

Evangelicalism vs. Evan-“Bell”-icalism

By REBECCA S. MAY

In a recent news article, “Love Wins” guru Rob Bell “came out” as a supporter of homosexuality and homosexual marriage. To the discerning, this comes as no surprise, since Bell abandoned the Bible as an authority years ago. The only surprise, here, is that this announcement has been so slow in coming. What is more interesting than Bell’s pro-homo stance is his opinion about the future of the evangelical Christian. Bell says,

I think we are witnessing the death of a particular subculture that doesn’t work. I think there is a very narrow, politically intertwined, culturally ghettoized, Evangelical subculture that was told ‘we’re gonna change the thing’ and they haven’t. And they actually have turned away lots of people. And I think that when you’re in a part of a subculture that is dying, you make a lot more noise because it’s very painful. You sort of die or you adapt. And if you adapt, it means you have to come face to face with some of the ways we’ve talked about God, which don’t actually shape people into more loving, compassionate people. And we have supported policies and ways of viewing the world that are actually destructive. And we’ve done it in the name of God and we need to repent (“Rob Bell Supports Same Sex Marriage,” *woodtv.com*).

Historically, to be “evangelical” means “being in agreement with the Christian gospel. Emphasizing salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, and the authority of Scripture” (*merriam-websters.com*). Thus, three of the necessary components to the label “evangelical” include: (1) the necessity of the Gospel (salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ), (2) the necessity of personal conversion, and (3) the necessity of the authority of Scripture.

William Tyndale was the first to publish the term *evangelical* in English in 1531. The earliest leaders of evangelical Christianity were preachers, like Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), John Wesley (1703-1791), and George Whitfield (1714-1770). These men were followed by missionaries, such as James Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), and evangelist and educator Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899). As we move into the twentieth century, we find evangelicals, like author A.W. Tozer (1897-1963), professor Merrill Unger (1909-1980), and apologist F. F. Bruce (1910-1990), as well as biblical scholars John Walvoord (1910-2002) and Bruce Metzger (1914-2007). Today, we see the same three necessary components of the evangelical label appeals to men like William Lane Craig, Norman Geisler, Wayne Grudem, Gary Habermas, J. P. Moreland, R.C. Sproul, Billy Graham, Chuck Swindoll, John MacArthur, and Charles Ryrie, just to name a few.

These men are who Bell calls the “culturally ghettoized”—a “ghetto” being “an impoverished, neglected, or otherwise disadvantaged residential area of a city, usually troubled by a disproportionately large amount of crime” (*urbandictionary.com*). They are, according to Bell, the leaders of a “narrow, politically intertwined subculture that has turned away a lot of people.” As Bell proclaims, these men’s “policies and ways of viewing the world are destructive.” And, according to Bell, these men and their followers need to repent.

Are Evangelicals Ghettoized?

Among the list of evangelicals are distinguished professors Merrill Unger (Ph.D. Johns Hopkins University); J.P. Moreland (Ph.D. University of Southern California); William Lane Craig (Ph.D. University

of Birmingham, England and University of Munich); as well as noted authors Norman Geisler (Ph.D. Loyola University), who has written more than 70 books on subjects ranging from apologetics, to theology, to logic; Bruce Metzger (Ph.D. in Greek from Princeton), who has produced five Bible translations and multiple Bible commentaries, including “The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance” (1997) and “Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament” (1994). For Bell to consider this level of scholarly fortitude and excellence “impoverished, neglected, or otherwise disadvantaged” is ignorance to the highest degree.

Are Evangelicals Politically Motivated?

In a letter to his sister Amelia, on February 14, 1860, Hudson Taylor wrote, “If I had a thousand pounds, China should have it—if I had a thousand lives, China should have them. No! Not China, but Christ. Can we do too much for Him? Can we do enough for such a precious Saviour?” Concerning Hudson Taylor, historian Ruth Tucker said, “No other missionary in the nineteen centuries since the Apostle Paul has had a wider vision of evangelizing than Hudson Taylor (“A Biographical History of Christian Missions,” 73). For Bell to accuse evangelicals, like Taylor, who gave their life for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as having “carried out the interest of a particular government or political party” is evidence of an unrivaled level of incomprehension.

Are Evangelicals Destructive?

Of D.L. Moody, F.B. Meyer said, “Mr. Moody was one of the humblest men I ever knew. He never spoke about himself, the people he had known, or the vast audiences he had addressed. He was simple and transparent, thinking of the pleasure and comforts of others.” Jonathan Edwards said, “I will live for God. If no one else will, I still will.” John Wesley said, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” Humility, undying commitment to God, and a heart to serve others are the characteristics of the evangelical Christian—certainly those are the attributes which are destructive only to Bell’s form of “Christianity.”

Are Evangelicals Narrow?

George Whitfield preached in the slave communities at his revivals. The response was so great that many historians consider it the beginning of African-American Christianity. Billy Graham is said to have preached the Gospel in person to more than 80 million people, including being the first Christian to teach the Bible in public behind the Iron Curtain. From popes to presidents, from streets to stadiums, Graham was “firmly established as the acknowledged standard-bearer for evangelical Christianity, a charismatic and catalytic figure who was able to gain the confidence and cooperation of a wide range of church leaders, often overcoming considerable initial resistance” (William Martin, “Billy Graham: A Workman that Needeth Not To Be Ashamed”). The evidence is overwhelming that evangelicals were neither historically nor are currently narrow in their mission or their outreach.

As individuals committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible, evangelicals are certainly narrow in the way commended by Christ, *For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life* (Matthew 7:14). When George Whitfield was speaking of the inefficiency of works to merit salvation, one listener recounted that Whitfield suddenly cried out in a tone of thunder, “Works! Works! A man gets to heaven by works! I would as soon think of climbing to the moon on a rope of sand!” (*christianhistory.net*). These evangelicals have contributed to the only life that is left of biblical Christianity. By laying a foundation of the Gospel and the authority of Scripture in their countless commentaries, universities, ministries, and churches, they have served the body of Christ, making disciples for

generations who, like them, are narrow, that is, unwavering in their commitment to Jesus Christ and His Word.

Bell, on the other hand, having been *led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ* (2 Corinthians 11:3-4) rejects the Gospel, rejects the need for conversion, and rejects the authority of the Bible. He preaches a different Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different Gospel. His message is fiercely popular and widely accepted, *for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction* (Matthew 7:13).

According to Bell, evangelicalism does not work. “Die or adapt” is the message Bell is offering to Christians. This may surprise you, but I agree. Sadly, the masses of Christianity are following Bell in rejection of these champions of historical evangelicalism. And Bell is right, if you want a socially acceptable form of Christianity, you must follow the secular cultural religious leaders like Bell or die. Daniel was given the same choice. Join the new religious movement or face the lions. Stephen, the first deacon, was faced with a choice as well—adapt or die. So *they went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord* (Acts 7:59). And let’s not forget Jesus, who, by simply adapting to Bell’s universalism and endorsing “what worked” for Satan and the Jews, He, too, could have avoided death and reigned over the kingdoms of the earth. But Jesus was never interested in what worked. He was concerned with what was right—things like the necessity of the authority of Scripture, *blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it* (Luke 11:28), the necessity of personal conversion, *I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish* (Luke 13:3), and the necessity of the Gospel, *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life* (John 3:16). And because He preached those things, evangelicals will continue to believe and teach those things. Should we repent, as Bell suggests? I’ll answer that question the same way Peter and John did, *Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge* (Acts 4:19).