

I. Intro

A. Today we focus on the Evangelical spiritual stream ... also called the Word-centered life

1. Like the Charismatic stream last week, this one can carry with it some mental baggage that people associate with the word "evangelical"

- a) If we were in a small group setting right now, I'd go around & ask each of you if you would identify yourself as an evangelical Christian
- b) I would guess that many of you would gladly do so ... some of you would emphatically say no ... and a lot would say that it depends on the situation or on what the questioner means by "evangelical"

2. Another way to start thinking about the evangelical spiritual stream is to ask what is the first word you associate in your mind with "evangelical"?

- a) Some of you might say things like "Bible-believing" or "missionary" or "outreach"
- b) Others might have some more skeptical associations, like "narrow-minded" or "tea party" or "prosperity gospel"

B. I can share a few particular experiences of my own associations with the word "evangelical" ... these have to do with events you might call revivals, or crusades:

1. As a child in the early 70's I witnessed the tail end of the revival ministries of a well-known Mennonite evangelist: Myron Augsburger, who I heard speak in Pryor, OK, at the annual sessions of the South Central Conference of the Mennonite Church



2. Also during those years I remember my parents sometimes tuning the TV in to hear national broadcasts of evangelistic crusades by Billy Graham, held in large American stadiums

3. A few years later, at age 15, I was living in Bolivia when my parents were serving with Mennonite Central Committee

- a) In Bolivia, any non-Catholic Christians were called "evangelical"
- b) As one who enjoyed singing and who interacted with various North American & Bolivian Christians, I found myself in a choir supporting an evangelistic crusade at the largest soccer stadium in the city of Santa Cruz
- c) The crusade was led by Argentine-born evangelist Luis Palau,

Text: 2 Cor. 5:17-20; Eph. 2:4-9

(Streams of Living Water: Evangelical) 2



who many considered the “Billy Graham of the Spanish-speaking world”

d) I remember wearing nice pants, a white shirt & tie and singing Spanish versions of songs like “Just as I am”, while people making new commitments to Christ streamed forward to talk with counselors

4. Those kinds of revivals are much less common today, but they are not only limited to 40 or 60 years ago ... some of you have your own memories locally of events bearing the strong fingerprints of this evangelical spiritual stream:

a) About a year and a half ago the Goshen community was abuzz with a series of large events called *Revive Indiana*, held @ Maple City Chapel



and in smaller groups of roving prayer teams.

b) Some at Waterford were quite critical of the particular practices & theology of this movement, while others thought it was the best thing to happen to Goshen in years.

c) I personally confess mixed feelings I had in both directions about this particular set of events, but I won't deny that many new & renewed commitments to Christ were made thru *Revive Indiana*

d) I would describe it as one example of a present-day expression of both the evangelical and charismatic traditions.

II. So there are many meanings people assign to that word “evangelical” ... **What do we mean by the Evangelical Spiritual Stream?**

A. **Foster’s most concise definition: “ A life founded upon the living Word of God, the written Word of God, and the proclaimed Word of God.”**

1. If this sounds confusing, it contains a triple understanding of that

3 common meanings of “Word of God”

- A person (Jesus Christ)
- A sacred book (The Bible)
- The present message God wants communicated

phrase “Word of God” ... 3 meanings

- a) Living Word of God is Jesus Christ, God's Son who lived, died, rose again and now lives among us through His Spirit active in our world ... So *Word of God = a person*
- b) Written Word of God refers to the Bible, which definitively tells us God's love story with the world, as interpreted by Jesus and the community of believers called the church, who carried forward the work of Jesus ... so *Word of God = a sacred book*
- c) And the ongoing message of the good news of Jesus, faithfully written & preached over course of 2K years ... THAT is the proclaimed Word of God ... So then *Word of God = the present message God wants communicated*

B. The life of the Evangelical Stream person is centered in all 3 of these

III. Strengths & perils of Evangelical Stream (4 each)

A. Strengths

1. The call to conversion/being "born again"

- a) This is the stream that has returned often to the invitation of Jesus to Nicodemus that he must be "born again"
- b) The call to conversion means that we avoid keeping Christ at a safe arms' length
- c) It means we don't merely agree in our minds with what Jesus says, but we push further to the level of a personal commitment of our hearts

2. Stress on missionary work of proclaiming Christ to the world

- a) Swiss theologian Emil Brunner summarized well what the nature of the church is to be: *The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.*
- b) This stream is the one that pushes back against the relativism of our time by asking, "If all religions are equally true, then why do we need mission, and in fact, why do we even bother with Jesus?"

3. Commitment to biblical fidelity

- a) The fact that churches today may even believe or practice the same things as churches did 1600 years ago ... That is a witness to the power of keeping the Bible as a constant criterion for testing for error
- b) Scripture has been a faithful record of God's holy history

4. Emphasizing significance of right belief

- a) Other spiritual streams will remind us that how we live and pray and treat our neighbors matters as much as exactly what we believe. While propositional truths are not everything, they are important.
- b) As humans we can never know the fullness of divine wisdom. In our finiteness, we still strive to think as rightly about God as possible.

B. Potential perils

1. Fixating on peripheral & nonessential matters

- a) Too many Xians and churches have parted ways over exactly when the so-called "rapture" may happen, or over how literally you should understand the history of the stories in Job.
- b) We need to be able to make crucial distinctions between doctrinal matters of primary importance & those of secondary importance
- c) As a rule of thumb, the closer the issue comes to the heart of the Christ event, the more it becomes of primary importance to our faith

2. A sectarian mentality, due to purity concerns

- a) Concerns over church purity can get way out of hand ...

From the legalism of groups that say "We won't associate with those Christians because then we'd be guilty of their sin"

To separations that border on acting like a cult, by saying, "WE are the only true church"

- b) If you're evangelical, you need to beware of just glibly following your own path & breaking with Christian history

3. Too limited a view of salvation found in Jesus Christ

- a) Unfortunately, some evangelicals essentially preach a salvation that is nothing more than punching your ticket to heaven while ignoring everything evil or unjust that happens here on earth
- b) A similar problem in some evangelical circles is an extremely individualistic salvation that basically says God only cares about our souls, so we can ignore larger social responsibilities as Xians
- c) When we call people to conversion & commitment, that call must extend out as well as down

4. Bible can become an idol or a weapon

- a) The name for this is bibliolatry ... when people value & proclaim the Bible more strongly than Jesus Christ
- b) When the Bible is used as a club or a weapon to harm or silence people, then it is not really pointing them to Jesus the Living Word of God
- c) While affirming a high view of Scripture, we must also remember that salvation is not found in The Book ... salvation is in Jesus Christ

IV. So after that overview of strengths & perils, **where does that leave us**, especially if we've come thru an Anabaptist tradition?

A. 2 weeks ago Cindy pointed out a heavy identification of the early Anabaptists with the Holiness stream

1. Last week I noted there was also strong influence of the Charismatic spiritual stream on the Anabaptist movement
2. Many of you here do identify strongly with this Evangelical Stream, while for others, not so much
3. But if you do not easily call yourself an evangelical, please don't make that claim because you think that Anabaptist & evangelical do not belong together
 - a) Nearly 500 years ago the Protestant Reformation was shaking up Western Europe, and Martin Luther was perhaps the most noteworthy Reformer from this spiritual stream
 - b) But the early Anabaptists were considered the real evangelists of the Protestant Reformation

The mainline Lutheran & Calvinist churches got more members by simply baptizing more babies, or expanding the territory they controlled (Hartshorn, p. 58-59)

But despite persecution, the Anabaptist movement grew because they couldn't stop talking about their faith, in their lives and often in their deaths as martyrs

B. Meanwhile the remarkable spread of Xian faith around the world, over the centuries & especially in the past 200 years, is largely because of people operating from this spiritual stream

1. Apostle Peter
2. Augustine of Hippo (passionate preacher & bishop)
3. John Wycliffe (English reformer & Bible translator)
4. Martin Luther (great Protestant reformer)
5. Dwight L Moody (19th Century revival preacher)
6. CS Lewis (20th Century Christian apologist)
7. Billy Graham (global evangelist)

V. Although all 6 spiritual streams find expressions in the Bible, the Bible itself could almost be one of the main figures we include in that list because the Bible is so central to this spirituality

A. I chose 2 sections from the epistles to the Corinthians and to the Ephesians because they capture some of the most central themes:

B. Ephesians 2 reminds us of a few very evangelical realities:

1. God loves us despite our sin & trespasses, so much that we are

offered new life through Jesus Christ ... that we too are effectively raised from the dead ... hallelujah!

2. One of the hallmark phrases of evangelical spirituality is "*By grace you have been saved*" ... & here it's repeated for emphasis: that salvation is God's gift to us, which we cannot earn by our own works

3. The salvation is God's free gift, but it requires us to accept that gift, and to stop working to try to earn it for ourselves

C. That action of God saving us by grace through Jesus is described in a particular way in 2 Corinthians 5, and then it is translated from God's action into a mission for us

1. This passage gives us in vv. 18 & 19 a valuable lens to understand what salvation means:

a) It says God reconciled us to himself through Christ (means a broken relationship was mended, made right)

b) But it wasn't only a few people God did this for ... also says in Christ God was reconciling the whole world to himself!

2. We can call God's salvation work a ministry of reconciliation, but that ministry doesn't stop when we as Xians have found our own reconciliation thru X:

a) Here's where the sense of mission comes in: God hands over that ministry of reconciliation to none other than ... US

b) We've been entrusted w/God's message of reconciliation (Wow!)

c) We are considered Christ's ambassadors to others in the world, as if God were making his appeal through us!

3. In other words, this ministry of reconciliation is not just a private train ticket to heaven that God hands to a few passengers ...

a) We are no longer mere passengers but we've been authorized to become conductors on that gospel train ...

b) I hear in 2 Cor. 5 that now WE're announcing this voyage and WE're calling out to others, "All aboard!"

VI. Before concluding, let's try to make this spiritual stream more practical for us: How can we practice it?

A. I'm reminded of an axiom I 1st heard at a church leaders' conference about 15 years ago

1. Most of us there already had college or seminary degrees. After we had heard inspiring stories & practical, challenging advice, the speaker baldly exposed the problem we often have when it comes to Xian education & faith formation:

2. He said: "*Most of us are educated far beyond our obedience.*" So here are 2 practical suggestions for us to live out this stream more in our lives ...

B. Get to know our Bible better

1. 2 years ago we launched our campaign of Year of the Bible ... I hope that the Bible reading and memorization many of you did helped Bible phrases and images begin to soak into your thinking

2. Richard Foster challenges us to go deeper and less superficially into our Bibles ...

a) he says an hour of Bible reading once a week is better than 10 minutes of Bible reading every day

b) I agree that this is true, but if some of you are thinking this is hopelessly out of touch in your busy life, then I would agree that shorter daily Bible readings are also much better than no Bible readings at all

C. Get to know those around us

1. Some of us live and work from morning to night only with other Christians ... sometimes only with other Mennonite Christians ...

a) Many of us have not a single non-Christian friend, and we live isolated from people of other religions or no religion at all

b) If I were to paraphrase what Foster and some mission-minded writers have said ... here's a painfully blunt truth: *Keeping strangers & neighbors at a distance is a good way for us to avoid spreading the Good News*

2. As we do get to know our neighbors and fellow citizens, let's keep this perspective in mind:

a) Do not confuse witnessing with "soul-winning" ...

b) Witnessing (with and without words) is our job. Winning souls is the Holy Spirit's job

VII. Conclusion: If you want a single phrase to help you remember this spiritual stream, let it be the title for this



message – a grace-filled Word

A. Again, just like "Word of God", this is simple yet has multiple

meanings for us:

1. The Word-centered life always starts with the grace-filled Word that is the living Word of God ... Jesus God's Son,

- a) Jesus was the very embodiment of grace in a human life
- b) This grace-filled Word is described to us in the very beginning of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (1:1)

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth. (1:14)

2. At another level, the Word-centered life revolves around the Word of God written ... the Bible. This, too, is a grace-filled Word because the Bible tells one extended story of God's loving grace to sinful undeserving people ... people like you & me.

3. Finally, the Word-centered life is evident in people whose very living and being is a grace-filled Word ... the proclaimed Word of God

- a) This happens when we are God's ministers of reconciliation, helping others to be reconciled to God
- b) It is this kind of grace-filled Word that I have in mind when I pray that classic prayer from Psalm 19:14 Please pray it with me: "May the words of my mouth & the meditation of my heart ...

Evangelical Spirituality:

*Found in the "grace-filled Word" of
Jesus (living)
the Bible (written)
our own lives (proclaimed)*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of
my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock
and my redeemer.*

Psalm 19:14