

A REVIEW ARTICLE

The Younger Evangelicals

Reviewed by
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The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World by Robert E. Webber. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002, 288 pp. \$16.99.

This book is an apologetic for and a chronicle of one of the latest editions in the ever-widening evangelical saga. Robert E. Webber is Myers Professor of Ministry at the Northern Baptist Theological Seminary and president of the Institute for Worship Studies. He taught at Wheaton College from 1968–2000. He has authored numerous books on the general subject of evangelicalism, including *Ancient-Future Faith* (Baker, 1999) and *Ancient-Future Evangelism* (Baker, 2003). The author's research and contact with his subject are aptly demonstrated in the book under review, although the ideas and practices of the new group he portrays are still largely from anecdotal accounts at this early point. In this book Webber "interprets the changing face of evangelicalism since about 1950 and projects where evangelicalism is going in the next decades" (p. 13).

Webber introduces the subject by placing the new movement, called the younger evangelicals, within the history of evangelicalism that spans roughly 1950–2000. From 1950–1975 there flourished a group that he calls "traditional evangelicals," or what I would term the new evangelicals, that arose out of the old fundamentalist/evangelical coalition that itself had emerged from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s. The new or traditional evangelicals repudiated the essential motifs of the fundamentalists. From 1975–2000 a new stirring of "pragmatic evangelicals" appeared, baby boomers that turned against the traditionalists and created the mega-church, seeker-sensitive, market-driven, and generation-targeted philosophy of church

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ministry. From 2000 on into the 21st century, the latest wave has rebelled against the drastic innovations, self-esteem therapeutics, and crass commercialism of the boomer pragmatists. They are now returning to the past—pre-Constantine church practice, patristic theology, ecumenical creeds, and ancient liturgics, icons, and symbols—as a paradigm for doing church in a postmodern culture. They are known throughout the book as younger evangelicals (young in age or young in spirit), postmodern evangelicals, 21st century evangelicals, twenty-somethings, Gen X evangelicals, and millennial youth.

Webber lays out the flow of his thought well. Part one (chapters 1 and 2) is introductory, locating the recent vintage of evangelicals in the evangelical history of the twentieth century, mainly in the USA, and outlining the characteristics (24 of them!) of the new group. Part two (chapters 3–7) explains the impact of new forms of communication on the younger evangelical thinkers and how this has changed their approach to several critical issues. They have shifted from a disregard for history to a new appreciation of tradition, from didactic propositionism to a story/narrative basis for theology, from rational apologetics to a verification of truth through its authentic embodiment in the communal church, and from a preoccupation with the invisible church to an emphasis on the visible church in ecclesiology. Part three (chapters 8–16) deals with the ways in which the 21st century evangelicals differ with their 20th century predecessors (the traditionalists and pragmatists) in ecclesial practice. To use the author's chapter titles: "Being Church: From Market to Mission; Pastors: From Power to Servanthood; Youth Ministers: From Parties to Prayer; Educators: From Information to Formation; Spiritual Formation: From Legalism to Freedom; Worship Leaders: From Program to Narrative; Artists: From Constraint to Expression; Evangelists: From Rallies to Relationships; and Activists: From Theory to [Social] Action." Part four (chapter 14) is the conclusion, diagramming Webber's vision of the new kind of evangelical leadership needed for the 21st century.

It would be impossible in this space to interact with each chapter of the book and its innovative proposals, although such a discipline would be worthy of the effort elsewhere. I will select what I consider to be four of the load-bearing points or crucial areas and respond to them. My stance, of course, is that of historic fundamentalism, and, while there are varying eddies in the fundamentalist stream, some good and helpful and some otherwise, as is true of any movement, the main channel consists of a core of cardinal, non-negotiable theological teaching, the doctrine and practice of ecclesiastical separation, and an underlying *esprit* of militancy for the truth and against whatever would deny it or detract from it. Webber came out of a fundamental Baptist background, attended Bob Jones University, subsequently shifted to

what I would call a new evangelical position, and quite evidently has become enamored with and a proponent of the latest expression of evangelical opinion. Accordingly, his interpretations and mine of the history, beliefs, and practices of the evangelical movement, as well as its present direction, will in the main not coincide.

History

Webber's feelings toward fundamentalism are patently negative, regarding it as sort of a pothole in the ongoing evangelical movement. Evangelical history in the United States is marked off as (1) 1910–1925, the origins of the fundamentalist movement; (2) 1925–1945, fundamentalism; (3) 1945–1966, neoevangelicalism; and (4) 1966–2000, evangelical diversity consisting of the traditional evangelicals and the pragmatic evangelicals. In his thinking, the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, TN, was the turning point when fundamentalism turned anti-intellectual, anti-ecumenical, and anti-social action. It is probably too much ever to hope that fundamentalism will be seen by its opponents as anything but the villain of the so-called “monkey trial.” The truth is that, while the fundamentalists took a hit in the court of public opinion thanks to a very prejudiced and unsympathetic media, the movement continued to flourish in the aftermath of Scopes and William Jennings Bryan.²

Fundamentalism has indeed been characterized as anti-ecumenical, if by that is meant that fundamentalists attempted to separate the liberals from their ecclesiastical environment and, that having failed, consequently had to separate themselves formally from the apostasy and its evangelical fellow-travelers. It was not until the rise of the new evangelicalism in the 1940s and 50s that ecumenism made its appearance within the original fundamentalist/evangelical coalition largely through the technique of ecumenical evangelism. This openly first took place at the 1957 Billy Graham New York Crusade and its inclusive policy of sponsorship and convert referrals, which fundamentalists resisted. Graham forced the issue and precipitated the final and irrevocable breach between the new evangelicalism and historic fundamentalism. In a pluralistic context of ministry where fundamentalists would be yoked with theological unbelief and apostasy, fundamentalism has always been and continues to be anti-ecumenical.

Concerning fundamentalism's anti-social action, the charge has

²For a clear-headed and historically aware analysis of the Scopes trial and the subsequent fortunes of fundamentalism, see Gerald L. Priest, “William Jennings Bryan and the Scopes Trial: A Fundamentalist Perspective,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 4 (Fall 1999).

been that 20th century fundamentalism squandered a rich social sensitivity that it inherited from the Wesleyans and from the evangelicalism of the era from before the Civil War until the Scopes trial. On this I have two thoughts. One, the social activity of the Wesleyan movement and the social consciousness of antebellum evangelicalism as well as the pre-1925 evangelical/fundamentalist coalition has been hugely overdrawn, in my opinion. I do not discern a *distinct* social agenda for the institutional church in those times, the kind of programs being called for by the new evangelicals since the later 1940s. The Bible believing churches did not consider themselves the divinely-appointed sentinels of the social conditions of their cultures. The care of Christians for the generally deprived and disenfranchised arose out of their individual lives in civil society as they fleshed out the implications of the Christian experience in good citizenry.

Two, pragmatically the social gospel and its theology have been a colossal failure, accomplishing little more than a feel-good attitude among liberal and evangelical churchmen, meanwhile totally devastating the philosophy and practice of the missionary enterprise in those circles.³ Studies have shown that it is not clear that the rise of fundamentalism actually caused a loss of legitimate social ministry among conservative Christian groups.⁴ Furthermore, the evangelical lamentations over a lost fundamentalist social sensitivity and the calls for a revived sociopolitical activism, beginning with Carl F. H. Henry and Harold John Ockenga in 1947, were in reality more rhetoric than substance; little was actually accomplished. Even Webber notes that phenomenon (p. 31).⁵

As for fundamentalism being anti-intellectual, I have addressed that elsewhere,⁶ but it too is part of the tired, old mantra against fundamentalism that continues on.

³This has been analyzed by Arthur P. Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1978).

⁴James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 42.

⁵No less than George M. Marsden made this observation in *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 82.

⁶Rolland D. McCune, "The Formation of the New Evangelicalism (Part Two)," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 4 (Fall, 1999), pp. 121–30. Douglas Carl Abrams was perceptive: "As a group, fundamentalist leaders were well-educated." *Selling the Old Time Religion: American Fundamentalism and Mass Culture, 1920–1940* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p. 9.

Authority

Any movement that wants to use the name Christian must justify its claims by an appeal to some kind of an ultimate authority, that for which no greater authorization can be given. That authority may be the ultimacy of autonomous human reason, the decrees of the church, or divine revelation. For historic evangelicalism this has always been the authority of an inerrant Bible. But for the younger evangelicals this has posed a dilemma: How can a postmodern culture, which rests on a denial of virtually any kind of authority, be reached by those who ordinarily have been impelled by the absolute authority of an ancient book, the Scriptures? In sorting through this impasse, the new thinkers have abandoned the ultimate authority of the Bible in favor of a communal consensus of their intellectual elites as informed and shaped by patristic and medieval thought. The ultimate casualty of all this, of course, is exegesis of the biblical languages and its correlation into doctrinal propositions as the source of belief and practice. It is not surprising, then, that Webber's first appeal to any Scripture passage is on page 85, the second on page 86, and the third on page 95 in a book of only 230 pages of text!

As one analyzes the basis of authority for the way the younger evangelicals do theology he soon realizes that their thought is governed by an underlying intuition or a sense of emotional satisfaction. The inner "still small voice" carries tremendous authority with these people (pp. 193, 214). This stress on what is ultimately non-rational and non-cognitive as the basis of doing church is obviously fraught with all manner of difficulty, but it is their hope of reaching a postmodern, non-rational, non-judgmental, and authoritatively rootless culture for Christ. But the question persists, is such theology and methodology truly Christian? Does this approach give a biblical and historically viable answer to the query, what is a Christian? My conclusion is that in terms of its own proposals it does not. In those terms the younger evangelicals are inherently unstable in theology and ecclesial practice and will not endure the challenges of the next fad of the contemporary culture even as, in their minds, their traditionalist and pragmatist evangelical predecessors did not. In fact, the newcomers may well have a shorter life span than either, and the underlying reason is the broad-based, pluralistic authority of younger evangelical group-think that will bring an even more accelerated deterioration of their cause than those against whom they are in revolt.

There is a recurring theme in *The Younger Evangelicals* that deprecates the cognitive, propositional (subject-predicate), and didactic thought-forms of ordinary human reason, especially of traditional evangelicalism, in constructing a theology of belief and practice from the written revelation of God. Here are just a few examples. In his

dislike of the fundamentalist skepticism of unbiblical philosophical notions that he found in his college days at BJU, Webber adds, “This attitude still dominates fundamentalist Biblicism, a view that is based on the modern philosophy of rationalism [i.e., cognitive reasoning] and the scientific method of hermeneutics. *This method results in propositions of faith that deliver guaranteed truth, a hermeneutic not widely accepted by the younger evangelicals*” (italics added) (p. 28). He wishes to get away from a “truth-oriented” posture and “reasoned-based theology” to “a more experience-based faith” (p. 45). He agrees with a current author that “the problem with a mere ‘propositionalism’ (a modern idea) is that you lose the power and force of the imagination...you lose the story and in so doing you lose the vibrant stuff.” Thus the younger evangelicals know that “*they must minister in a new paradigm of thought* (italics his) (p. 48). “The freedom from rationalism, propositionalism, and logical analysis has revived the imagination, and we are beginning to see the fruits of empowered imagination in the new ministries formed by the younger evangelicals” (p. 51). “The importance of truth is not so much that it is understood but that it is loved and lived” (p. 52). For the younger evangelicals, “stating truths to which they are asked to commit is too modern. It’s related to propositions and conclusions that have been developed by others outside their intimate community. Younger evangelicals enjoy the process of *shared experiences* from which they derive a sense of wisdom and direction” (italics added) (p. 53).⁷

For the younger evangelicals authority therefore becomes communal; it arises from within the church. This of course makes a shambles of the doctrine of individual soul liberty, the freedom of conscience wherein every believer has the right and duty *personally* to come to Scripture directly and be taught and governed by the Holy Spirit. The corporate concept of authority rules out any such personal claim because that would, in their opinion, lead back to the old evangelical/fundamentalist idea of individualistic faith, Great Commission ecclesiology, CEO pastors, personality cults, and empire building. In other words, individualism would destroy the idea of the church as a democratic community. Accordingly, the young evangelicals have decided, apparently through the feelings of the community, that certain ones who emerge with sufficient intellectual and personal abilities will be accepted as the authority. Webber not only affirms this but practices it as well as he quotes certain scholars and takes the testimony of

⁷More examples of this kind of assault on the propositional authority of the written Word of God can be found on pp. 69, 83, 94, 95, 96, 116, 123, 196, among others.

successful anecdotal witnesses as authority for promoting the new paradigms of doing theology and ministry.

In an astounding overstatement, Webber claims that “classical Christianity knew nothing of the concept of propositionalism as held by Christians after the Enlightenment” (p. 84), as if the Enlightenment invented the idea that meaning is in the subject-predicate sentence and not the individual word much less a feeling produced by the imagination or an intuition divined by the mystical still small voice. In inveighing against propositionalism, Webber has impaled himself on one of his own assumptions, which happens to be correct, that language is univocal. It is axiomatic as a result of the image of God in human beings that words cannot have two or more meanings in one and the same connection; A cannot be non-A at the same time and in the same sense, which is the very genius of propositionalism. Yet the author uses propositional language to argue against the propositionalism of the Scriptures and true, historic Christianity. But he simply cannot have it both ways. By his own standard either his statements or the Bible’s truth-claims, or both, are unintelligible.

When propositional formulations of truth from the written revelation of God are abandoned or deprecated, the only standard left is pure subjectivism in doing theology and doing church. In other words, if the mind is bypassed, the emotions and feelings remain as some sort of an ultimate criterion. This is to say that eventually one falls back on the glands for authority. And this is what Webber and the younger evangelicals duly propose as a final religious authority. For instance, in promoting the power of the imagination vis-à-vis propositional truth-statements, Webber quotes approvingly another: “Since imagination locates itself in time, it must also locate somewhere in space. Somewhere, in other words, it takes on a physical entity.” The author then adds his own commentary: “If you can dream it, you can create it” (p. 50). But on what is the “dream” based? Since he has ruled out any cognitive content by circumventing one’s intellect, what is left for the created “physical entity” that will emerge from the dream or imagination but glandular functions? Webber is optimistic about the “language of metaphor” that the younger evangelicals are embracing; it rides the tide of emotion and will revolutionize the senses. In the words of a recent author, it will make “our emotions and feelings—especially touch—cognitive extensions of our minds.... *We will know through our feelings*” (italics added) (p. 68). This is surely confusion thrice confounded but aptly demonstrates the fact that if the mind is short-circuited, the glands are all that are left, accounting for the heavy mysticism and pietism that hangs over the younger evangelical agenda.

The subjective but normative power of the imagination in doing theology leads irresistibly to a subjective and fluid definition of truth.

Truth must be rightly defined, in my judgment, as a character of propositions that represents a correct state of affairs. This “state of affairs” is the person of God and His all-encompassing decree of whatsoever comes to pass. Truth, in other words, is that which corresponds to the mind of God, and this gives truth a biblical, God-centered basis in theology and reality. If so, the younger evangelicals appear to have a most difficult task of affirming truth to say nothing of discerning truth from falsehood since truth cannot be absolute but must be flattened out to include everyone’s feelings, especially those of the authoritative cadre of thinkers within the 21st century evangelicals. But if religious authority is relative to the culture’s idea of authority, and if the younger evangelical’s authority is relative to the magisterium of the movement’s trusted think tank, then there is no solid basis of authority for anyone. Everyone is left floating in the shoreless ocean of relativity especially where spiritual and eternal truths are concerned. The younger evangelicals will protest that this is not the way it is, but in so doing they must employ authoritative propositional truth to deny or disprove the idea of the propositional nature of authoritative, divine, verbally revealed truth, and this, of course, is self-destructive.

Ultimate religious authority for these evangelicals is subjective (the communal consensus) and not objective in nature (biblical propositions). But it is impossible for authority to result from the unanimous feelings and consent of *every* believer within the believing community. Since authority is subjective, it can only be determined *arbitrarily* for the larger group, evidently by those most gifted and influential as leaders. And their choice for doctrine and practice is to return to the past and a formulated conflation of ancient patristic theology and pre-Constantine [prior to the 4th century A.D.] ecclesiology, medieval liturgy, and Reformation and Wesleyan ideas. This shift is a conscious deconstruction of traditional evangelicalism’s thought-forms allegedly formulated with ingredients drawn from modernity, and a reconstruction of an ancient-future faith, a faith for the future built on the thought and ways of the past. “The younger evangelical is returning to basics, to broad strokes and an eclectic Christianity held together by traditions that have lasted for centuries” (p. 59). It must be stated again that this broad-based authority is theoretically a *consensus* of the believing community. “The younger evangelical is turning away from theology as ruled by reason and the scientific method toward theology as a reflection of the community on the narrative of Israel and Jesus” (p. 87). Theological reflection “is not an abstract objective discipline that is subject to reason, logic, or science. It is instead a communal reflection on God’s mission that arises out of God’s people as they seek to discern God’s work in history and his present action in the life of the community” (p. 241).

With the negative attitude against propositional language formulations and a penchant for ambiguity, mystery, and the multi-dimensional in faith, theology, and worship (pp. 48, 49, 52, 185, 199), one is not prepared to learn that “*younger evangelicals are attracted to absolutes*” (italics his) (p. 52) and that “the younger evangelicals know that *they must stand for the absolutes of the Christian faith in a new way*” (italics his) (p. 48). The “new way” is to present the gospel as “story,” which is “*not a noncontradictory, rationally defended, logically consistent fact apprehended by cognitive acquiescence*” (italics added) (p. 49). So it seems we are back to ambiguity after all in standing for the absolutes of the gospel and the Christian faith. I find this kind of dialectic utterly incomprehensible.

The question that remains to be dealt with is, are the church fathers a coherent and stable source of theology? If not, then the theological and ecclesial structure of the younger evangelicals is lost.

Historical theology teaches us that patristics is neither coherent nor stable. Just about any doctrinal variation (and aberration) can be found in the church fathers. There is no consensus among them on the meaning, mode, recipients, and purpose of water baptism, or millennial issues; pre-, mid-, and posttribulationism have all been supported by selected fathers. Church polity, the person of Christ, and a host of other subjects including the nature of and the way to salvation and eternal life itself can be proven or disproved by an appeal to patristic thought. The fathers’ knowledge of the biblical languages was quite deficient compared to today. Their theology in the main is immature and undeveloped at best; at worst it is heretical in many ways. It is hard to imagine a more unreliable source of authority.

In the middle ages ecclesiastical scholarship was deplorable. Since allegorism had generally prevailed for centuries, biblical exegesis had become sterile and the academia of the church was content largely to compile the theology of the fathers. Thus Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and others developed an authoritative patristic theology that is with them to this day. Unfortunately, this is the mother lode out of which Webber and the younger evangelicals recommend that theology and ministry be drawn for a postmodern expression of evangelicalism and its ancient-future faith. Appeal to the fathers at the very best is an indirect and second-hand exposure to biblical exegesis and theology and accounts for the evident bob-tailed content and short-sighted outlook of the younger evangelicals’ thinking and doing in a secular society, at least as depicted in the book. And I might add, I personally do not see a whole lot that is exegetically and theologically cogent in the church fathers that hasn’t been said with more clarity and precision, and with far better exegetical foundation and theological correlation, by Bible-believing theologians and exegetes of the last century

and a half. True, there were great theological controversies that yielded some outstanding confessions of faith in the days of the church fathers, but I would not consider these great expressions of doctrine as the kind of contributions that characterized patristic thought.

Apologetics and Evangelism

Apologetics and evangelism are intertwining and inseparable disciplines that concern the propagation and defense of a total witness to the truth-claims of biblical Christianity. The method and conclusion of both apologetics and evangelism are wrapped up and governed by a mutual presuppositional authority or starting point, whether it is that of autonomous human reason, the law of non-contradiction, a self-authenticating Bible that points to a self-identifying Christ, or whatever else. The younger evangelicals have cast their lot with some kind of a corporate religious conscience as the ultimate authority and most primitive starting point for their community's belief and practice. This carries the freight of arbitrary subjectivism for their interim, daily working basis for defining truth, formulating theology, constructing hermeneutics, conducting worship, and generally doing ministry, including how to defend and propagate the Christian faith. In other words, apologetics/evangelism is subject to the same notions of ambiguity, equivocation, imprecision, and lack of certainty that plague the other aspects of the younger movement.

The book's chapter on apologetics is subtitled, "From Rationalism to Embodiment." In brief this means that the younger evangelicals have moved the defense and propagation of the Christian faith out of the realm of argument and reasoned discourse based on the objective propositions and truth-claims of Scripture into the subjective and personal dimension—the "life" of the believing community.

There are four load-bearing points that I will address which are difficulties that prevent an understanding of how this new postmodern apologetic methodology can be either biblical or successful. The first is its non-propositional or non-foundational nature. I have addressed this in the previous section and will only mention it briefly. Foundationalism understands that a system of beliefs, to be coherent, must rest on presuppositions or first principles that are assumed at the outset because they are indubitable or self-evidencing—first principles that are authoritative because no greater authorization can be found for them. The younger evangelicals identify foundationalism with Enlightenment thought that was allegedly then adopted by evangelical thinkers. The younger evangelicals have rejected foundationalism in favor of a non-foundational construct for doing theology and ministry. In that sense they also wish to be considered postfoundational as compared to their evangelical predecessors.

It follows that if the Bible's authority does not reside in its propositional truth-statements, the process of conveying the message of the Bible will irresistibly be without a certain foundation. This is because, as I noted above, the method and conclusion in an apologetic methodology both begin with one's starting point or the presupposed foundational authority. If the younger evangelical begins with a subjective, in-house, corporate, and ambiguous authority, the method of presenting and defending the faith will proceed on that plane, and the conclusion of necessity will be an ambivalent, uncertain form of evangelicalism peculiar to the in-group. And this is exactly how the post-modern apologetic unfolds. Anti-foundationalism ends without fail in religious malaise and invites skepticism of the whole Christian enterprise. Biblical Christianity merely stands in line with the multitudinous other believing-without-knowing options in the world.

This methodology's result is at total cross-purposes with the intended goal of the younger evangelicals, which is to make *committed* Christians in a rootless culture. That is to say, their postmodern apologetic/evangelistic technique betrays them in the end. It has nothing that makes New Testament Christianity unique, it has no way of showing the futility of false religions (Islam in particular is of concern to the younger evangelicals), and the truthfulness of Christianity and the exclusivity of Christ as the way to God (Acts 4:12) are muted. Apologetics, it seems, has been reduced to little more than unilateral, open-ended God-talk.

Webber begins his treatment of apologetics with an autobiographical introduction concerning his conversion experience that illustrates the younger evangelical methodology of doing apologetics and evangelism. One night, at his pastor father's behest, he consciously decided to

acknowledge God and follow Jesus in baptism. I have always considered my baptism to be my first real conscious choice to affirm God's reality and to live in the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection. This commitment was real, authentic, and actually radical, *even though it was not the result of knowledge* and certainly was not based on rational arguments or evidence that 'demanded a verdict' (italics added) (p. 94).

It is understandable that his coming to Christ was not based on rational arguments or empirical proofs since the biblical picture of saving faith is not such. But to say that saving faith does not involve intellectual content or result from knowledge is a problem. If by knowledge is simply meant demonstrable free-from-God proof derived by an independent, free-from-the-Bible apologetic methodology, well and good. But the rest of the chapter indicates that the author is simply affirming the non-foundational and thus non-rational structure of

biblical authority. That the Bible is necessary to faith is indicated by his reference to Jesus' death and resurrection, but how His death and resurrection can be divorced from knowledge is to me unexplainable if indeed faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17). The implication here, and it is borne out in the chapter and various other parts of the book, is that faith is sacramentally structured in isolation from one's intellect. This is quite troubling to me but understandable in terms of the non-foundational construct the younger evangelicals have made for themselves.

A second point has to do with the subjective communal embodiment of apologetics which is the fulfillment of the non- or post-foundationalism chosen by the younger thinkers. If understanding and presenting the Christian faith are not to include commitments to propositional truth-statements in an inerrant Bible, what is to take its place? And whatever it is cannot be objectively authoritative. Once again we are back to the somewhat amorphous "community," the church which is the embodiment of the truth. As Webber says, "truth is not proven, it is embodied by individuals and by the community known as the church" (p. 101). Theological truth, in the post-foundational sense, is a "conversation" between the Bible, tradition, and the culture, "a mosaic in accordance with the ecumenical faith of the church throughout its history and on behalf of the church throughout the world" (p. 101; he is quoting another source). In other words, the Christian faith is true because it is old and has had innumerable adherents in its long history, and the living ones currently embody the truth in the believing community of the visible church. But what makes this community of adherents right and other ancient traditions (e.g., Islam) wrong? The proponents here admit that the new approach makes Christianity contestable and subject to debate just like Marxism, Hinduism, and others (p. 100). But this only makes biblical faith part of a smorgasbord of religious options, and who or what is to determine that the evangelical community has the absolute truth or that it even has superior insights about God and eternal life? Or is Christianity not the only viable way to God, and if not, why bother to do apologetics at all or even be evangelical? Post-foundationalism reduces all religions to God-talk and does nothing to make Christianity the embodiment of the truth and the others not.

A third factor is the corporate vis-à-vis the individual witness of Christians in the postmodern apologetic/evangelistic proposal. The younger evangelicals disapprove of the "Great Commission ecclesiology" (pp. 108, 122) that characterized the older evangelicals and indeed the church for centuries. Their model is that of a corporate witness to the truth-claims of the gospel. In that sense the church "does not have a mission, it is mission" (p. 109), and its missional

function is not verbal so much as a communal dynamic that expresses somewhat metaphorically the Christian message. That is, the visible church demonstrates Christian spirituality holistically in authentic realness more than proclaims it to a listening world. Relationships rather than programs characterize ministry, and evangelism begins, not with a presentation of the plan of salvation, but with an invitation to begin a seeking journey into the things of God within the relationships of the believing community. The church is an “alternative community” (p. 118) of small groups that embody and exhibit Christian authenticity. “The goal of postmodern apologetics is to recover the role of the church as the interpreter and the embodiment of truth” (p. 104).

A fourth item concerns the lack of a proclamation motif of younger evangelical apologetics and evangelism. This is actually a subset of the previous point. As much as the postmoderns may dislike Great Commission ecclesiology, the New Testament could not be more clear and emphatic that preaching/proclamation is the main business of doing church. This is seen not only in the Great Commission accounts (e.g., Matt 28:18–20) but in the life and ministry of the early church in Acts (e.g., 5:42) and the didactic exhortations of the epistles (e.g., Rom 10:15). Preaching is not confined to a homiletical sermon from the pulpit, nor is it limited to declaring the plan of salvation. But the evangelism methods of the New Testament are centered around the verbal proclamation of the message of divine grace whether in public or in private. To be sure, the younger evangelicals give a high place to preaching in the assembled community, but the content of the declaration is not very “evangelistic”; instead, it addresses the needs of the damaged and wounded spirit and encourages fellowship and meaningful interpersonal, communal relationships. One younger evangelical preacher put it clearly: “My preaching is not so much what I think they should hear but more a reflection on what they are going through and how God meets us in the midst of our troubles and joys” (p. 152). And as another explained: “Programs are important...[but] I’m a strong advocate of an embodied presence of Jesus,” which means “that Jesus’ presence is communicated in many other ways besides our words—such as compassion, encouragement, love, grace, kindness, service, etc....with no agenda to necessarily be telling them about Jesus. I believe He will be evident in the way we care for people” (p. 230). Preaching as a communication device in the postmodern setting is not “to transfer information” but “to stimulate the mind” (p. 68). As such, it is not reasoned discourse because postmodern man, including the younger evangelicals, is highly suspicious of propositionalism and they “reject the restrictions of print communication with its emphasis on knowing primarily through rational means” (p. 69). So

there has been a shift to “embrace the more emotive, imaginative, and symbolic forms of communication” but, inconsistently it would seem, “without rejecting the significance of the spoken word” (p. 69). To accomplish this, the Bible is looked upon and communicated as a meta-narrative, an all-encompassing and universally applicable story of salvation that tells of God’s work through the accounts of Israel and Jesus (p. 84). The truth reaches the hearer as he puts himself into the story and gains understanding by experiencing the narrative as a participant in the tradition (p. 91). A narrative interpretation of the biblical message is not dependent on any particular view of inspiration, especially not verbal inerrancy. As a result the younger evangelicals do not affirm inerrancy and show little interest in the subject since it is irrelevant to the overarching message of God in the story of Israel and Jesus.

This approach to communication is apparently the “soft sell” of the gospel that avoids propositionalism and authoritative pronouncements to be saved or to get right with God, and the like. Webber cites a successful young evangelical preacher who claims that for him communication “creates a beautiful atmosphere.... They hear what they choose to hear. I cannot transfer meaning. I only give the setting in which people construct meaning.... I hope people walk away with a certain need to fill in the spaces with their own experience of the one true God” (p. 68). This hazy, choreographic, you-connect-the-dots preaching is so self-evidently unlike the New Testament way of communicating the gospel that it would be redundant to criticize it further.

The post-foundational apologetics of the younger evangelicals is void of any idea of “defending” the faith. To the contrary, it is declared that the gospel needs no rational defense because it is capable of standing on its own; and, in one sense, that is certainly true. The gospel itself is, through the Spirit, “the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16). But believers are also called upon to make a defense, an *apologia*, an apology to those who ask a reason for their hope (1 Pet 3:15) because the unbeliever is “without a defense” (*anapologetos*, defenseless, without excuse) (Rom 2:1). But if the governance for apologetics is more of a feeling than authoritative biblical propositions and is a mosaic based on the ecumenical formulations of the church, it is unexplainable why this will not leave the millennial youth at everyone’s mercy as they attempt to win to Christ a non-authoritarian, subjective culture on its own terms. There is neither a criterion nor a limiting concept as to whose feelings are correct, and if all emotions are eventually correct, none is truly right. And as well, verbal dialogue concerning faith and practice, if it is attempted at all, would soon degenerate into an endless haggle over which church father and whose interpretation of the ancient creeds is normative.

Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology means the study of the church, but it appears that for the younger evangelicals it is more about ecclesiasticism or the outward trappings of liturgy and formalism borrowed from ancient tradition. These objects and rites are designed to enhance postmodern worship and forward the spirituality of the community. This is clearly a somewhat violent reaction to the casual and highly informal flavor of the designer churches of their pragmatic evangelical predecessors. And in fact a deep-seated dissatisfaction with that form of doing church is justified and long overdue. Candidly, not a few professing fundamentalist churches are also in desperate need of a strong dose of reverence and order that would see an excision of the accelerated pace, breezy attitude, pockets of pandemonium, and the urge to be contemporary and “with it” that characterize much of their public services.

A couple of things stand out as characteristics of the younger ecclesiology that merit some note. One is its roots in the pre-Constantine church or the church prior to the fourth century. Younger evangelicals feel that with Constantine the church became a secularized civil religion that served as a “chaplain” and “caretaker” of the culture (p. 118), and this has continued to the present day. The Constantinian church over the centuries came to be operated and controlled by the professional clergy rather than a ministering people, sent out missionaries instead of itself being the incarnation of mission, and became in essence an extension or arm of the culture rather than an alternative community within the culture. The younger evangelical vision of a postmodern pre-Constantinian church is one that is intergenerational, intercultural, and postdenominational that operates within small groups characterized by diversity and an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

Another motif of the younger evangelical ecclesiology is its heavy liturgical formalism essentially borrowed from Romanism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and other forms of ancient and medieval ceremonialism. This incorporates a host of rites and symbols that include candles, prayers, crosses, icons, pictures, art, church architecture, sacraments (especially the Eucharist), initiation procedures, and other forms that promote “mystery, awe, wonder, [and] transcendence” in worship (p. 199). What is more, all of the use of this religious paraphernalia can include the worship leader pronouncing absolution (p. 203)! The austere worship forms of the Celts, a fourth century group that became infested with Pelagianism, asceticism, and monasticism,⁸ hold a

⁸Robert G. Clouse, “Celtic Church,” *The New International Dictionary of the*

particular fascination for the younger group.

One philosophical rationale for these observances is that “worship uses the material to proclaim that the invisible God who is wholly other is the very ground and meaning of material existence” (p. 198). But it seems to me that the Second Commandment forbids just that kind of practice. God is spirit and He is to be worshiped via the seat of one’s personality, his spirit or the ability to think and reason, as this is informed and governed by revealed truth (John 4:24). The problem with these material objects is that, while intended to proclaim certain spiritual ideas, they soon become what they supposedly symbolize, i.e., they become sacramental. According to Webber, “‘Sacrament,’ refers to an action of God that is received, affirmed, treasured, and kept (Eph 3:3–6).⁹ ‘Sacrament’ expresses the mystery of the union between God and man—effected by God, kept by man” (p. 181). The author goes on to state that the sacraments are to be observed “as a reception of *his work for us and our faith response to him*” (italics his) (181).

For example, faith understands that in the eschaton the created order will be freed from its slavery to corruption (Rom 8:21), but for the younger evangelicals the arts do not just symbolize this truth, they incarnate it. Webber says, “In worship the arts put wood, stone, and textile into a new and released form of praise. The arts are not mere decorations that enhance worship, nor are they illustrations of truth. Instead the arts *participate in their eschatological meaning*. They are creation put to praise” (italics added) (p. 200). That is, the physical materials of the arts become sacramental; they do not just portray eschatological truth, they *are* the eschaton in the midst of the assembly and have the mystical ability to bestow what they are on the worshipers.

This principle is applied in many other ways in the new millennial ecclesiology. Many younger evangelicals find in the Eucharist, for example, an especially poignant sense of the presence of God, an existential, momentary experience of the kingdom of God where the love of God in Christ’s atonement “is on full and permanent display” (p. 182). The bread and cup constitute “a continuous rite of spiritual nourishment.... On the divine side, the Eucharist is God’s spiritual

Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 207.

⁹Webber traces the word Latin word *sacramentum* back to the Greek word *mysterion* (mystery) and uses Paul’s references to mystery in Eph 3:3–6 to prove his assertions about a modern day sacrament (pp. 180–81). But the biblical idea of mystery is anything but sacramental. It is revelation that God kept to Himself and revealed at an appointed time (Rom 16:25). Webber commits a hermeneutical fallacy that involves a completely illegitimate transfer and extrapolation of a Latin usage onto biblical Greek, leaving himself no basis for sacramentarianism.

nourishment given to us” (p. 224). Some use a prayer that “asks the Holy Spirit to come upon the elements” (p. 204). The Benedictine *Lectio Divina* (Holy Reading), a very ritualistic reading of Scripture, is popular among the group. Icons are also highly recommended for worship, complete with eight rules for making an icon. The icon-making guide says that first “make the sign of the cross and pray in silence and pardon enemies,” and at the end “have your icon blessed by putting it on the Holy Table...[and] be the first to pray before it” (p. 213).

All of the High Church liturgy, formality, and sacramentalism of the younger evangelicals is very disconcerting to a biblicist. There is no attempt to locate these things in the Word of God, no effort whatever to interpret and correlate Scripture, nothing except a wholesale adoption of patristic and medieval forms that have been lifeless for centuries. This is so like the catenists of the Middle Ages, scholars that simply rearranged the thought of the church fathers and had no fresh exegesis of the Scriptures for themselves or the common people. Such rearranging and/or compiling of the fathers was done to enhance the sacramentalism of the dominant (Roman Catholic) church. The younger generation of evangelicals does not seem to appreciate how arid such religious thought had become in those days. Thus a question presents itself: How long will it be before dead formalism and theological and biblical sterility overtake the younger evangelicals? If medieval sacramentalism is popular among them today, can the beads and holy water be far behind?

Webber is probably correct to present this younger generation of evangelicals as a cultural reaction. It appears to be part of a general dissatisfaction of present day young adults with their boomer parents' ideas and ways. But while the newer evangelical thinkers want to be counter cultural, i.e., against the forms of modernity with which they identify their predecessors, they are still very culturally conscious and wish to develop a postmodern evangelicalism that can interface with postmodern man on his own turf. And while these late vintage evangelicals have leap-frogged well back of the twentieth century and appear to be in revolt against the current establishment, they are very much a part of its displacement, namely present-day postmodernity. They passionately wish to conform, convert, or change the face of their evangelical heritage to postmodernity's new thought and methods, that is, to contextualize the faith for a new day. How successful they will be remains to be seen, and if successful, will they be worthy of the name evangelical?

The younger evangelical movement and the promotion Webber gives it are very reminiscent of the “young evangelicals” of the 1970s

whose major prophet was Richard Quebedeaux¹⁰ and minor prophet was Bernard Ramm.¹¹ They too were on a mission of change, from the new evangelicalism of Billy Graham and Carl Henry to a politically liberal post-American evangelicalism of the hippie movement and the counter cultural anti-war protesters of the Vietnam era. Their day came and went virtually without notice and made little impact. Then as probably now the promotion and hype were far greater than the substance; there was a lot less than met the eye. The young evangelicals of that time came across as a group of arrogant young turks who demanded to be seen and heard. The younger evangelicals of today are much more benign and seem not to be plagued by such visions of grandeur and greatness. But their emotionalism and lack of a stable authority for doing theology and church, their disdain for propositional written revelation, their failure and/or inability to rightly handle the sacred text, and their adaptation of medieval thought and practice all presage, in my judgment, a rather short evangelical life, if indeed they are even now genuinely evangelical.

¹⁰Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) and *The Worldly Evangelicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

¹¹Bernard Ramm, "Welcome 'Green Grass' Evangelicals," *Eternity* (March 1974), p. 13.