

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) Bulletin (US)* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_tsfbulletin-us.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tsfbulletin-us.php)

# TSEF BULLETIN

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1986

VOL. 10, NO. 2

\$4.50

## Introducing This Issue

*Vernon Grounds*

3

## Finis to Fratricide

*Vernon Grounds*

4

## Evangelical Diversity and Self-Criticism: Signs of Hope

*Thomas F. Johnson*

8

## Our Shared Evangelical Heritage

*Timothy L. Smith*

10

## The Black Contribution To Evangelicalism

*James Earl Massey*

16

## The Authority of the Bible: What Shall We Then Preach?

*Paul J. Achtemeier*

19

## The American Hour, The Evangelical Moment

*Os Guinness*

22

## CONFERENCE REPORTS:

### North American Evangelical Missions: The Last 100 Years

*Marvin Bergman*

24

### Missiology Students Form Society

*Thomas Russell*

26

### The Case of *Brave New People*: A Shadow and a Hope

*Stephen Charles Mott*

27

### Abortion: Four Reviews

31

### Book Reviews and Comments

34

A Publication of  
**THEOLOGICAL  
STUDENTS  
FELLOWSHIP**

As a direct consequence of that, I would suggest that we regard the term "critical" in the historical-critical method as continuing to point to a critical attitude on our part, but a critical attitude to what *we* think a given passage of Scripture means. We are not to assume that what seems obvious to us as modern people is necessarily the meaning of that passage when seen in its total historical and literary context.

The point of such a "historical-critical" method is to protect the text from us through our own self-critical attitude toward what we find in this text. All ancient artifacts are fragile; they must be given special care or they will be destroyed. That is also true of the biblical text. History has shown, and continues to show, that interpreters can carry on a form of cultural imperialism that will blind us to what the text in fact can tell

us about the ways of God with humanity. In that case, the authority of the Bible for our task of preaching will be ignored, as we resolutely preach ourselves, rather than Christ as Lord, and as we bend our precious biblical heritage into forms we are sure it ought to have assumed.

What shall we then preach? We are to preach Christ as Lord, as the only authority for a God-starved world, and in a way that allows the text to speak its word of judgment and grace to us who preach, as well as to those to whom we preach.

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of this kind of theology, the best handbook for the Reformed positions is Heinrich Hepppe, *Reformierte Dogmatik*, new ed. Ernst Bizer; Kreis Moers: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen, 1935); for the Lutheran positions see Heinrich F.F. Schmid, *Die Dogmatik der Evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 7th ed.; (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1893).

# The American Hour, The Evangelical Moment

by Os Guinness

Raymond Aron once remarked that few people are contemporaries of their own generation. Usually behind the times and largely gaining our understanding second-hand, most of us find it hard to keep up with what is happening and harder still to make sense of it. And the modern explosion of information only makes the problem worse. Most people therefore find themselves strung out somewhere between the extremes of the "Happiness-is-a-small-circle" philosophy and the phenomenon of Daniel Boorstin's "Homo-up-to-datum," the one irresponsible and the other both idolatrous and illusory.

How are we as followers of Christ to steer a course between these extremes and become unriddlers of our times? The challenge is to turn from the modern preoccupation with "know yourself" and to direct the alternative, "know your moment," toward the biblical task of "reading the signs of the times" and "interpreting the hour." In an era calling forth such claims as "an opportunity unprecedented in the twentieth century" for evangelicals (Ron Sider) or "the greatest opportunity since the Reformation" (Richard Lovelace), this goal is obviously vital.

Well aware of the perils of prediction, whether spiritual or secular, and renouncing all pretensions to be a prophet or futurist, I offer the following observations as one Christian's attempt to assess one aspect of the extraordinary times in which we live. The thrust of the argument is carried in raising three sets of questions—three preliminary ones, three main and three concluding.

## Whose Moment?

For Christians the form of this first preliminary question must always be, "Whose?", and, "For Whom?" Quite different from current terms such as "window of opportunity" or being "on a roll," a biblical moment is never chosen or interpreted at will. It is essentially God's moment and a matter of his sovereign initiative.

Yet it is God's moment for someone, and one question today is, For whom? After his visit to the U.S. in 1921, G.K. Chesterton wrote, "So far as democracy becomes and remains Catholic and Christian, that democracy will remain demo-

cratic. Insofar as it does not, it will become wildly and wickedly undemocratic." Six-and-a-half decades later, this comment appears prophetic rather than simply partisan or an instance of Chestertonian cleverness.

With Rome as the center of gravity in the Christian world, the Roman Catholic Church has become the largest community in Christendom and the largest single denomination in the U.S. Considering such strengths as its ancient tradition, its hierarchical structures, its aesthetic richness and its cogent (if somewhat delayed) defense of democratic pluralism, there is little wonder that many observers, such as Richard John Neuhaus and William Miller, have declared that this is "the Catholic moment."

Yet alongside this estimate, the present period is surely also an "evangelical moment." For, culturally speaking, it is no accident that evangelicalism has given rise to the strongest social, political and religious movements in the late Seventies and early Eighties while also representing the oldest, closest religious ties to American life and history. Through its capacity to rise to the challenge of this moment, the evangelical community will reveal its character and strengths or weaknesses today.

## What Stage?

For Christians, an accurate answer to this question is virtually an impossibility. Since ignorance is insurmountable, humility is a necessity as well as a virtue. And because of the dire hunger today for a sense of meaning and belonging, false predictions are proliferating on all sides.

Yet no Christian is let off the hook. For running beside the biblical record of those who missed their moment is the relentless insistence on their responsibility for doing so. Further, the pages of history continue the biblical record right up to our day. So the challenge for faith and obedience is to recognize and seize the moment, however difficult that may prove. Speaking as an Englishman, and conscious of the sad genealogy of convictions in English evangelicalism between 1830 and 1900, this point is poignant as well as strong.

The answer to what stage has been reached depends of course on prior questions as to the character of the moment. But to preempt later discussion, I am arguing that the present developments are in the later stages of their unfolding. While still a remarkable and genuinely open opportunity, the present moment shows signs that it may be closing.

*Os Guinness, noted author and lecturer, is presently a Fellow at Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C. These remarks are taken from an address he delivered at the Evangelical Roundtable in June, 1986 and used by permission.*

## Why Significant?

The claim that this period is a crucial moment for evangelicalism must be distinguished from two kinds of similar claims. On the one hand, it is not to be confused with mere trendspotting labels, such as *Newsweek's* celebration of 1976 as "The Year of the Evangelical." If it amounts to a *kairos* moment at all, the present moment is so only because of the perspectives and priorities of the Kingdom of God.

On the other hand, though close in spirit to estimates such as those of Richard Lovelace and Ron Sider mentioned earlier, it differs slightly because pivoting on an assessment of the turning point itself rather than on that of its consequences.

---

***Repeatedly misunderstood or misrepresented merely as a non-issue or a nuisance factor, the religious issue is key to current cultural clashes because it underlies the principles and patterns by which personal lives and public life are ordered.***

---

The crux of the claim is as follows: On the one hand, American culture is at a turning point, primarily (although not solely) because of its changed relationship to faiths. Compared with their role in the past, the influence of faiths is too little and too little positive. On the other hand, American faiths are at a turning point, primarily (although again not solely) because of their changed relationship to culture. Compared with its role in the past, the influence of culture is too much and too negative.

The reemergence of evangelicalism in the last decade is therefore greatly significant. Currently the strongest religious movement while historically the oldest, the evangelical community faces an "evangelical moment" that is part of the wider "American hour." The faithfulness of the community and the fortunes of the nation are, for the moment, intimately linked.

### What Is The Context Of This Claim?

The first main question concerns the context of this claim and therefore the significance of the wider "American hour." Just before he retired as Secretary of State, Dean Acheson remarked to a prominent Austrian, "Looking back, the gravest problem I had to deal with was how to steer, in this atomic age, the foreign policy of a world power saddled with the constitution of a small, eighteenth-century farmers' republic."

Today this remark could apply equally well in many areas, because it raises a recurring issue: How does the U.S. currently stand in relation to its origins? Few other Western nations give so proud and prominent a place to their origins, but if current analysis is correct, the question of the present's relationship to the past is being raised sharply in the Eighties and in ways which mean that the next decade's answers may be decisive for many years to come.

Doubtless a large part of "turning point talk" is pure hype, but when this is removed, three recurring claims about a turning point stand above all others: first, that the U.S. is experiencing social changes, shifting from an industrial society to an information society; second, massive political changes, shifting from the old Democratic alignment to the new Republican alignment; and third, massive international changes, adjusting to world realities after Vietnam.

What is more striking, though, are aspects of the turning point that are ignored in serious national discussion—and none more so than the fact that the religious issue is central to the grand cultural clashes of the last generation. Repeatedly misunderstood or misrepresented merely as a non-issue ("purely

private and should remain so") or a nuisance factor ("all those misguided millions believing what nobody believes any more"), the religious issue is key to current cultural clashes because it underlies the principles and patterns by which personal lives and public life are ordered.

In fact, a deeper consideration of the U.S. in the 1980s reveals how important the faith factor is. Not only do the deepest national issues (such as the status of "Americanism" or the strength of the "public philosophy") have a critical religious component, certain of the most distinctive national institutions (above all, the First Amendment) require a critical religious contribution. So misunderstood and misrepresented

yet so vital is it that religion amounts to the wild card factor in the American future.

### What Are The Likely Consequences?

The second main question concerns the likely consequences for the faith and for the nation which grow out of the present time of transition. What follows is not a prediction, but an outline of the four broad directions which may conceivably be taken. In the first two, the common assumption is that in the future religion will not prove socially decisive, the first outcome assuming that this will cause no problems to the nation and the second one that it will. In the last two outcomes, the common assumption is that religion will prove decisive in the American future, the third outcome assuming that this might be harmful and the fourth that it might be beneficial.

The future, of course, may have none of the neatness of these categories, but they at least provide a theoretical test bed for examining various options and possibilities.

1. *The triumph of secular liberalism*: This outcome does not depend on either the disappearance of religion or the dominance of secularism, both being unlikely in the American context. Instead, it sees secularism growing ever more dominant in the public square. Despite its front-runner status, this scenario probably carries the seeds of its own destruction, because it is doubtful whether secularism can replace religion as the bedding for traditional American values.

2. *Crises and decline*: This outcome requires no grand catastrophe nor period of lurid national decadence. All it envisages is the steady erosion of the spiritual and moral foundations of the social order, in a manner and at a rate which no post-religious substitute (such as prosperity, law or technology) can prevent.

3. *Semi-religious authoritarianism*: This outcome assumes that, in order to counter the sort of crises perceived in the second outcome, the attempt will be made to reassert "traditional values" by giving them a religious base—religion being used not because it is true, but useful.

4. *Revitalization via revival and reformation*: This outcome assumes that American assumptions, ideals and institutions could be revitalized profoundly yet peaceably by genuine revival and reformation. A hope which at first sight appears to be the last resort of the marginal pious—"praying well is the best revenge"—is actually a possibility considered seriously on the basis of scholarly, rather than purely believing, considerations.

## What Is The Capacity Of Evangelicalism To Rise To The Occasion?

The third main question concerns the capacity of the evangelical community to respond. Will evangelicalism rise to the occasion as its record, numbers and the demands of the present moment (not to speak of biblical obedience) would lead one to expect? At a time when American "exceptionalism" is reckoned to have declined, religion in America is the last great exception to the decline of exceptionalism. And evangelicalism in particular appears in many ways to be thriving as almost never before.

Yet a closer examination shows that at just those places where a culture-shaping faith must be strong, evangelicalism at large is alarmingly weak. On the one hand, instead of demonstrating a powerful *claim to truth*, traditionally the source of the Church's strength in its role as the protagonist of its own culture, popular evangelicalism betrays a widespread loss of a Christian mind that is a fatal handicap to cultural transformation in the modern world.

On the other hand, instead of demonstrating a powerful *challenge to tension*, traditionally the source of the Church's strength in its role as the antagonist to other cultures, popular evangelicalism betrays such a lapse into worldliness and cultural captivity that it is fatally handicapped again.

These two comments are sweeping generalizations that require substantiation outside the scope of this article. They are also offset by many magnificent exceptions, especially in the world of evangelical parachurch movements and the world of evangelical colleges and seminaries. But excellent and exceptional though the latter are, their weakness is their intellectual, social and cultural distance from popular evangelicalism.

Whereas fundamentalism has largely retained its strong sense of social and theological cohesion, evangelicalism has developed so great a gap between its "elites" and its "masses" that it appears and acts as socially disjointed.

Short of revival and reformation, severe weaknesses like these are likely to prevent evangelicalism from making a constructive and enduring response to the present moment. Certain concluding questions sharpen the challenge now facing evangelicals.

*Who? Whom?* Lenin's famous question poses the central challenge to the evangelical community: Are evangelicals as "people of the Gospel" to be shaped radically by the Gospel, or are they as "the earliest and most American" religious community to be shaped more decisively by American culture?

*Will Evangelicals Be Evangelical To Others?* Evangelicalism, which is conspicuously lacking as a distinct and separate religious tradition, comes into its own as renewing force within the wider church and wider community. Will evangelicals lose their distinctiveness in seeking to protect it, or will they find it in sacrificing themselves to bring life to the wider church and peace and justice to the wider community?

*Will God Be God To Evangelicals?* If the American republic both requires metaphysical premises yet rejects any official statement of them, making its own enduring vitality a gamble on the dynamism of its "unofficial" faiths, evangelicalism pivots on the same promise and the same problem. One of the least self-derived and self-sustaining of all traditions, evangelicalism without living, personal faith is nothing. G.K. Chesterton's prophetic comment on the American republic can therefore be translated to apply aptly to American evangelicalism: "Freedom is the eagle, whose glory is gazing at the sun."

# North American Evangelical Missions: The Last 100 Years

by Marvin Bergman

Approximately 100 missions scholars and practitioners gathered on the campus of Wheaton College June 16-19, 1986, to assess "A Century of World Evangelization: North American Evangelical Missions, 1886-1986." According to the prospectus for the conference, "It is high time that scholars and practitioners of world missions give the missionary experience of the self-consciously evangelical party of American Protestantism the same careful scrutiny now being afforded to the old-line denominational endeavors."

In part, the conference represented an attempt to bring together scholars—especially religious and cultural historians—to promote a better understanding of the evangelical contribution to the American mission enterprise and its interaction with other cultures; this, in turn, can offer insight into the character of American Christianity and the values of American culture generally. But this kind of understanding can be just as valuable for those who are presently committed to the global mission of Christianity as it is for scholars. Again in the words of the prospectus, "the current concern to know intimately the various 'contexts' and 'situations' in which the Christian faith operates and is communicated can be enlightened by

examples from the past. 'Contextualization' of the Christian message can also be enhanced by a nuanced knowledge of the cultural heritage of the missionary."

Usually one expects the keynote addressed at conferences to be the highlights. Occasionally, as in this case, that expectation is rewarded. Andrew Walls, the director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, kicked off the conference in fine style on the first evening with his address, "The American Evangelical Factor in Twentieth Century Missions." He raised in a provocative way many of the issues that resurfaced throughout the conference. But his broad comparative perspective—both geographically and temporally—and his status as an outsider to the American scene helped bring some of those issues into sharper focus. Perhaps his major contribution was to assure evangelicals that as we move into a new era in missions history, we need not fear cultural determination; after all, when God became man, he became culturally determined man. And this relatively brief, remarkably successful, one-hundred-year period of missionary activity is just a small part of the long history of Christian expansion in which brief periods of cross-cultural exchange are always followed by long periods marked by the development of local forms of Christianity.

The other two keynote addresses dealt with shortcomings

---

Marvin Bergman is Acquisitions Editor at Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia.