

The Flaws of a Fad-Driven Church, Part 2

Scripture: Ephesians 4:14

Code: A281

Some of you are probably thinking: Shouldn't we be enthusiastic about the way the ranks of those who label themselves "evangelical" have swollen over the past fifty years? Isn't it a good thing evangelicals now have enough clout to help elect a president and be recognized by most of the secular media as a movement to be reckoned with?

Think about it: in the late 1970s, when Jimmy Carter became President and the secular media discovered the expression "born again," the average person in mainstream American culture didn't even know what an "evangelical" was. But evangelicalism has ballooned so much in size and visibility and political savvy that in February 2005, *Time* magazine did a feature photo-essay and cover article titled "[The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America](#)."

Here's why I don't think that's a particularly encouraging development: I *read* the *Time* magazine list of 25 influential evangelicals. That article by itself would have been enough to convince me the evangelical movement is in serious trouble. The list included people like T. D. Jakes, who denies the Trinity; former Lutheran-turned-Catholic priest Richard John Neuhaus; Joyce Meyer, the jet-setting charismatic prosperity-gospel preacherette; and Brian McLaren, the postmodern pastor who denies the authority of Scripture and wants to see the church make a radical break with just about everything that's rooted in historic Christianity.

Thirty years ago, not one of those people would have even been included in a list of "evangelicals." They are *not* evangelicals in the historic sense of the word. What's changed? It's not that more people became evangelicals, but that the concept of evangelicalism has been expanded to become all-inclusive. The word *evangelical* has lost its historic meaning. These days it means everything—and it therefore means nothing.

It's clear where *Time* magazine thinks evangelicalism's clout is being felt the most. It's not in spiritual matters, but in the realm of politics and culture. And you know what? They are right. The word *evangelical* used to describe a well-defined theological position. What made evangelicals distinct was their commitment to the authority of Scripture and the exclusivity of Christ. Now evangelicalism is a political movement, and its representatives hold a wide variety of theological beliefs—from Neuhaus's Roman Catholicism to Jakes's heretical Sabellianism, to Joyce Meyer's radical charismaticism, to Brian McLaren's anti-scriptural postmodernism. There's only one person in the entire list who would remotely qualify as an evangelical theologian, and that's J. I. Packer. But Packer himself has been on a quest for the past 20 years to make evangelicalism as broad as possible.

Frankly, **none** of these people I just named would even agree among themselves on any distinctive points of doctrine. They wouldn't even agree on the essential points of the gospel message. The one thing they *do* agree on is that they'd like to see the evangelical movement become as broad and inclusive as possible. But that's not really historical evangelicalism, is it? That kind of

latitudinarianism has always belonged to Socinians and Deists and modernists and theological liberals. It's antithetical to the historic principles of the evangelical movement.

But I'll get off my subject if I'm not careful. There's another common trait shared by many of the people on *Time* magazine's list of 25. For the most part, these are the fad makers. These are the people who have designed the programs that are peddled by the out-of-control Christian publishing industry and purchased and implemented with little critical thought or concern by hundreds of thousands of people in the evangelical movement. Rick Warren, who heads the list, is the father of the hottest prefabricated program of the moment, "Forty Days of Purpose." Tim LaHaye is co-author of the best-selling fad of all time—the "Left Behind" series. Packer and Neuhaus have been the prime movers in the ecumenical fad—probably the last bandwagon we would have expected evangelicals to jump aboard 20 years ago. Bill Hybels masterminded the "seeker-sensitive" fad. And McLaren took that to the next level with the "emergent church" fad. (Too bad for Bruce Wilkinson that *Time* magazine didn't do this piece several years ago when the "Jabez" fad was still hot, or he would have almost certainly made the list.)

Now, I have labeled all these trends and programs as "fads," because that is what they all are. They are popular for the moment, but they have nothing to do with historic evangelicalism or the biblical principles that made evangelicalism an important idea. Not one of these movements or programs even existed 35 years ago. Most of them would not have been dreamed of by evangelicals a generation ago. And, frankly, most of them will not last another generation. They will all eventually fade and die, just like the Jabez phenomenon. And some poor publisher or wholesale distributor will be left with warehouses full of Jabez junk, Weigh-Down Workshop paraphernalia, "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets, and Purpose-Driven merchandise (complete with the authorized trademark symbol).

Why has the recent culture of American evangelicalism been so susceptible to fads? Why are evangelical churches so keen to jump on every bandwagon? Why do our people so eagerly rush to buy the latest book, CD, or cheap bit of knockoff merchandise concocted by the marketing geniuses who have taken over the Christian publishing industry?

By the way, my background is publishing, and I love the historic influence Christian literature has made on the church. But the Christian Publishing industry has changed dramatically in recent years as Christian publishing has become big business. Companies once run by godly Christians, such as Zondervan, have been bought out by men like Rupert Murdoch and made part of huge secular publishing empires. And it has changed the face of Christian publishing. To a large degree, it is the publishing industry that fuels this bizarre hunger for more and more fads and programs.

And I have sat in meetings with publishers who have tried to convince John MacArthur to tone down his message, soften his hard stance on controversial issues, ignore things that are unpopular, and tell more funny stories. Publisher after publisher has tried to tell him he could broaden his audience and sell more books if he would just broaden his message a little. One publisher looked at some of his material—it was the series on the twelve apostles—they looked at it and told him, "It's just too biblical." I kid you not. They said it sounded too much like Sunday School material; they wanted more contemporary stories and hip language, and less Bible. That book was published anyway, without dumbing it down or removing a single Scripture reference. It was titled *Twelve Ordinary Men*, and despite the experts predictions, it stayed on the bestseller list for more than two years.

But that's how all these fads are crafted. They are deliberately dumbed down, made soft and generic and nonthreatening, so that they don't rebuke anyone's sin; they don't endanger anyone's shallowness; they don't threaten anyone's comfort zone; and they don't challenge anyone's worldliness. That's the way both the publishers and the people want it.

That is the culture the evangelical movement deliberately created when it bought the notion that religion is something to be sold to consumers like a commodity. It created an environment where unspiritual and unscrupulous men could easily make merchandise of the gospel. It conditioned people to be like "children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting." That's Ephesians 4:14, and it is a perfect biblical description of the faddism that has overtaken the evangelical movement in recent years.

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