



Beverly Heights
Presbyterian
Church

scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

NOVEMBER 2021

WHAT'S NEXT?

REFLECTIONS

OF A LIFELONG

EVANGELICAL

By
Pastor
Emeritus
Rick
Wolling

I AM AN UNAPOLOGETIC EVANGELICAL!



Rick Wolling, the
“unapologetic
evangelical,” was
ordained by the
Presbytery of New
York City on July 13,
1975, when he was
24 years old.

IN MAY 1975, I
STOOD ON THE
FLOOR OF THE NEW
YORK CITY PRESBY-
TERY FOR MY ORAL
ORDINATION TRIAL.

As predicted, the chairman of the Candidates Committee, whom I had previously sparred with over my written statement of faith, rose and asked me the question I had been warned about.

“Mr. Wolling,” he said, “what would you say is your theological perspective?”

My pastor and sympathetic supporters had counseled and encouraged me to say nothing

that would jeopardize my ordination by the denomination’s most liberal presbytery.

With a quick glance at my pastor and my uncle, who was an elder commissioner to the meeting, I replied: “I am an unapologetic evangelical!” Some reacted to my answer with anger and voted not to ordain me.

Ten years later, in August 1985, I sat in the lounge of the Beverly Heights Presbyterian Church with the Pastoral Nominating Committee as it sought to fill a three-year vacancy in the senior pastor’s position.

“Pastor Wolling,” a committee member asked, “what would you say is your theological perspective?” With a quick glance at my wife Mary, who was present, I replied: “I am an unapologetic evangelical.” The reaction to my answer was one of joy and I was called to the position.

Now 46 years later, and asked that exact question, my answer would be the same. Sadly, the reaction to my answer on the part of some would be befuddlement. What is an evangelical? What does he mean?

And, perhaps more to the point: Why should anyone care?

The obvious answer is found in our denominational affiliation. We are a member of the *Evangelical Presbyterian Church*. Moreover, in our politically charged world where “evangelical” is a label of scorn by many who haven’t the foggiest idea what that term means, we, of all people, need to know what we are and, in my judgment, be proud of it.

When I identify as an evangelical, I claim a theological perspective founded on 10 biblically revealed truths (enumerated in the adjacent box).

However, to describe an *evangelical* is not the same as defining *evangelicalism*. Evangelicalism is much more than a gaggle of clergy and laity that believes the foundational doctrines as I and others assert them. In fact, an issue that faces us today is our inability to define just who we are and what we believe.

In December 1999, an article in *Christianity Today*, in its annual review of the state of evangelicalism, cited Billy Graham as saying, “We seem to be confused, bewildered, divided, and almost defeated in the face of the greatest opportunity and responsibility, possibly in the history of the church.” Sadly, that quote from Graham was uttered in 1955 when the magazine was founded.

And 66 years later are we still confused?

Loathe as I am to disagree with an icon of Graham’s stature, I think a careful review of 20th century church history yields a coherent story of the development of a movement, a theological perspective and an ethos that may honestly be called American Evangelicalism.

RICK’S 10 BIBLICALLY REVEALED

TRUTHS:

1. The inerrancy and infallibility of scripture.
2. The creation of all things by God out of nothing.
3. The virgin birth.
4. Original sin.
5. The deity of Christ.
6. The substitutionary death of Christ in payment of the penalty for man’s sin.
7. The bodily resurrection of Christ.
8. The need for personal conversion and commitment of one’s life to Jesus as Savior and Lord.
9. The second coming of Christ.
10. The remaking of the heavens and earth when Jesus comes again.

A BRIEF HISTORY



Between 1947 and 2005, the world renown evangelist Billy Graham conducted 417 crusades in 185 countries and territories on six continents, including this one which took place at the old Forbes Field in 1952. It was the first of his three Pittsburgh crusades; a second occurred in 1968 and a third in 1993.

Harold John Ockenga with Billy Graham.

EVANGELICALISM

IS NOT A NEW

PHENOMENON.

The word evangelical is taken from the Greek word *euangelion* – typically translated as “good news.” Strictly speaking, the term evangelical has been embraced by movements in the Christian church that date back to the Protestant Reformation and even before.

In America, evangelicalism finds its roots in 17th century Puritanism; in the 18th and 19th century revivals of the First and Second Great Awakenings; and in the Fundamentalist Movement of the early 20th century. Failing to understand this history is one of the causes of our current bewildering inability to know who evangelicals really are.

The most recent predecessor of American Evangelicalism was the Fundamentalist Movement, to which evangelicals owe a faithful, even tenacious embrace of the central tenants of Christianity.

When I was interviewed for the position of senior pastor of Beverly Heights, I was asked if I was a fundamentalist.

I replied, “Yes, except my eschatology is not dispensational premillennialism [I’m an amillennialist], I hold to a reformed versus an Arminian view of conversion, and, I’m generally a nice guy.” Following uneasy and somewhat confused laughter, the interview proceeded with no other questions about my theology.

Fundamentalism was a reaction to attempts by theological seminary professors and their graduated clergy as well as mainline denominations to accommodate Christianity to modern biblical studies known as higher criticism.

It was in 1919, at the time of the founding of the World Christian Fundamentalist Association, when William Laws coined the term “fundamentalist,” from its adherents who held to the fundamentals of the Christian religion as revealed in the Bible. Fundamentalists gradually became known for a strident and angry posture to those with whom they disagreed.

The history of fundamentalism includes the drama of the Modernist Controversy at Princeton Theological Seminary, the mainline Presbyterian church’s flagship school. The faculty there split over the hiring of newly minted PhDs from the European continent and their higher critical approach to scripture, which ultimately led to the establishment, near Philadelphia in 1929, of the bastion of Reformed Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary.

By the late 1940s, there arose a group of conservative church leaders who desired to be known more for what they embraced than what they were against.

This group was led by Harold John Ockenga (pronounced Ock-en-gay). He served as a pastoral assistant of Pittsburgh’s First Presbyterian Church, then pastor of Point Breeze Presbyterian Church here, before becoming the longtime pastor of Boston’s historic Park Street Church. A second leader was the group’s

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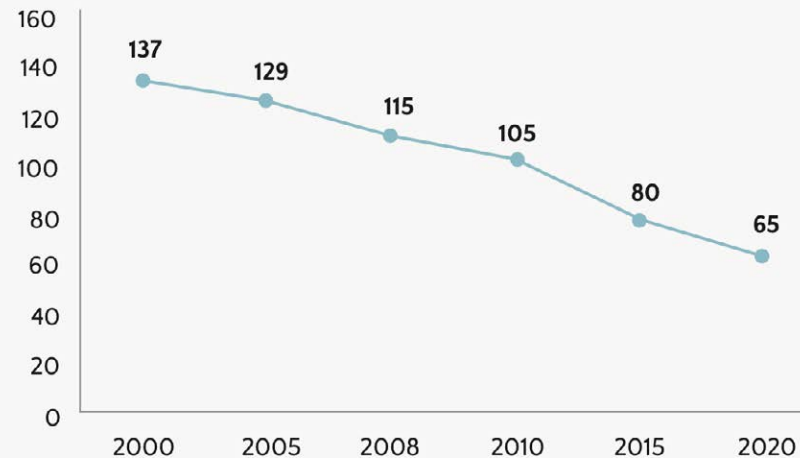
chief theological thinker, Carl F.H. Henry, who called for a “progressive fundamentalism” and a “new evangelicalism.”

The neo-evangelicals were concerned with addressing social concerns which they believed old style fundamentalists had ignored and with developing a literate, biblically robust theological foundation for the Christian faith in the 20th century.

Through successful crusades in Los Angeles in 1949 and Boston in 1950, Billy Graham, with the enthusiastic support and promotion of Ockenga, soon became identified as the icon of this new movement. With financial support provided by J. Howard Pew, owner of Sun Oil Company, modern American Evangelicalism was launched.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

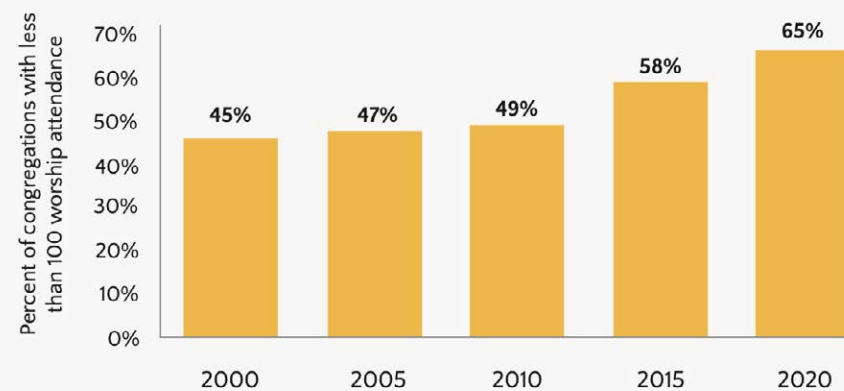
Declining Median Worship Attendance among US Congregations



Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Figure 6

Increasing Number of Small Congregations



Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Figure 7

WHEN THE HISTORY
OF AMERICAN
EVANGELICALISM IS
WRITTEN TO COVER
THE PERIOD OF MY
LIFE AND MINISTRY,
I THINK THERE
WILL BE A NUMBER
OF IMPORTANT
HIGHLIGHTS.

The progressive decline in sound, committed leadership comes to mind. Early in my life there was Ockenga, Henry, Graham and other luminaries. These were deeply spiritual men who also exhibited great leadership abilities.

I had the great privilege of attending Gordon-Conwell Seminary and worshiping at Park Street Church under the preaching of Ockenga. James I. Packer, with whom I studied, and Tim Keller, who was a fellow student with me in seminary, have all contributed significantly to my theological development.

Over the years, I've read almost everything James Montgomery Boice wrote. Boice was, for 30 years until his death in 2000, the pastor of Philadelphia's historic Tenth Presbyterian Church, and had great influence on my theology.

Where are the leaders of evangelicalism today? Boice is with the Lord as is Packer, Ockenga, Henry and Graham.

Who are the great preachers now? The great Bible expositors? Surely it is not Joel Osteen, Bill Hybels or Creflo Dollar.

Christianity Today was established as a periodical that Graham hoped would be "absolutely indispensable for every serious-minded Christian minister in America." I gave up reading it years ago – it's lost its way.

Where we are today is that the church, through a (possibly) unconscious yet wildly mistaken view, has come to believe that it has power to bring the kingdom of God to earth through political activism. This is where fundamentalism's Moral Majority went off the rails, in my view. The church's role is to give witness to the kingdom, not usher it in. Only Jesus Christ will do that.

That is not to suggest that Christians should refrain from political involvement. Many true evangelicals are engaged in their communities, particularly with regard to their children's education. This is as it should be. But I despair over the anger and snarling threats that flow from the mouths of those who from same mouth confess, "Jesus is Lord."

There's despair to be found, too, amid recent trends in church attendance, exacerbated no doubt by the Covid pandemic.

In a recent sermon, Pastor Nate cited disturbing statistics from the most recent report, "Twenty Years of Congregational Change," by Faith Communities Today.

On its face, the situation is grim with all faith communities

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(not just evangelical churches) witnessing a significant decrease in weekly worship attendance and a dramatic rise in the number of small congregations (see charts on the opposite page).

Preaching from Isaiah 10, Pastor Nate suggested that evangelical churches like Beverly Heights need to develop a “prophetic imagination,” a new vision for what a faithful, vibrant and effective church will look like in the coming years.

Not the “mighty army” of Onward Christian Soldiers but a smaller, scrappier squad of believers who know what God has done for them; how God has gifted them; what God is calling them to do; and who give themselves enthusiastically to worship, fellowship and evangelism through word and deed.

This is the call and work of the remnant.

THE PATH FORWARD

IN THIS MOMENT WHERE SO MUCH

SEEMS UNSETTLED AND DISORDERED,

WHAT ARE WE TO DO AS EVANGELICALS?

I suggest at least the following as a start.

The shrinking influence and strength of iconic evangelical leaders, institutions and associations may be just what evangelicalism needs. The “good news” is to be found in the bad news. It’s easy to be associated with a movement, an organization or denomination. It’s easy to hide in the numbers and the position papers and the demonstrations.

Evangelicals have, for too long, identified our personal influence, power, safety, participation and accomplishment through our association with those of American Evangelicalism’s brilliant leaders, successful campaigns and prominent institutions.

In biblical terms, we have put our faith in horses and chariots, and men with spears.

Evangelicalism’s God-enabled victories notwithstanding, it doesn’t take much courage to say, “I agree with them.”

What takes courage, and this is what we need – courage – is to know what we believe, know what we think, know what the Lord wants us to do and then do it, even and especially if we do it alone.

Organizations, associations, institutions and prominent leadership all have their places in the advancement of the kingdom of God.

But what is needed in our day is not just inspiring leaders but more devoted followers – disciples with a higher, deeper and broader personal commitment to what God is calling each of us to be and do.

For almost 30 years, our congregation has embraced a vision of the church as scattered 97% of the time and gathered 3% of the time. In this current moment, an evangelical church must be more focused than ever before on training, challenging, inspiring and caring for its members who live as the light, salt and leaven of the kingdom between Sundays.

Members of evangelical churches like ours must exhibit God-given courage to engage an unbelieving world with the only solution to the problems of this life and the only hope for the next life. That comes from exhibiting lives which radiate the truth and grace that incarnates the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ Whom we love and serve.

The courage to think, believe, speak and act is what living under the lordship of Jesus Christ is all about. It’s living the life that Christ died in order that we might have it.

Remember: you plus the Lord is always a majority. The kingdom of God is made up of small things and seemingly insignificant individuals. But the history of evangelicalism and indeed of the church in total is that the majority of one faithful individual, plus the Lord, can change the world.