need of each generation to "say something new," even if it just means saying something old again?) Among "conservative" Anglicans, I see some signs of a new "enclave" Anglicanism, a resurgence of nineteenth-century partisan conflicts, an embracing of either Protestant (or Anglo-Catholic) oppositional distinctives: To be Evangelical (or Catholic) is to be as unlike the opposite as possible!

In terms of popular American Evangelical culture as a whole, I also have concerns about a political "circling of the wagons," e.g., *The Benedict Option*, that at times seems to reflect more "sour grapes" about losing the "culture wars" than embracing a distinctively Christian identity.

Where do I myself stand? I'll conclude by repeating an answer I gave in a blog post about ten years ago:

When I am asked to identify my own theological stance, I usually call myself a "Barthian Thomist." If I were asked to identify my churchmanship, I would call myself a "catholic evangelical" or a "Reforming Catholic," in the tradition of movements like the Mercersburg Theology, Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten's Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, or figures like Thomas F. Torrance. If I am an Evangelical, I am an ecumenical Evangelical, who understands the Reformation as a reforming movement in the Western Catholic Church. If am an Anglo-Catholic, I am a post-Vatican II Anglican catholic, who understands catholicism as ressourcement, not as retrenchment. If asked to choose between an evangelical and a catholic understanding of the Reformation, I would refuse that choice as a false dilemma.