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A Look at the Positive Side of Neo-Evangelicalism

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This article attempts to cite some of the positive values and benefits of the neo-evangelical movement as it affects the contemporary North American religious scene. At the outset, let it be noted that the author recognizes the various disadvantages and pitfalls of neo-evangelicalism. It is my understanding that these are addressed in other articles in this issue.

The neo-evangelical movement has become a formidable religious force in North America and in other parts of the world. The studies of its re-emergence could not have been predicted twenty-five years ago. The effect and impact of its influence will not be calculable for at least another twenty-five years. Without doubt it has become one of the most significant religious happenings of the century.

The neo-evangelical or neo-conservative movement is not limited to theology, for it also touches the educational, political and social spheres of life in numerous ways. For the sake of this short article our attention will be focused on the theological realm.

The term "neo-evangelical" movement is a designation for a grouping that, like Protestantism, is almost impossible to describe with any precision. A disservice is rendered if one talks about it as if it were somehow a unified phenomenon. It has been compared to a mosaic or even a kaleidoscope. Given the diversity of this movement labels become fuzzy. For instance, the distinctions between evangelicals and fundamentalists are often not as clear to mainline Protestants as they are to the evangelicals themselves. A simple breakdown would see conservatism falling into three general groupings: 1) fundamentalists, 2) charismatics, and 3) neo-evangelicals.

This article uses the term neo-evangelical instead of neo-conservative because the former designation is the preference of many people in the movement. The term "neo-evangelicalism" was coined by the late Dr. Harold Ockenga in his 1947 convocation address at Fuller Theological Seminary. Other early leaders like Dr. Carl F. Henry, sometimes called the dean of evangelical theology, Dr. Billy Graham and Dr. Harold Lindsell along with many others helped to spark the movement. In the 1950s and 1960s this movement encompassed a great deal of conflict as it determined to find theological footing and identification. By the 1970s and 1980s a new kind of "neo-evangelicalism" had emerged which was more open and moderate than its predecessor and theologically wider and deeper than the movement which stemmed from the 1940s.

This more recent neo-evangelicalism stands as the subject of this article. Yet the identity crisis continues for the neo-evangelicals as they struggle to determine who should consciously come under the umbrella of their fellowship or grouping. Where the movement is heading theologically becomes a major question. What happens with the use of higher criticism of the Scriptures within neo-evangelical circles will become the watershed point. The neo-evangelicalism of today reflects more the orthodoxy of the Christian church in centuries past than any type of neo-orthodoxy. The neo-evangelicalism of today has close links to the kind of religion espoused by the Protestant Reformation. The accents of the great Reformation principles of *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fides* and *solus Christus* continue strong in much of neo-evangelicalism.

While the neo-evangelical movement crosses all denominational lines it does not escape definition. A very simple description of neo-evangelicalism would include that group in Christendom whose dedication to the gospel expresses itself in a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and whose understanding of the gospel is normed solely by the Scriptures as the written Word of God. Neo-evangelicals are committed to sharing with others the Good News of Jesus Christ and the life and salvation which come from him.

The evangelical renaissance is occurring today partly in reaction to the secularization of faith and life in the modern world. Further reaction is incited by the growing awareness of the shortcomings and, in some cases, the theological

bankruptcy of some current theologies which stress the opinions of people above the revelation of God. There would not be a strong neo-evangelical movement if it were not for liberalism.

Neo-evangelicalism, on the one hand, sees itself in reaction to the liberalism of ecumenical mainline Protestant churches—especially the churches which tend to dissolve the historic Christian faith into the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*). Neo-evangelicalism is determined not to lose the uniqueness of Christ's person and revelation in the face of syncretistic mysticism or permissive latitudinarianism which see saving grace in almost any religious expression. Furthermore, many of the theologies of experience—feminist, liberation, black, political, secular, etc.—claim revelatory status in themselves and become very subjective and selective in their use of Scripture. When taken to a radical level they render the Scriptures superfluous. There may come a point where some things that are sold under the label of liberal Christianity in reality become a desertion of the Christian faith. Neo-evangelicalism takes a position over against theologies which attempt to make tradition co-normative with the Scriptures, to update the Christian message by conforming it to social trends, to select from the Bible what supports certain viewpoints and dissent from what appears unreasonable, and to stress the impact on the reader and to devalue the source.

On the other hand, neo-evangelicalism reacts against fundamentalism. While neo-evangelicals recognize a common ancestry and history with the fundamentalists, they see themselves as far removed from the narrowness, close-mindedness, defensiveness and extremes of much of fundamentalism. There exists a striking difference between evangelicals and fundamentalists in tone, style and spirit. Neo-evangelicals reject the anti-cultural and world-denying characteristics of fundamentalism. They reflect a more listening, open, reconciling spirit than those further to the theological right.

Neo-evangelicals also recognize the danger posed by some of the current TV evangelists. For example, the editorial in *Christianity Today* of 14 June 1985 is entitled "The Cut-rate Grace of a Health and Wealth Gospel". It states: "But the danger of this perverted gospel of health and wealth is that it makes false promises. These in turn lead to unscriptural desires

for wealth and material prosperity, to false hopes for perfect physical health, and in the end to false guilt and despair.”

For decades, since the early part of this century, liberalism has battled with fundamentalism. For the most part, liberalism won that battle. But in the process liberalism paid a great price; it moved too far to the left and opened up a gaping hole in the middle. Between left wing liberalism and far right wing fundamentalism neo-evangelicalism is moving to fill a huge theological vacuum. In so doing it may become one of the most influential Protestant religious movements in recent history.

A part of the price that liberalism paid is that it lost a good grasp on the gospel of Jesus Christ. It forfeited a part of what it means to be the church. It is no secret that a number of liberal Protestant churches are in a serious state of disarray. Memberships have declined sharply, calling for belt tightening and budget cutting measures. Shaky connections exist between congregations and denominational headquarters. Some of these trends reflect society; yet, all the change cannot be laid at the door of contextual factors. Many neo-evangelical churches are growing at a pace that far outstrips their liberal counterparts.

Liberalism often denies important teachings like the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, the Trinity, the virgin birth, prophecy, miracles, the vicarious atonement of Jesus, the second coming of Christ, heaven, hell, the devil, etc. One of the positive aspects of neo-evangelicalism lies in its insistence that these teachings are important to Christian theology.

Neo-evangelicalism today takes a solid stand on biblical authority. It is not to be identified with a particular position on biblical inerrancy. Inspiration is regarded as important but not as having occurred in a mechanical way. The reliability and authority of the Scriptures for faith and life remain a priority. Neo-evangelicals do not maintain that the Scriptures cannot be criticized. In fact, the use of higher criticism is the hottest issue in neo-evangelical circles today. A good number of evangelicals are willing and even firm in their commitment to allow some criticism which honestly takes into account how the Scriptures come to us. However, they refuse to allow the Scriptures to be criticized to the point where their authority is eroded or ignored within the church. Furthermore, they are

adamant that the revealed Word of God, Jesus Christ, must never be set against the written Word of the Bible.

Neo-evangelicals want to let the words of the Bible stand as they are. The messages of the Scripture are plain for anyone who has the Spirit of God to understand and believe. Neo-evangelicals find no value in or need for esoteric or humanistic interpretations of the Scriptures. They accent one of the cardinal teachings of Luther and the Reformation by letting Scripture interpret Scripture. While open to scholarship, wrestling with the results of modern scholarship, they do not accede to that which subjugates Scripture to human opinion. For the evangelical the authority of the Scripture and not higher criticism is the given and the question is how criticism helps us to understand the Bible. Where it militates against the authority of the Scripture criticism is dropped.

Today we are again living in a theological climate where the divinity of Jesus the Christ is being played down or refuted. For many the virgin birth is of little consequence and the vicarious atonement becomes one of many atonement theories. Even the historic resurrection of Jesus pales to a dimension of faith so that some would not be concerned if the actual bones of Jesus were found in a tomb. The so-called faith of the community has become for some more important than the person of Jesus the Christ. (It would be interesting to pursue the question of which community, but that is outside the purpose of this article.) Neo-evangelicalism upholds both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus, stressing his uniqueness. It urges the need for a personal relationship with Jesus. For the neo-evangelical, to know Christ is like knowing someone on a deep personal level. It is a growing experience, based on the Scriptures, and continuing throughout one's lifetime. Neo-evangelicalism affirms that grace and life come from Jesus. It maintains that Jesus is the only way to salvation. It believes that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Liberal churches often do not seem to have any effective requirement that a person repent and believe the Gospel. Almost any existential encounter can be regarded as a religious experience. Furthermore, there is a faulty interpretation placed on the truth that the world has already been reconciled to God. This interpretation causes some to see salvation in the movements and structures of societies. Why, then, bother about

personal evangelism and missions? Often evangelism is reinterpreted to mean the establishment of a just society where all can live together in peace. For some church bodies evangelism and missions have been functionally replaced by social action.

Some liberals disregard the wrath of God against sin and minimize or delete the possibility of being spiritually lost. They also regard other religions as possible ways of attaining salvation, and hold to an incipient or a more full-blown universalism. They tend to accept pluralism of religions with the fullest of tolerance, and regard Christian conviction as bordering on fanaticism and the sharing of one's faith as zealotry.

Neo-evangelicals are committed to evangelism and mission work. For those whose personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior is real and for whom life with Jesus is central there follows an urgency about evangelization. In response to the widespread meaninglessness of life, neo-evangelicals, along with others, share the Good News of Jesus Christ who gives the most profound meaning to life. Neo-evangelical churches are growing because they do not hesitate to evangelize.

Neo-evangelicals combine evangelism with social concerns and insist on both. They are working hard at eliminating any dichotomy between evangelism and social responsibility as a reading of the fifth article of the Lausanne Covenant would clearly indicate. Indeed many people are surprised at the social concern and responsibility exhibited by the neo-evangelicals and at their good track record in this regard. They are great supporters of social programs to help alleviate human need. *Sojourners*, an evangelical magazine, is perhaps the most exciting social action journal in North America today, but *Christianity Today* also expresses a high level of social concern.

While neo-evangelicals are less likely than fundamentalists to define the Christian life in terms of prohibitions against such things as dancing, drinking or degrees of sexual conduct, they hold to a distinctively Christian life-style. Neo-evangelicals expect that good fruit should follow from an active Christian life and that there should be growth in sanctification. They see the value of being close to the Scriptures and living out of the Scriptures.

In somewhat of a contrast to many other churches, neo-evangelicals are effectively reaching out to young people today. Most evangelical congregations promote an active and

full youth program. Other neo-evangelical organizations like Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and the Navigators attempt to involve young people in Scripture study, prayer, evangelism, growth and the providing of a meaningful structure to life. In contrast, some other campus ministries appear to involve relatively few.

The neo-evangelical movement has gained considerable prominence in the field of academics and scholarship. Christian academies have been coming into existence at the rate of almost one per day over the past few years. Many of the larger schools are attaining academic respectability. They are fostering sound scholarship and increasing numbers are receiving full accreditation. A good number of the largest seminaries in North America hold to the neo-evangelical position. Currently subscribers to *Christianity Today* outnumber subscribers to *Christian Century* at the rate of about five to one.

In the area of ethics there continues to be a noticeable movement in many churches to a more conservative stance. For instance in 1974 the Southern Baptist Convention supported the pro choice arguments. In 1980 it reversed itself. In June of 1985 it passed a resolution opposing abortion even in the cases of rape and incest. In the 1970s the United Presbyterian Church and the United Methodist church favored a free attitude toward abortions. In 1983 the Presbyterian Church (USA) and in 1984 the United Methodist Church voted to tighten their previous statements on abortion. In August 1984 the Lutheran World Federation passed a resolution deploring abortion.

Most of what has been said above reflects Protestantism. The neo-evangelical movement has affected the Roman Catholic Church, too, in a way comparable to the effect of the charismatic movement, although not as focused. Greatly increased interest in Bible study groups can be attributed in part to the neo-evangelical influence. On other levels, there is a growing ecumenical appreciation between the neo-evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II has a personal appeal to evangelicals. His strong support of fundamental doctrines, his biblical emphases, his bold stand on the priority of the Christian message over political involvement, his concern for justice and freedom, and some of his sexual ethics tend to warm evangelical hearts.

Closer to home, Lutherans need to regain an appreciation for some of the positive aspects of evangelicalism. The term is a good one. In fact, we had it first. During the Reformation the followers of Martin Luther were called Evangelicals to distinguish them from the Calvinists, who were designated as Reformed. A good number of Lutherans still use the term in their official designation.

Many Lutherans presently seem to be in a straddle position. They have one foot planted in evangelical theology, strengthened by their view of the means of grace and sacramental theology, and one foot in the stream of mainline Protestantism.

One of the positive things about neo-evangelicalism is that it can encourage us to reconsider some of our heritage. Lutherans can benefit from a reminder of what it means to affirm Scriptural authority and to live under that authority. We need to regain an emphasis on evangelism—because we too are guilty, to a degree, of stressing social action at the expense of evangelism. We need to eschew some of the radical thinking regarding the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ, and see the theological limits and dead-ends as well as the benefits in certain of the liberation theologies. We need to see that Christian experiences must be grounded in the Word.

Lutherans should not be too proud to ask what lessons can be profitably learned from the neo-evangelicals and to use those things to the glory of God and for the benefit of our church and world. It is no secret that a denomination today which does not carefully consider the neo-evangelical movement around it and within its own grouping is begging for polarization. People today want what is reliable and trustworthy—especially as it deals with those things that undergird their reason for living and their future hope. It is an area that precludes trifling and erosion. The neo-evangelicals are far from perfect. So are we. They are indicating to us today the value of upholding the great principles of the Reformation. Thanks be to God!