

***The Chicago Declaration and the Problem of “Evangelical” Identity***  
[Tentative Title]

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**Preface**

In keeping with the conference theme, this paper was originally framed to deal with the question of what “evangelicals” might have to say about peace and peacemaking, through a thematic and historical analysis of the “Chicago Declaration.” When I began my research I presumed that the problematic term in the relationship “evangelicals and peace” would be the latter, but I found that the more interesting, and perhaps just as problematic, was the former. Now, to our subject . . .

**Introduction**

This morning I will be leading us through a discussion of the “Chicago Declaration,” which was originally published on November 25, 1973 under the title, “A Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern” [for purposes of our discussion, I will refer to this document as CD]. I was first made aware of this document while editing a festschrift for my theological mentor and friend, Donald Dayton, one of the participants in the Thanksgiving weekend conference that produced it. In his autobiographical response to the festschrift he mentioned the document and noted that, “This event has not received the attention it deserves; . . .”<sup>1</sup>—I took it as a sign, as any young assistant professor trying to figure out what to do after their dissertation would do!

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<sup>1</sup> Donald W. Dayton, “An Autobiographical Response,” in Christian T. Collins Winn (ed.), *From the Margins: A Celebration of the Theological Work of Donald W. Dayton* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2007), 412.

My interest grew upon reading the document. A quick read of the document reveals that it is a remarkably progressive statement of repentance and commitment. As one committed to a more progressive prophetic politics, I found this refreshing, especially as it had originated from the so-called “evangelical world.” The CD speaks prophetically against the individual and systemic causes of poverty, hunger, exploitation, oppression, religious nationalism, militarism, sexism, racism, and the ravages of unfettered global capitalism, and it calls the “Evangelical” community to reaffirm the claim of Christ on the whole of life and history. All this, in just 472 words! It is fair to say that the “Chicago Declaration” is simultaneously more elegant and more prophetic than the “Evangelical Manifesto” which has garnered some modest attention in recent days.

After an initial infatuation with the content of the document, however, my interest has shifted. I now find myself more interested in the history and politics surrounding the CD and what it says about the signifier “evangelical,” than in the actual content of the text. That is, what really makes the CD interesting to me at this point is the history behind and in front of the text. Or put in question format: 1) how was it that a relatively broad spectrum of participants and signatories within “evangelicalism” was able to come together to produce such a statement? And 2) why was the extraordinary vision expressed by the document realized only partially, if at all? The answer to the first question is rather simple; the answer to the second is extraordinarily complex. It is the second where I hope to focus our discussion today.

As a way of opening up our discussion I will provide a sketch of the basic narrative of the events that produced the CD, its subsequent reception and the collapse of the coalition that it represented. I will then turn to offer some observations on what the

CD and the events surrounding it tell us about the elusive descriptor “evangelical.” The CD could not produce a progressive, let alone, broad “evangelical” consensus on social engagement. It seems to me, that the problem of “evangelical identity” is at the root of that failure. Finally, I will offer some options for how to deal with the problem of “evangelical identity.”

### **A Surprising but Fragile Coalition: The World behind the Text**

“Some day American church historians may write that the most significant church-related event of 1973 took place last week at the YMCA Hotel on South Wabash.” This statement, originally published in the Chicago Sun-Times in December of 1973, is printed on the back of the Creation House edition of *The Chicago Declaration*. Ron Sider—the editor of the volume, primary architect of the CD and founder of Evangelicals for Social Action (1978)—cautiously embraced this assessment in the extended introduction he provides for that volume.<sup>2</sup> When looking at the list of those who signed the CD, one can see why.

Key figures like Carl F. H. Henry, Vernon Grounds, Paul Rees, and Frank Gaebelien, leading spokesmen from the first generation of neo-evangelicalism born in the 1940’s, can be found alongside younger radicals like Jim Wallis, Donald Dayton, John Alexander and Wes Michaelson. In addition, leading voices in the struggle for civil rights and evangelical feminism like John Perkins, William Pannell, Clarence Hilliard, Foy Valentine, Eunice Schatz, Sharon Gallagher and Nancy Hardesty are included with John Howard Yoder, Dale Brown, and Samuel Escobar, representatives of the peace-

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<sup>2</sup> “Introduction: An Historic Moment for Biblical Social Concern,” in Ronald J. Sider (ed.), *The Chicago Declaration* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1974), 11-42.

church tradition. To be fair, the list of signatories is a who's who of moderates, progressives and radicals, within the "evangelical" community. Nonetheless, with so many disparate agendas, the ability of these folks to produce a document like the CD raises the question: What made such a gathering possible?

Donald Dayton, writing in 2007, noted that the gathering was the result of a convergence of currents that were far greater than any shared vision of theological or social convictions. "It was remarkable that we were able to make a common statement, something that might not have been possible a year or two later or earlier."<sup>3</sup> With less historical distance, Sider argued that the conditions for such a coalition were provided by developments both external and internal to "evangelicalism." I will trace his narrative in what follows.

In the wider culture, the late 60's and early 70's was the era of civil rights, Black Power, the Black Panther movement, and a more intensified struggle against racism. It was the era of women's liberation, the Equal Rights Amendment and the fight to legalize abortion. This was also the period of the New Left political coalition, at its height in 1969-1970, whose chief concern was ending the Vietnam War.<sup>4</sup> Not to be forgotten, this was also the period of the Watergate scandal which was at a fever pitch by November 1973 when the Chicago meeting took place.<sup>5</sup> The social, political and cultural upheaval of this period was both unsettling and promising to many groups in the US, not the least

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<sup>3</sup> Dayton, "An Autobiographical Response," 413.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, some have argued that Sider, the principle organizer of the Chicago meeting, was looking for a way to make use of the mailing list developed by the 1972 "Evangelicals for McGovern Committee." To be clear, "Evangelicals for McGovern" ought to be understood more as an expression of resistance to Republican domination within "evangelical" circles, than as an enthusiastic expression of support for McGovern. That is, the stance of many of the participants looks more like "Evangelicals against Nixon" than "Evangelicals for McGovern."

<sup>5</sup> Paul Buhle, "New Left," in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 545-551.

young progressive “evangelicals.” Indeed, the momentous changes of this period had opened up the possibility that “evangelicals” might be freed from their traditionally conservative politics, freed, “from an automatic acceptance of traditional socio-political presuppositions.”<sup>6</sup> Singling out Watergate in particular, Sider argued that this episode had the potential for “evangelicals” to, “raise fundamental questions about the justice of the socioeconomic status quo.”<sup>7</sup>

It is fair to say that Sider and those that gathered at Chicago interpreted the transformation of American society that was underway as a major opportunity for Christians committed to the biblical themes of social justice. The question that appears to have driven many of them was did “evangelicals” have anything to offer to the current cultural crisis? Did “evangelicals” have a constructive role to play in the transformation?

This question was intensified given the perceived failure of mainline liberal theology and ecumenical cooperation. For Sider and others, mainline Christianity had withered and experienced significant decline in the face of the challenges of the 60’s and 70’s, and in this sad state of affairs had left a vacuum for credible Christian witness. In Sider’s view, it was a moral necessity for evangelicals to step into that vacuum. The transformation of the social and political context and the failure of so-called “liberal Christianity” combined to present “evangelicals” with an “historic opportunity” *and* obligation to help build a more just and equitable social and political order.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>7</sup> “Introduction,” 19.

<sup>8</sup> The appropriate response to this “historic” opportunity is to some extent different from the tone of other generations of “evangelicals.” In light of the rise of the Religious Right and its recent fall from grace, it seems worthwhile to quote Sider’s own intentions: “Our concern, of course, must not be power but rather faithfulness to God’s word. If our aim is to seize for the new evangelical majority the power, prestige and political influence formerly enjoyed by liberal churchmen in previous decades, then we deserve ignominious failure” (Ibid., 19).

At the very same time, there were also changes afoot in the smaller world of “evangelicalism” itself. A shift had occurred in “evangelical” thinking about Christian social engagement, discernible especially in the younger generation. On the question of social engagement, “evangelicals [were] beginning to transcend the unholy dichotomy of evangelism and social concern.”<sup>9</sup> A number of monographs bore evidence of the growing awareness among “evangelicals” that the gospel might actually have some thing to say about social and political problems. Among the more important were Timothy Smith’s *Revivalism and Social Reform* (originally published in 1957), Art Gish’s *The New Left and Christian Radicalism* (1970), Dale Brown’s *The Christian Revolutionary* (1971), David Moberg’s *The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern* (1972), John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) and Rich Mouw’s *Political Evangelism* (1973). Of equal significance was the founding of the radical journals *The Other Side* in 1965 [which had grown out of the civil rights journal *Freedom Now*] and the 1971 launch of *The Post-American* later to become *Sojourners*. In addition, there were a growing number of progressive ministries concerned with racial reconciliation, urban blight and poverty. For many observers of “evangelicalism,” this was evidence that, at least among a small cadre of intellectuals and activists, “a new wind was blowing” within “evangelicalism.”<sup>10</sup>

Of perhaps greater importance was the 1969 Minneapolis Congress on Evangelism where, according to *Time* magazine, “the nation’s evangelical churchmen boldly . . . challenged their churches to rejoin the battle for social reform,”<sup>11</sup> and “Key’73”, a mass evangelism campaign conducted by “evangelical” and mainline

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Friday, Sept. 19, 1969 [<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901470,00.html>].

churches, signaling a new era of cooperation.<sup>12</sup> These cooperative ventures indicated that the change among “evangelicals” was not only among the intellectuals and activists, but was also reaching into the pews of “evangelical” churches.

It was the combination of this smaller shift within “evangelical” circles, combined with the staggering changes in the culture at large that together produced the conditions for the Chicago meeting. These, in addition to the despair experienced by the younger more radical “evangelicals” in the wake of Nixon’s re-election,<sup>13</sup> were undoubtedly the historical catalyst that produced the Chicago meeting held in November 1973.<sup>14</sup>

Through informal conversations largely initiated by Ron Sider, a network of interested persons committed themselves to organizing a conference on “evangelical social concern.” The goals for the conference were to develop a theoretical framework for social engagement and provide concrete proposals for specific issues. However, in the background there also appears to have been an interest in creating as broad a coalition as possible. Thus, the small group of folks eventually expanded and the question of who to invite to the conference became an issue. Sider’s description of the rubric that the planning committee used to decide who should be invited deserves to be quoted at length:

The planning committee decided to limit participants to those who were “evangelical.” (Definitions are always slippery, but Harold Ockenga’s definition in *Christianity Today* is useful: An evangelical is one who believes, on the basis of the Bible, which is the inspired, authoritative Word of God and hence the norm for faith and practice, the basic doctrines of historic Christianity—the deity of

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<sup>12</sup> For an interesting discussion of the cooperation of mainline and “evangelical” churches on the question of evangelism see, Thomas C. Berg, “‘Proclaiming Together?’ Convergence and Divergences in Mainline and Evangelical Evangelism, 1945-1967,” *Religion and American Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Winter, 1995), 49-76.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 132.

<sup>14</sup> As Sider himself noted: “It was with deep awareness of the extent both of the opportunity and the obligation presented by this convergence of events that a group of evangelicals began to ponder the possibility of assembling a number of evangelical leaders to consult together and to seek the Lord for guidance. The Chicago Declaration was the result” (“Introduction,” 21).

Christ, the sinfulness of man, justification by faith alone through Christ's death on the Cross, regeneration.) It hoped to avoid just a token representation of evangelical blacks and women. It wanted to include both Northerners and Southerners, both evangelical elder statesmen and younger, more 'radical' evangelical voices.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Sider notes a conscious attempt on the part of organizers to invite "evangelical types" from the mainline churches. Nancy Hardesty points out, however, that the committee was looking for what might be called "credentialed evangelicals" (i.e., those who held degrees or recognized positions of leadership within the "evangelical" subculture), a descriptor that proved particularly difficult for women [and people of color?] who in general had been barred from positions of leadership in the predominately patriarchal [and racist?] sub-culture of "neo-evangelicalism."<sup>16</sup> Presumably the need for credentialed "evangelicals" reflected a desire to create broader consensus among the many constituencies within "evangelicalism."

The conference began on Friday, November 23 and ended on Sunday, November 25, 1973. According to Nancy Hardesty, the planning committee came with a four-page draft that "included lengthy paragraphs on racism, poverty, economic injustice, and militarism, but no mention of women at all."<sup>17</sup> There was also general dissatisfaction and frustration over the paragraphs on racism and militarism, which created further tension among the participants.<sup>18</sup> On Saturday morning, sub-committees worked on assigned

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>16</sup> Email correspondence, April 28, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy Hardesty, "Blessed the Waters That Rise and Fall to Rise Again," *EEWC Update: Newsletter of the Evangelical & Ecumenical Women's Caucus* [<http://www.eewc.com/Update/Summer2004Blessed1.htm>]; "Sexism appeared only tangentially in the four-page original draft of the declaration presented by the committee. Only after lengthy debate did the workshop accept the statement "We acknowledge that we have encouraged men to prideful domination and women to irresponsible passivity. So we call on both men and women to practice mutual submission and active discipleship" (Nancy Hardesty, "Reflection on the Chicago Declaration," in Ronald J. Sider (ed.), *The Chicago Declaration*, 123).

<sup>18</sup> "Introduction," 25-28.



paragraphs and issues, and by the afternoon new drafts were submitted for discussion and debate in a plenary session. After further debate, on Sunday morning, November 25, 1973, the CD was unanimously adopted. Unfortunately, there was no time left for discussion of concrete proposals. As Sider notes, though the conference had not achieved all of its goals, nonetheless, “. . . a theoretical foundation grounded in biblical faith had been laid . . . .”<sup>19</sup> Additional meetings were planned during which strategic and tactical proposals would be fleshed out on the basis of the adopted statement.

### **Reception and Collapse: The World in Front of the Text**

In general, the document was well received both by the wider press, and by the chief literary organ of “evangelicalism,” *Christianity Today*. Leighton Ford, then vice-president of the Billy Graham Association, Tom Skinner, a leading African American activist and Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield all enthusiastically identified with the document. Even the National Council of Churches wrote a response to the CD and established a dialogue with participants in the Chicago conference. Billy Graham and the National Association of Evangelicals, however, chose not to endorse the CD, though for different reasons.<sup>20</sup> The coolness of Graham and the NAE revealed that “evangelicals” were not of one mind on the question of Christian social engagement. The problem, however, ran far deeper than that. As would soon be revealed, it wasn’t just that the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> Supposedly Graham did not endorse because of the paragraph on women and the NAE was already moving in the direction of the “Religious Right” which was on the horizon.

More interestingly, in early 1974 the Christian Holiness Association chose to endorse the document, though with some reluctance. The reluctance was rooted not in a conservative apprehension, since most of the ecclesial traditions of the CHA had long been involved in issues of social justice. It was rooted in a sense of frustration that mainstream “evangelical” figures had finally come round to the very positions that CHA churches had been pursuing since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and were portraying themselves as cutting-edge progressives!

broader “evangelical” world was not of one mind, neither were the progressives and radicals.

The first sign of a fracturing among the CD signors appeared as early as 1974 with Carl Henry’s response to Richard Quebedeaux’s book *The Young Evangelicals*.<sup>21</sup> In this book, Quebedeaux had sketched out the emerging radical vision of the younger generation, as exemplified by the *Sojourners* community. As the title of his review indicated, however, Henry was alarmed by what he called a “revolt on the evangelical frontier.” Henry took issue with the new generation’s use of Marxist categories for social critique, with its interest in pacifism and socialism, with its openness to the broader ecumenical church, and its embrace of unsavory theological trends such as “neo-orthodoxy,” etc.

Jim Wallis responded to Henry in the pages of *Sojourners*, offering an olive branch of conciliation on theological questions, but refusing to give ground on political and social issues. He argued that, “The less than critical identification with the nation by many evangelicals is just not biblically responsible and could only be felt by those who are benefiting from the system instead of being victims of it. Young evangelicals are seeking to recover the meaning of being aliens and exiles who ‘sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.’”<sup>22</sup> This initial dust-up was a portent of things to come and in more ways than one, for the divisions within the coalition that had produced the CD were more than generational, they were theological and more specifically, ecclesiological. Over the course of the next 3 years this would become clear.

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<sup>21</sup> (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>22</sup> Excerpts from Quebedeaux’s book, Henry’s review, and Wallis’ response, can be found in the helpful volume, *Salt and Light: Evangelical Political Thought in Modern America*, ed. by A. Cerillo Jr. and M. W. Dempster (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 68-81.

After the original '73 meeting annual meetings were held in '74, '75 and '76, all devoted to developing strategies for “evangelical” engagement in social issues. What became clear during these meetings was that the theoretical basis of the “Chicago Declaration” did not provide a sufficient foundation for a common social witness. The problem was highlighted in a 1977 exchange between the more radical “evangelicals” associated with *Sojourners* and the moderate gradualists associated with the *Reformed Journal*. Or, put more forthrightly, between the Anabaptist and Reformed camps respectively.

Writing in the *Reformed Journal*, Isaac Rottenberg noted that the *Sojourners* crowd had given him the, “increasing impression that they find their common commitment in a biblical radicalism that has a close affinity with the historical position of the Radical Reformation. As a result, rather than providing a ‘home’ for a broad spectrum of biblical radicals, they tend to revive some of the major disputes of the Reformation era.”<sup>23</sup> Though I won’t rehearse the particulars here, as one committed to the Reformed vision, Rottenberg laid out his problems with the Anabaptist social-ethical tradition in the rest of the article with the ordinary charges of sectarianism and idealism.

Wallis, in turn, embraced the accusation that he was an Anabaptist—giving the obligatory nod to John Howard Yoder—and proceeded to launch a barrage at the Reformed tradition by claiming: “It could easily be said that it is the Calvinist tradition that is politically irresponsible—in failing to accept the political example and style of Jesus.”<sup>24</sup> Though by this point, the coalition of Chicago had disappeared, Nick Wolterstorff, editor at the time of the *Reformed Journal*, stepped in to offer an olive

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<sup>23</sup> “The Shape of the Church’s Social-Economic Witness,” in *Salt and Light*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> “What Does Washington Have to Say to Grand Rapids?” in *Salt and Light*, 96.

branch of sorts. However, though he sought to find a mediating solution, his response further confirms that the arguments between Wallis et al. and Rottenberg et al., were indeed another iteration of the longstanding argument between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions.<sup>25</sup>

### **What Does the Collapse of the Chicago Coalition tell us about “Evangelical” Identity?**

What does this theological and ecclesiological fight within “evangelicalism” tell us about “evangelicalism” itself? It tells us, as Nathan Hatch has argued, that “there is no such thing as evangelicalism.”<sup>26</sup> Or as Jon Stone has argued: “evangelicalism is a fiction.”<sup>27</sup> That is, the “evangelical” identity that purportedly was the theological foundation for the “Chicago Declaration” was unable ultimately to support a unified social witness because the actual theological and historical content of the signifier “evangelicalism” is contested.<sup>28</sup> It is fundamentally unstable, perhaps even without substance, and as such, those involved with CD almost instinctively turned to other, more substantial identities (i.e., ecclesial identities) in order to construct a social ethic. Donald

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<sup>25</sup> The earlier argument between Henry and Wallis had already led to a vigorous discussion within the Sojourners community about the viability of the term “evangelical.” Dayton purportedly drafted a memo that circulated within Sojourners circles, but which was also sent to Carl Henry and others involved in the Chicago meetings. This memo, in effect, marks the beginning of the interrogation of “evangelical” identity claims and historiography, for Dayton argued that, “the Sojourners vision was as different a vision of Christianity as might be found between confessional traditions” (“Autobiographical Response,” 413). The discussions led the Sojourners community to distance itself from the descriptor, at least for a while. This new found independence may account for the sharper tone of the response to Rottenberg when compared to Wallis’ earlier more conciliatory stance vis-à-vis Henry. Unfortunately, I have yet to locate a copy of Dayton’s memo. See Dayton, “Autobiographical Response,” 413-414.

<sup>26</sup> “Response to Carl F. H. Henry,” in K. S. Kantzer and C. F. H. Henry (eds.), *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 97.

<sup>27</sup> Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>28</sup> See Donald W. Dayton, “Some Doubts about the Usefulness of the Category ‘Evangelical,’” in D. W. Dayton and R. K. Johnston (eds.), *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 245-251.

Dayton has phrased it as follows: “As soon as one opens up the ethical questions, one is driven back to specific Christian traditions. One becomes a Lutheran, a Calvinist, a Catholic, and so forth, and these differences are more important than an un-definable vague ‘evangelical’ identity.”<sup>29</sup>

The thesis that “evangelicalism” is at best an “essentially contested concept” or at worst an “empty signifier,” has been fleshed out in the historiographical projects of various scholars.<sup>30</sup> What can be said historically is that contemporary “evangelicals” come from a post-fundamentalist movement centered originally in the northeastern US. Since the inception of that movement in the 1940’s, so-called “evangelicals” have been obsessed with their identity. As a coalition of individuals and institutions seeking to define itself over against Fundamentalism on the one hand, and liberal Protestantism on the other, the practice of boundary drawing has been a major hallmark of the “evangelical” intellectual project.<sup>31</sup> The key gesture in that project, evident very early on, was to identify “evangelicalism” with the classical Christian tradition, or more specifically Protestant Orthodoxy, as mediated to the American scene through the Princeton school. By so doing, people like Carl Henry, Harold Ockenga and E.J. Carnell could describe Fundamentalism as an aberration without simultaneously falling into

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<sup>29</sup> “An Autobiographical Response,” 413. The dynamic highlighted here by Dayton—i.e., the interconnection of historical identity, ecclesiology and social ethics—has received considerable attention in other contexts. See, for example, John Howard Yoder, “Why Ecclesiology Is Social Ethics: Gospel Ethics versus the Wider Wisdom,” in idem, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 102-126; and Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Donald W. Dayton, “‘The Search for the Historical Evangelicalism’: George Marsden’s History of Fuller Seminary as a Case Study,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 23, no. 1 (1993), 12-33; Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism*; and D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> This is the basic argument of Stone. See his, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism*, 23-49, 73-116.

liberalism.<sup>32</sup> They appropriated the classical Protestant tradition to create for themselves a path out of fundamentalism, but not into mainline Protestant Christianity.

As Dayton and others have shown, the historical and theological problem with this was that the vast majority of denominations and churches who eventually signed off on the “evangelical” project were actually historically rooted in ecclesiological traditions that were antithetical to Protestant Orthodoxy [Arminian Baptists and Free Churches, Wesleyan Holiness churches, Pentecostals, Methodists, the Black Church tradition, and Anabaptists], and many were in fact enemies of the Princeton theologians in particular.<sup>33</sup> This means that the historical narrative that formed the basis for “evangelical” identity and unity, certainly during the 1970’s, but even up until very recently, has been misleading at best.<sup>34</sup>

The identity meant to provide stability and theological cohesion to an otherwise disparate group of ecclesial and theological traditions was utterly incapable of such a task because of its naively fictional nature. What is surprising is that the narrative offered by that first generation persists in different guises not only on a popular level but even in scholarly circles.<sup>35</sup> It does not take a great deal of historical and theological sophistication to realize that the theological and ecclesiological differences between say,

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<sup>32</sup> See Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism*, 23-157 passim.

<sup>33</sup> See Dayton, “Some Doubts about the Usefulness of the Category ‘Evangelical,’” 245-251. The alliance between the Princeton theology and many of the traditions listed above did not originate in the 1940’s, nor did it occur in the 1920’s, which is often assumed. Rather, it began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was rooted not in concerns over “biblical inerrancy” or the “acids of modernity”, which is also often assumed, but was rooted in issues of eschatology and in particular, pre-millennial dispensationalism. For the definitive discussion of this, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>34</sup> One of the best examples of a “fictional” portrayal of “evangelical history” can be found in the recently reissued Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage: Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in T. Larsen and D. Trier (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-14. The narrative offered by Larsen is considerably more sophisticated than earlier iterations; however, there are still vestiges of the older genealogies at play in his essay.

Anabaptists, Puritan Congregationalists, and Pentecostals is far greater than their similarities, relatively speaking. That is, one is forced to ask how one might theologically and historically unite the multiple ecclesial and theological traditions that have been lumped together under the signifier “evangelical.” One might include, for instance, Anabaptist, Pietist, Black Church, Pentecostal, Baptist, Holiness, Orthodox Presbyterianism, and conservative Congregationalism among others, in such a list. With such disparate traditions in view, it becomes quite a challenge to find common theological convictions or a unifying historical narrative that will draw all of these groups together. What becomes apparent, are that the unifying marks (theological, historical, ecclesiological, etc.) that draw these traditions together are already deployed under the descriptors “Christian” and “Protestant”, leaving “evangelical” with no real descriptive work.

Nonetheless, significant attempts to theologically define “evangelicalism” have been offered, the most influential of which is David Bebbington’s four-fold description.<sup>36</sup> Bebbington argued that “evangelicals” are 1) Biblicist, 2) activist/evangelistic, 3) conversionist, and 4) crucicentrist. For our purposes, there is no point in unpacking these four descriptors, however, because they suffer from the very same problems that attended the debates over the “Chicago Declaration” and its implementation. Though the signors of the CD could agree on some basic affirmations, they could not agree on how to enact those affirmations because at base their agreement was more mirage than reality. That is, when they considered how they might engage the social problems of their day, signors imported theological and ecclesial convictions that were prior and more basic than their

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<sup>36</sup> See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-17.

so-called “evangelical” commitments. Likewise, Bebbington’s four theological characteristics are going to be inflected differently according to the ecclesial and theological tradition out of which one speaks about them. Anabaptists and Reformed Christians, for instance, do not necessarily mean the same thing by the term “crucicentrism.” Thus, even though Bebbington offers what appears to be a plausible definition, the material content of the component parts remains elusive and subject to more basic convictions.

### **Some Options for the Term “Evangelical”**

We are left to ask whether or not the descriptor “evangelical” is really useful anymore. If the term, as it has been defined up to now, is as descriptively useless as seems to be the case, should we continue to deploy it? There are three ways to respond to this question, and I offer these as a basis for discussion:

The first option is that we ought not to use the term at all. “Evangelical” is simply too elusive to be of any use, thus, we should be intellectually honest and for the sake of clarity, discard it. There is much to recommend this. I would, however, argue against it. My reason is primarily pragmatic: There are individuals, institutions, and networks who continue to subscribe to this label and who continue to view the more recent history that stretches back to the 1940’s as constitutive of their identity. That is, there continue to be a large number of people who call themselves “evangelical”, and more than that, continue to find ways of working together towards common or shared goals. Even if the term is conceptually flawed and difficult to pin down, there is still a living phenomenon that calls itself “evangelicalism.” Pragmatically speaking, it seems unfeasible to discard the term



while it is still in use and while there is, as yet, nothing to replace the common history (at least since the 1940's) that it is meant to denote. It seems to me, that at least for now, the descriptor is here to stay.

The second option is to continue defining the meaning of “evangelicalism” without much regard for actual historical reality. I would argue that this was the basic, though not necessarily conscious, orientation of many early “evangelical” scholars. That is, “evangelicalism” was what they needed it to be, a way out of Fundamentalism without lapsing into Protestant liberalism. In seeking this way out, the early spokesmen of “evangelicalism” constructed their identity without much regard for the actual historical reality that had produced the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism to which they appealed.

Understanding the “constructed” nature of “evangelical” identity presents us with a stark choice: do we continue to make “evangelicalism” what we need it to be? Though this option has some appeal, as we can construct “evangelicalism” in our own image, it seems to me that it is not only intellectually dishonest, but is finally corrosive. Such a procedure inevitably leads into definitional warfare, which is ultimately a game of power. In such a state of affairs, they who have the most power will decide what the definition will be.

One need only track the debates in the Evangelical Theological Society to see that this dynamic is very much a part of “evangelical” subculture.

The reception and subsequent collapse of the coalition that produced the Chicago Declaration illustrates that the signifier “evangelical” is deeply flawed. This, however, cannot be the final word as there are whole communities and institutions that self-consciously see themselves as “evangelical.” Thus, as a final option, I offer a variant of the second response: continue to utilize the descriptor “evangelical” but with more care

and attention to the actual historical and theological dynamics that produced it. I would suggest that the phenomenon and theology of the “new birth” as originating out of Pietism, with Puritan variations, should be the central theological tenet of such a historical and theological proposal. That is, if we are going to continue using the label “evangelicalism” in such a way that is consonant with its own origins and dynamics, then we need to see to begin to see “evangelicalism” in the light of its pietistic and puritan roots. Such a retelling of the narrative would not necessarily solve all of the problems we have highlighted. Nor would it necessarily produce widespread theological or ethical consensus within contemporary “evangelical” circles. But it would reconnect “evangelicalism” to those traditions and dynamics that actually produced it in the first place.

This need not mean mere repristination, but it would mean reconsidering how far, and in what way “evangelicalism” can be described, for instance, as simply “Protestant orthodoxy.”<sup>37</sup> It also means a shift of focus away from some of the concerns that have dogged “evangelicals” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and would open up new avenues both for scholarship and renewal. In terms of social ethics, such a re-definition would help not only to reconnect most of the constituencies in the contemporary “evangelical” world to their own internally coherent theological and historical dynamics, but also to rediscover the profoundly holistic and progressive social ethical vision that many of the early pietists and later holiness spokespeople developed. This is the task that faces the next generation of “evangelical” scholars.

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<sup>37</sup> Describing “evangelicalism” as simply “Protestant orthodoxy”—a commonplace among many scholars—can no longer be sustained in the light of studies such as W. R. Ward’s *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).