

11/07/09 - Evangelicals and Ethics

The following article was published by the German magazine 'idea' as part of a series of essays "Evangelicals ? who they really are" and has been translated by Dr. Richard McClary (Nuremberg)

(idea) Evangelicals represent the largest movement within Christianity after the Roman Catholic Church. Worldwide counts are that around 460 million Christians are included in the total of theological conservatives, the majority of which are members of Protestant national churches or free churches. In recent months the German press has for the most part published critical reports about Evangelicals. idea has asked well-known personalities in Germany to describe Evangelical theology and devoutness from their point of view. Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher, Rector of the Martin Bucer Seminary and one of the best-known Evangelical ethicists in Germany, reacts against a one-sided view of Evangelical ethics in the public sphere.

A Caricature

When the Green Party politician Volker Beck started a so-called 'small inquiry' in the German federal parliament into the 'Christival', a large evangelical youth convention, because of supposed workshops against abortion and homosexuality, one could have gotten the impression that Evangelicals are above all against abortion and practicing homosexuality. As a matter of fact, it had been a few years earlier that the then president of the Gnadauer Association, Kurt Heimbucher, in making reference to the large number of state assisted abortions, refused receipt of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. Aside from that, Evangelicals have at all times been against practicing homosexuality. But does being pro-family and pro-child, and being against any sort of premarital sex actually capture the ethics of the almost 500 million Evangelicals around the world?

The reality looks different. Such a one-sided picture of Evangelicals overlooks that it was the Evangelicals who brought about the first movement against slavery in England and in the USA. It was in this connection that the term 'Evangelical' was even first used in England. Such caricatures overlook that Evangelicals were at the forefront in the fight against racism, for example in India, and that at a time when most churches still celebrated the Lord's Supper separated according to caste. It overlooks that a conservative Evangelical theologian such as Peter Beyerhaus and

a youth movement such as the 'Young Christians' Offensive' (Offensive Junger Christen, or OJC) were massively engaged against apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s even though they rejected all violent forms of overthrowing the practice. A one-sided picture completely overlooks that in the 19th century the Evangelical Alliance was the first large religious movement worldwide that called for the right to freedom of religion, long before the large churches did this. In this connection they sent delegations to the Turkish Sultan and to the Russian Czar as well as to the rulers of their home countries.

Do the caricatures arouse the idea that the founder of the West German Evangelical Alliance (Westdeutsche Evangelische Allianz), Theodor Christlieb, took steps around the world against the devastating and so-called Indo-British opium trade between India and China, which included action all the way up to the British Parliament? Does one know that in a spectacular manner Christlieb had German and French Christians hug during the Franco-Prussian War and pleaded for peace, something that was decried as treason back at home? Does anyone have a clue that Evangelicals have always and up until today respectfully but critically opposed the state ? and not just since abortion, pornography and homosexuality have been liberalized? Does the caricature explain why the UN General Secretary recently praised the 'Micah Initiative' of the global alliance in New York, because it belongs to the largest supporters of the UN program to halve poverty and mobilize enormous efforts against poverty around the world ? aside from gigantic and respected aid organizations such as World Vision?

Ethics as Sanctification

For starters, ethics for Evangelicals is ? in the good tradition of pietism and the movements of awakening, but also in the tradition of reformed and charismatic awakenings ? 'sanctification.' Ethics means first of all that God in Christ forgives every sinner und that every individual can start a new life. For Evangelicals, ethics also means that every Christian sins and for that reason has to struggle for sanctification. Sanctification cannot be lived out of oneself; rather, every individual Christian lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. On account of this, every Evangelical ethic begins with self-critique, with the awareness that every Christian can think and act wrongly, and that only God can change something about that.

The connection between ethics and sanctification is demonstrated in the German Evangelical Alliance's 1972 confession of faith. It confesses "the divine inspiration of

the Holy Scripture, their complete reliability, and highest authority in all questions of faith. . ." It continues this sentence, however, by supplementing: ". . . and in the way life is conducted." The relationship to the Bible, which bears the testimony of Christ to us, comes to a head in life as it is lived out, as is stated in the central verses II Timothy 3:16-17. Furthermore, the confession refers "to the work of the Holy Spirit, which effects conversion and new birth in an individual, lives in the believer, and enables the believer to experience sanctification."

Therefore, for Evangelicals ethical action is an expression of their existence as Christians. It has to do with a "life of sanctification" by the Holy Spirit through the gracious action of God and his Spirit.

Evangelicals? Social Ethics

In addition to personal ethics, Evangelicals' social ethics are above all demonstrated in the topics of marriage and family as well as in work with children and youth. Starting from that point, the other fields of social ethics are defined. For this reason, Evangelicals always view the fight against poverty to mean a fight against family poverty and the neglect of women and children. The Bible calls for this all too clearly.

The free church element attracts attention to itself by emphasizing the right of children to freely choose when to be baptized and become members, a precondition of religious freedom. It also shapes the equal rights of lay people, which led early on to a situation among Evangelicals where women were active as missionaries and social reformers, and where locals were able to advance to positions as church leaders earlier than in other Western missionary organizations. The Evangelical movement feeds on pacifist and Baptist churches as well as on the rather state-supporting theology of Reformed churches.

A load-bearing element of the Evangelical social ethic is readily overlooked: the belief that conversion and awakening sets free enormous powers for change. Work around the world among alcoholics (e.g., the Blue Cross [das Blaue Kreuz]), drug addicts (e.g., Teen Challenge), and among inmates (e.g., the Black Cross [das Schwarze Kreuz], or Prison Fellowship International, the latter having been started by the Nixon advisor Charles Colson after his release from prison ? Colson had been convicted for his 'Watergate' involvement) makes it clear that every Saul ? a murderer ? can become a Paul.

Evangelicals on the Right and Left

The Evangelical movement feeds on many roots, and today it has enormous bandwidth. The reason for this lies in the fact that the priesthood of all believers and the reticence against centralized church structures are central elements found among Evangelicals. US Presidents Jimmy Carter und George W. Bush were personally shaped by experiences of Evangelical awakenings, and yet their politics could not have been more different.

Recently in *Welt* Till Stoldt alluded to the fact that there are not only Evangelicals who are right-leaning, but rather that there are 'left-leaning' Evangelicals who are, for instance, against the military and big business. This mirrors the worldwide situation, where one has important state-supporting Evangelical ethicists such as Wayne Grudem, Ken Gnanakan, P. Netha, and Mario Aviles. On the other side there are important 'Evangelical liberation theologians' such as Ron Sider, René Padilla, and Samuel Escobar.

This also applies similarly to Germany. The leading Evangelical Evangelist Ulrich Parzany was known as the leader of 'left-leaning Evangelical' Weigel House in Essen, Germany through the 'spiritual double-track' resolution. This was a step taken against NATO's double-track resolution regarding the stationing medium range ballistic missiles in Germany. On the other hand, other Evangelicals were completely in line with the government's actions and called for an arms build-up.

Another example also demonstrates the diversity of the movement: for many Evangelicals Evangelical private schools or even homeschooling is indispensable, while others become strongly involved with the idea of a Christian presence in state schools. On this issue no consensus is in sight.

In addition to the many Evangelical ethicists coming out of the tradition of Reformed churches – today, for example, coming out of Korea and South Africa – there are also 'dispensational ethicists' – nowadays coming out of Canada and India, for instance. However, if one compares my writings on ethics, which are based on Reformed and early church approaches, with those of Horst Afflerbach, who teaches at the leading Brethren church training center in Wiedenest, one will find in many areas a large amount of agreement.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The ethical strength of the worldwide Evangelical movement is solidarity exercised upon a common basis. It has a strong ability to mobilize, which originates with personal relationships. It is unmistakably active, and so much so, that intellectual reflection regarding it occasionally tends to take a back seat.

There are also weaknesses. Participants in the Evangelical movement conduct too little discourse among themselves ? it has only been for only about two years that ethicists, for instance, who teach at Evangelical training centers in German-speaking Europe, have been meeting to conduct annual exchanges at the Institute for Ethics and Values in Gießen, Germany. Specifically in light of the large denominational spectrum among Evangelicals, what is called for is that everyone not behave as though they alone read the Bible correctly, but rather that an open and honest conversation occurs.

With the exception of the USA, there is practically nothing invested in true research. Think tanks such as the International Institute for Religious Freedom or the Institute for Life and Family Sciences both date from recent times. There are still too many Evangelicals who oppose any kind of societal involvement whatsoever. The teaching of the 'prosperity gospel' has disastrous repercussions on ethical questions such as the fight against poverty or how to address crises.

Only in recent times has there been any success in what shaped the Evangelical Alliance in the 19th century: to participate in the creation of an international Christian ethic, for instance, through the 'Micah Initiative' of the World Evangelical Alliance or through the common formulation of an ethical codex for missions and human rights together with the World Council of Churches and the Vatican.

In terms of publishing there also remains much to do in Germany. At Hänssler Publishing a 'short and sweet' series has been released that covers societal topics such as the new lower class, climate change, the *Sharia*, the multi-cultural society, and eating disorders. At Brunnen Publishing the first volumes in an 'Ethics and Values' series have been released. Ethical handbooks authored by Georg Huntemann, Klaus Bockmühl, Horst Afflerbach, and Helmut Burkhardt can be mentioned, yet still too little has been done. In addition, there are a number of topics where there is a need to catch up, for instance in the areas of medical ethics, terminal care, or the abuse of religious power.



In summary, Evangelical ethics cannot be considered exhausted by the topics of abortion and homosexuality. On the contrary, Evangelicals, in their diversity and dissimilarity, have demonstrated a high level of societal involvement at all times. For them, faith in Christ is inseparably connected with 'right action.' What is missing is critical reflection and intellectual penetration with respect to ethics. However, the first steps have been taken. Therefore, one can hope that Evangelicals' ethical concerns will be presented by the press in a more differentiated manner in the future.