

**Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Is the Term Still Valid?**  
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**Introduction**

I want to begin with a few disclaimers: First, lest anyone interpret my title as an attack on evangelicalism, I want to explain that I consider myself an evangelical and I intend to defend it. To justify my claim, I have cast off any pretense of objectivity and am adding a few personal observations. Second, while there are few footnotes, I hope to analyze “evangelicalism” with some care. As I will show, this term has a multitude of meanings, both historically and theologically. Indeed, it is claimed by many people, not all of whom are welcomed with open arms by everyone else in this movement. Third, while the term “deconstructing” in the first part of the title is not intended in the technical sense that Jacques Derrida and others use it, like him, I do want to signal some tensions resulting from oppositions. Instead of that type of deconstruction, I mean by it a careful analysis of what evangelicalism has meant in the past and what it means today. The question I want to pose now is this: After its use by so many people, is the term evangelicalism still valid, and if so, how ought it to be used at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Lest there be any confusion, I will use evangelical and evangelicalism in a largely synonymous way. Yet the latter, is an “ism” or ideology. I have had an aversion to “isms” since my college days, when one of my philosophy professors drilled this into me. Thus to this day I dislike talking about “Calvinism” or being called a “Calvinist.”

**The Problem**

I have been reading a book that typifies how widespread the term evangelical is: *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, by Ben Witherington III.<sup>1</sup> The subtitle proves my point: “Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism.” Although these three groups can all be labeled evangelical, they are very different from each other, and seem to have little in common? Theologically they are miles apart. All of them claim to take Scripture seriously, yet their hermeneutics and the resulting exegesis divides them. Witherington identifies them as the three main theological tributaries of evangelicalism; each has made important contributions, he adds, but each contribution came at a great price: “individualism and determinism” for the first, “systematic ahistoricism” for the second, and “the raising of experience to a norm, sometimes even above the Bible,” for the third (3). This book made me wonder if the evangelical tent has become too large, and prompted me to ask some pertinent questions.

Isaiah 54 speaks about the future glory of Zion, and, in verse two, the prophet urges Jerusalem, as the representative of Israel, to enlarge its tents and lengthen its cords, an image that I interpret missiologically. Missions and evangelism, as I will show, lie at the heart of what the term “evangelical” means. But evangelicalism has enlarged its tent and lengthened its cords so much today that the tent threatens to collapse. Witherington expresses this situation eloquently: “Evangelicalism is a many-splintered thing.” As a New Testament scholar, he decries the biblical illiteracy of many evangelicals today. He pleads for evangelicalism to return to its Reformation principles and pay more careful attention to the biblical text (ix-xi). Witherington is not the first scholar to signal this illiteracy. In *Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* David Wells laments the impending death of theology among evangelicals. In my opinion, the lack of interest in good theology, one that is solidly rooted in the Bible and yet is relevant today, is due to a large degree to an anti-intellectualism that still marks contemporary evangelicalism.

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<sup>1</sup> While Witherington is a fine exegete and I often agree with him, I have difficulty accepting his main hermeneutical principle: “what the text could not have possibly meant to the original inspired biblical author, it cannot possibly mean today” (x). That principle would not permit exegetes to interpret the text as well in the light of their own “*sitz im leben*.”

An article, entitled “Evangelicalism,” by R.V. Pierard and Walter A. Elwell (who is also the chief editor), in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (2nd edition), is especially helpful in studying this term; this article is written by evangelicals for evangelicals and is probably as close as one can get to any writing on this topic that bears an evangelical imprimatur. It forms the primary “text” for my “deconstruction.”

In order to discover the meaning of evangelicalism, it is good to begin by examining the term from an historical perspective. While it may seem a relatively recent phenomenon, an evangelical spirit can be discerned throughout the history of the church. The missionary zeal that characterizes the contemporary movement started already in the apostolic age: look at the Apostle Paul, perhaps the greatest missionary of all time. It is evident too in the writings of the church fathers, and perpetuated in the monastic movement that, far from being a withdrawal from the world, extended the boundaries of the church in succeeding generations. And it must also be recognized in the medieval reform movement and in forerunners of the Reformation, like Wycliffe, Hus, and others. Martin Luther set out to reform the Roman Catholic Church, not to split it. His followers were at first called “evangelicals.” Even today in Germany, Lutheran and Reformed churches are collectively termed “Evangelical” (*Evangelisch*) (EDT 407), which is much to be preferred over the more commonly used term “Protestant.”

Contemporary evangelicalism is rooted especially in English Puritanism with its emphasis on the theological doctrines that still mark evangelicalism. Another source is German pietism, which evidenced many traits that persist in evangelicalism today, especially missionary outreach. Mention should also be made of the Methodist revival of the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield in Britain, and the Great Awakening in America, as well as the fervor for renewal in the Anglican Church, as seen especially in the “Evangelical” party of John Newton, William Wilberforce and others, who founded many Bible and missionary societies. Baptists, Congregationalists, and Methodists created missionary societies as well. There were similar developments in Scotland, France, and the Netherlands (EDT 407).

The nineteenth century was *the* age of the evangelical. Prominent figures include William Gladstone, Charles Spurgeon, William Booth, Hudson Taylor, Abraham Kuyper, Charles Finney, and Dwight Moody. The evangelical faith permeated the churches, both black and white; it shaped the values of America, and it provided a vision of this country as God’s chosen people. Missionaries from Europe and North America carried the gospel to every corner of the world. Evangelical revivals then swept Africa, Asia, and Latin America, just as they had earlier swept the North Atlantic nations. Evangelicals worked together at the time to promote religious liberty and missions (EDT 407).

Evangelicalism declined early in the twentieth century, but this decline was temporary. In reaction to liberalism a narrow fundamentalism emerged that urged withdrawal from the world. Communism, fascism, and secularism all threatened the churches. The second half of this century witnessed the rise of “new evangelicals” in North America, who campaigned strongly against fundamentalism. Carl F. Henry argued that fundamentalists were anti-intellectual and presented only a truncated form of the Christian message. There were also more “radical” evangelical groups, such as Sojourners. The phenomenal growth of the charismatic movement signaled as well the growing number of evangelicals worldwide. Evangelicals became more ecumenical, as indicated by the World Congress on Evangelism (Berlin, 1966) and the International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne, 1974). Evangelicals increasingly worked together in evangelism, relief work, and theological development. Evangelicalism has become a global phenomenon, as people in the Two-thirds World (as I prefer to call it) founded evangelistic organizations and started sending out missionaries (EDT 408). Evangelicals gave ecumenism a strongly evangelical flavor, however, that emphasized spiritual unity, instead of the more visible unity that has characterized the World Council of Churches.

Even this brief excursion into the history of evangelicalism reveals the diversity of meanings that this term has had through the ages. In the twenty-first century evangelism has continued to grow and diversify. This increasing diversity, however, should cause us to ask whether this term is still valid today and, if so, what it means.

This diversity is even more evident when we examine evangelicalism from a theological perspective. Here it is well to pause and study the etymology of the words “evangelical” and “evangelicalism.” Both derive from the Greek noun *euaggelion* (good news) and the verb *euaggelizō* (bring good news), and appear more than 100 times in the New Testament. They have passed into modern languages through the Latin *evangelium*. Evangelist derives from the same source. An evangelical is someone who believes and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ (EDT 405-406, slightly revised). Both content (belief) and activity (proclamation) are included in the meaning of all these words.

I do not have enough time to examine in detail all the major theological beliefs that characterize evangelicalism. I will, however, list a few of them. Evangelicalism, as the authors of the article note, begins with the sovereignty of God. He is a transcendent, personal and infinite Being, who created and rules over heaven and earth. Yet he is also accessible through prayer. Moreover, in his sovereign plan, he decided to redeem all his creatures, and seeks to bring their wills in conformity with his in order to achieve his objectives. Evangelicals regard Scripture as the inspired Word of God; his self-revelation constitutes an infallible guide of faith and life and is inerrant in all that it teaches. They also believe in total depravity, which means that sin affects every part of life. God created humanity perfectly, but sin entered the world through the fall. God later sent his only Son to make atonement for sin through his death on the cross. And Christ through his resurrection has not only triumphed over death but he also began the process of redeeming all of creation from sin’s influence (EDT 406).

This list is short, yet it does include the main evangelical beliefs. I did not, however, use theological terms such as regeneration, justification, and sanctification, and I have consciously avoided the distinctive beliefs of many denominations. I have also tried to steer clear of some aspects of eschatology; not that these are not important, but because some denominations emphasize them too much. I realize that not all evangelicals will agree with everything on this brief list; these doctrines, however, allow most to feel at home within the evangelical tent. Yet all too often distinctive beliefs find ways of entering the tent, much like the proverbial camel. When this happens, of course, the tent threatens to collapse. Evangelism is what unites evangelicals, and it provides the chief support of the tent.

Heralding the Word of God, so that people can be brought to faith, brings evangelicals of many stripes together. Witnessing through life and word is fundamental; where holiness is understood not in the sense of withdrawal from the world but confronting evil and its effects both personally and socially. Yet I do have problems when the authors write that social service is “a preparation for the proclamation of the gospel,” or mention “the pre-evangelism” of works of mercy (EDT 406). Jesus healed people, often without adding a sermon. Medical mission work is not simply pre-evangelism. Similarly, to bring this matter closer to home, Christian education, at all levels, is a noble goal in itself, without using the classroom for evangelistic purposes. We see once again how the evangelical tent is beginning to shake, even when talking about missions. I mention this not to stir up controversy, but to show that in this important activity too there are profound differences yet among evangelicals. For this reason, a pragmatic stress on evangelism will, by itself, not be enough to repair the tent. Yet missions, as we shall see later, is crucial.

This summary of doctrines, it need hardly be added, is not unique to evangelicals. We share many beliefs with other Christians: the Trinity, Christ’s incarnation, his virgin birth, the church as the body of Christ, the sacraments,

and our final resurrection, to name only a few (EDT 406-407). I have purposely refrained, however, from citing the “immortality of the soul,” as the authors of the article do, since that is Platonic and unbiblical.

In the closing section, the authors conclude: “Internally, within evangelicalism this growth has created some difficulties and cracks are beginning to show. The very nature of evangelicalism was never a unified movement but a collection of emphases based on a common core of beliefs—a core that itself is now under discussion.” Then they go on to mention the appearance of a small group of mainly younger men and women who are intent on reforming evangelicalism; among them they cite Roger Olson, Clark Pinnock, and Stanley Grenz. Yet, they explain, the vast majority of evangelicals are traditionally inclined. Among the issues within evangelicalism that are currently being debated they list open theism, kenotic theology, universalism, annihilationism, theistic evolution, inerrancy, and postmodern literary theories as these affect the reading of Scripture (EDT 409). I will discuss some of them shortly.

The next paragraph of this article makes abundantly clear where the sympathies of the authors lie: “Needless to say, traditionalists are deeply concerned about these trends and are wondering aloud if the liberal evangelicalism of this generation is going to become the liberalism of the next generation, as has happened in the past” (EDT 409).

The tension that is induced by many current issues is palpable. The opposition here is between evangelicalism and liberalism. Evangelicalism, at least in its post-Enlightenment manifestation, is to a large degree a reaction to liberalism. Evangelicals are always looking over their shoulders at liberals—or perceived liberals—in their midst. Thus it is hardly surprising that, when liberals take over schools and churches, evangelicals often vote with their feet and set up new institutions, although sometimes they stay in order to achieve reforms from within. The publication of the *Fundamentals* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not enable evangelicals to stem the liberal tide in America, largely because they fought it using the weapons of liberalism. They appealed to rationalism and other philosophical tools, with the result that the enemy could never be defeated, since it was firmly established within the camp.<sup>2</sup> Earlier forms of evangelicalism, such as pietism, had fought the spiritually deadening effects of the Enlightenment, but later forms perceived liberalism to be the chief foe. While the danger of liberalism in the church always remains, evangelicalism must be more than a knee-jerk reaction to it. There are other dangers too. Secularism, for example, is as much a child of the Enlightenment as is liberalism. Typically, the older generation of Christians, especially evangelicals, complains about “worldliness,” but the younger generation quietly adopts many of the things that their parents fought against. Again, the proper response is not a reactionary one. We cannot seal ourselves off hermetically from what many see as an evil world; instead, we must find biblically-based alternatives rather than those that are shaped from reactionary motives, which have only temporary results and eventually allow that world to take over our homes, schools, and other institutions, including churches.<sup>3</sup>

How much diversity is possible before the tent collapses? Not all evangelicals will give the same answer. Some, like Clark Pinnock, once had impeccable evangelical credentials. Much of his early work was shaped by the liberal threat to biblical authority. J.R. Lincoln assesses him as follows: “Pinnock is a theologian in process. Although committed to the Bible as ‘inerrant in all that it affirms,’ he has changed his views on what it affirms, emphasizing profitability over inerrancy.” Since 1975, Pinnock has endorsed Arminianism and rejected Augustinian-Calvinism, because it implies that God coerces and manipulates his creatures. Instead, he promotes “free-will theism” in order

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<sup>2</sup> For an incisive analysis of the Old Princeton Theology with its use of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, consult J.C. Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology* (Marlton, NJ: Mack Publishing, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> The best response to secularism that I know by a Christian author is the work of B.J. Van der Walt, especially his latest book, *Transforming Power: Challenging contemporary secular society* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa, 2007). In Section C: “Transforming a contemporary secular world” he provides an analysis and a response. He is probably the leading authority today on worldviews, which he examines from a biblical perspective.

to preserve God's dynamism and human freedom. He rejects the traditional view of hell, and suggests annihilation as an alternative (EDT 927). His "open theism," as some call it, is so far removed from the sovereignty of God that has typified evangelicals for generations that one wonders whether he can still call himself an evangelical. Process theology, with its contingent and limited deity, is even further removed from the evangelical faith; thus it is hardly surprising that few evangelicals have accepted this mode of theology based on the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead.

Kenotic theology, a relatively recent development, represents a new attempt to allow the full humanity of Christ to be expressed, in contrast to the docetism that was common already among the Gnostics in the early church, and is still present today.<sup>4</sup> There are many kenotic theories, thus I will not try to pass judgment on all of them, except to suggest that as evangelicals we should examine such theories with an open mind, since the intention of those who propose them is legitimate: to square the limitations of Christ's humanity with the affirmation of Chalcedon (451) that he is at the same time truly God and truly human. Therefore, those who struggle with kenotic theology should not be branded as liberals, as some evangelicals do, but they must be respected for their orthodox intentions.

Universalism is another doctrine that has been much disputed in the history of the Christian church. On the universalist side one discovers people like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Scotus Erigena, F. Schleiermacher, and George MacDonald; while on the other side one finds Jerome, Augustine, and most evangelicals. Few evangelicals, in fact, would dare brand themselves as universalists, yet all Christians must struggle with universalistic texts, such as 1 John 2:2, Phil. 2:10-13, and 2 Peter 3:9. I am not a universalist, but we all know believers who have speculated at times about the possibility of God saving all, as Origen also did, who even included the fallen angels and Satan.

If there is one belief that makes many evangelicals squirm, it is evolution. Yet I know evangelical scientists who accept a form of evolution. They find it difficult, however, to swallow "scientific creationism," which they dismiss as both bad science and bad theology. One can believe in creation, yet not affirm the "young earth" theory. I say this fully respectful of the fact that some evangelicals will disagree strongly with the last part of my statement.<sup>5</sup>

I do not intend to question "inerrancy" at this IICS conference, since I do not want to debate this issue when Norman Geisler, who edited the position papers presented at the inerrancy conference in Chicago in 1978, and others who strongly believe in it, are present. Inerrancy is too complex an issue, and evangelicals are too divided on it, for me to deal with it now. One can have a high view of Scripture—as I do—and yet not affirm inerrancy.

Post-modern literary theories are last on the list of hotly debated topics provided by the authors of the article on evangelicalism. There are additional topics that I will raise in a moment. Yet evangelicals should not be too quick to dismiss postliberal theology with its postmodern literary theories. There is much we can learn from theologians such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas, and philosophers like Hans-George Gadamer and Jean-Luc Marion. Let me give just a brief summary of each man's thought.

In *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei traces how in premodern thinking the biblical narrative formed the world in which Christians lives, but with the rise of modernity a great reversal took place in which "interpretation was fitting the biblical story into another world with another story." In the postmodern period he pleads for a return to the older way. Scripture provides a grand narrative of God's actions and words as these are focused on Christ (EDT 937). Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* coined and defined the term "postliberal." For Lindbeck doctrines can only be understood properly within their own cultural-linguistic setting. He rejects both the propositional and experiential-

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<sup>4</sup> I have theology students in Nigeria who found it hard to accept that Jesus, when he was an infant, cried and had dirty diapers (if he wore them at all). The same docetic idea is expressed in the Christmas carol "Away in a Manger": "no crying he makes." Docetism can be found in many traditions all over the world.

<sup>5</sup> *The Economist* (June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007) includes a rather tongue-in-cheek article about "The Creation Museum" that opened on May 28<sup>th</sup> in Petersburg, Kentucky. While some evangelicals would support this project, others—I included—do not.

expressive models of religious language (EDT 937). Hauerwas, a severe critic of liberalism, emphasizes the significance of narrative for Christian ethics. Virtues are always rooted in a particular narrative, and thus Christian ethics is unique to its story (EDT 537). Gadamer was a student of Martin Heidegger and an acclaimed Plato scholar. He is known especially for his concept of “horizon,” by which he means the context that a person brings to an event. For him, there needs to be a fusion of horizons, of the text and the reader. One result of this is that the meaning of a text always transcends its author (EDT 477). Marion, a Roman Catholic, distinguishes between “idols,” which are our pictures of God, and “icons,” which point us beyond ourselves to God. For him, God “exists,” but not as we exist; his “being” is love. God is beyond predication. We must recognize the limitations of human speech and not create God in our own image. He is not the God of the philosophers but the God of faith (EDT 944). While not a literary theorist, Marion is notable especially for the way he applies postmodern insights to Christian thought.

All of these men are concerned that we read Scripture properly, which is a genuine evangelical concern. Few would call themselves evangelicals, yet there is much that we can learn from them and other postmodern theologians and philosophers. We ought to be able to apply their insights to our own thinking, without giving up the evangelical label. It is a label that many people—even those we least expect—claim today. I am reminded how the supervisor of my doctoral dissertation insisted repeatedly that, though Roman Catholic, he considered himself “evangelical.” The evangelical tent is getting larger and larger all the time.

What does the term evangelical mean, if so many people consider themselves evangelicals? And what should it mean today? Both historically and theologically it is evident that evangelical and evangelicalism are rooted in the gospel, both as content, faith in the God revealed in Scripture, and as an activity, proclaiming the good news. That unites many people who, nevertheless, feel more than a little uncomfortable sharing the same tent with believers from many totally different traditions. Is the evangelical tent large enough to accommodate this great diversity, or should it be broken up into smaller tents that reflect these profound differences? Can the contemporary form of evangelicalism, which grew out of the fundamentalist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, provide a home for those who consider themselves fundamentalists as well as for neo-evangelicals and even for the more radical variety of evangelicals? This label has been very flexible throughout the centuries, but can it survive the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Even if evangelicals can tolerate theological differences, can they accept the increasing polarization that is taking place in Europe and North America, as is evidenced by the “culture wars” of the last few decades? The article, “Culture War,” in *Wikipedia* lists some of today’s major battleground issues: affirmative action, the creation-evolution controversy (including Intelligent Design), capital punishment, environmentalism and global warming, family values, feminism, the men’s movement, judicial activism, media bias, the Iraq war, the separation of church and state, homosexuality, sex education, stem-cell research, welfare reform, and women in combat. This list is not complete; it does not mention all the issues on which evangelicals are seriously divided.

Many of these issues have the potential to destroy the fragile unity of evangelicalism. Evangelicals are divided even on the priority to give to each of these issues, as is illustrated by the recent conflict between James Dobson and other prominent leaders involved in promoting family values and the National Association of Evangelicals. In an open letter Dobson *cum suis* take Richard Cizik, vice-president for governmental affairs for the NAE, to task for expressing concern about environmental issues, specifically global warming. The letter contends that his concern distracts members from the central moral issues of the day, such as abortion and gay marriage. But the NAE has never taken an official stance on climate change or global warming. This, in turn, displeases another group of evangelical leaders who last year issued the *Evangelical Climate Initiative*, which stated that evangelicals must

engage this issue without further waiting. It was signed by 86 national evangelical leaders, including 39 college presidents. Almost immediately, another evangelical organization, *The Interfaith Stewardship Alliance*, criticized that initiative, saying the governmental action that was recommended would hurt the poor more than global warming would. Such diversity, we all recognize, has long been there. Because of their fear of big government many evangelicals have been reluctant to get behind government legislation protecting the environment. Education plays a role. Calvin DeWitt, President of the Academy of Evangelical Scientists, is hopeful about the next generation of evangelicals. He points especially to the 60 or so evangelical colleges and universities that provide not only religious training but also have scientists with deep scientific, biblical, and theological roots. Evangelicals are maturing, he concludes, in terms of their knowledge and understanding of the world (*Christian Courier* [April 2, 2007] 3).

I suspect that the divisions that currently exist among evangelicals are partly theological, partly educational, partly generational, partly political, and there maybe other factors as well that I have not been able to determine. I won't try to untangle all these different strands, many of which are intimately connected. We have examined some of the theological factors already. The educational factor is readily apparent when one compares the beliefs and attitudes of scientists teaching at Christian colleges and universities with that of many ordinary evangelical lay people. Anyone who is a parent is fully aware of the generational factor. It expresses itself in the "culture wars," in which cultural differences can also be seen between the generations. And one does not have to be a political scientist to know about the political factor as it influences not only the general population but also evangelicals.

The media tend to smear all evangelicals with the label "evangelical right," but this is unfair to those who feel uncomfortable with that label. Is the evangelical tent still large enough to hold the whole spectrum of evangelicals within both the Republican and Democratic parties in America? The same political diversity can be found in Canada, where evangelicals vote regularly not only for Conservatives but also for Liberals and New Democrats. Can all of these people, no matter what their party affiliation or whom they vote for, sit down on Sunday after the elections and commune together at the table of the Lord? I hope so, but increasingly I feel the tension is building up. Is there another opposition here, this time of right versus left? As much as I abhor these terms, evangelicals can be discovered on both sides of the political fence. Will politics destroy the evangelical tent? I hope not, yet the potential for that remains. For the foreseeable future, the political factor seems to me more likely than any other to split the evangelical movement. Yet, in spite of all these factors, it is premature to write an obituary for evangelicalism,

### **Conclusion**

What have we discovered thus far? We have examined evangelicalism from various perspectives. History teaches us that this term has had many meanings, but that missions and evangelism have been constants since the early days of the church. Etymology confirms this: an evangelical is someone who both believes the good news of Jesus Christ and wants to proclaim it, verbally or otherwise. Theologically, evangelicals have identified a series of doctrines that orbit around God and Scripture. Yet there are also many issues that evangelicals have not dealt with as fully as they should. Although such issues are can be divisive, they need to be addressed if evangelicals are to remain relevant. The factors that divide evangelicals are many; some have the potential to split the movement. Yet evangelicalism, for all its fragility, continues to display an amazing resilience. It is a label that many people—even those who theologically are otherwise far removed from it—choose because of its root meaning. But can the tent survive, when many people from diverse backgrounds, are clamoring to get in, if they are not already inside? How much diversity is possible before it bursts at the seams? Or is the tent large enough to encompass this diversity?

My hope is that evangelicalism will survive. As we have seen, the term is too rich to allow it to be abandoned. In an age when Christians are under attack from malevolent forces all over the world, and evangelicals, in particular, are ridiculed by the media and others, evangelicals must not reject their rich heritage. The evangelical tent must be retained, and even enlarged. Ways must be found to strengthen it so that it will not burst and cave in. Evangelicalism is indeed highly splintered, but the core is substantial enough to continue the use of this term; in fact, evangelicals need to build on that core and expand it, if the evangelical tent is to survive the first decades of the third millennium.

I began by wondering how Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism could all fit inside the same tent. I raised this issue for heuristic reasons. After a rather brief investigation of evangelicalism, I would assert that the evangelical tent cannot only be retained but should even be extended. At one time—many years ago now, I admit—I questioned how I could accept other Christians who had rejected many of my cherished beliefs and instead introduced teachings that I considered unbiblical. Eventually it dawned on me that others did not need to change, but I had to. I needed a change of heart, so that I would become more accepting of fellow believers from other traditions, who shared my concern for missions and evangelism but had adopted a very different theology and lifestyle. The problem lay not in the diversity itself, as I had assumed, but in my attitude to them. Later, when I became an ecumenist I learned to shift my gaze from these differences and focus, instead, on what people possess in common. Evangelicals must learn to do the same; otherwise the tent will not survive much longer.

The tensions that result from oppositions such as evangelical-liberal or left-right are not fundamental to the basic meaning of evangelicalism, yet they threaten to bring down the tent. If evangelicalism is defined in terms of its opposition to liberalism, the possibility of losing sight of this basic meaning can become lost. To brand people as liberals may be convenient, but that does not mean that they are no longer concerned with proclaiming the gospel, although they may have a totally different understanding of it. I gave examples earlier of what evangelicals can learn from postmodern and postliberal thinkers. That does not mean, however, that evangelicals have to accept everything that is taught by others. Personally, I reject open theism because it does not comport with my understanding of the Bible, yet I will allow Pinnock and others to say their piece. If they want to call themselves evangelicals, then that is their right, even if others might dispute that claim. Similarly, the left-right polarity introduces a mode of thinking that is inappropriate, since it, like the earlier one, introduces an unbiblical category. The late Jerry Falwell mixed faith with his own brand of rightwing politics—which has given the evangelical movement a reputation that makes many of us uncomfortable—yet he was justified in claiming to be an evangelical—a title he often denied to others.

The tent is large enough, provided that all those who consider themselves evangelicals are tolerant enough to accept those who differ from them in many respects, whether theological, political, or whatever. Therein lies the rub. Too often evangelicals are not noted for tolerating differences. They set up barriers that are intended to keep out those they do not agree with. Inerrancy, for example, has become a shibboleth for some: only those who subscribe to it fully are acknowledged as evangelicals. Once everyone starts setting up such barriers, however, we will end up with countless tents, each holding only a select few who fully agree with each other. Then the single evangelical tent will be gone and replaced by all these smaller tents. Is that what evangelicals want? Or are they prepared to accept diversity to the extent that the tent will seem constantly to be bursting at the seams and facing imminent collapse?

I want to conclude with a remark about the International Institute for Christian Studies, which organized this conference. The genius of IICS is that those who belong to it, whether as professors, staff, or supporters, accept each other fully as brothers and sisters in the Lord and recognize one another as fellow evangelicals. That does not mean that there are no longer any differences between them. Differences exist even within the best marriages, but they

should not be allowed to lead to schisms, and certainly not when professors are working together closely on a field. Then especially there needs to be an acceptance that comes from the recognition of what unites them as evangelicals: their desire to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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