

## **TRENDS IN EVANGELICAL SOCIAL ACTIVISM**

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I am a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which means I am a Reformed, Biblical conservative. I am also a white man married to an African-American woman. I am a member of the Christian Community Development Association. I have been involved in urban, multi-ethnic churches and ministry since I was saved as a child. Over many years, I have seen various philosophical and theological trends and developments affect the different organizations and movements in which I have participated.

This article is an attempt to highlight, and maybe analyze, some of the trends I see in the part of the Christian community that is focused on urban, poverty, cross-cultural (ethnic and racial), justice, and community development issues.

### **BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

The evangelical social activists I am concerned about would still call themselves “Bible believers,” but their view of Scripture might not be consistently high, and I think some of them don’t realize that their interpretation of the Scriptures comes from a liberal interpretation of it and not a conservative one.

Please understand that these words, “conservative” and “liberal” are a bit different than the political meaning of these words. Some would consider me a social liberal in some things, while I would claim I am seeking to be consistently conservative in my interpretation of Scripture. My advocacy of justice and mercy are not driven by social liberal politics, but by a conservative reading of Jesus, the Torah, and the prophets. My hatred and resistance to racism doesn’t come from liberalism, Marxism, or current fads, but from the commandment to love my neighbor as myself and the Biblical injunction to hate evil.

So, when my brothers and sisters seem to pick and choose what Scripture they want to obey, or choose to ignore, then I see a failure to keep the Word of God in high regard. One of the marks of that failure is a very convenient way of interpreting Scripture culturally, so that the things that smack in the face of current philosophical and political trends, and cause a bit of generational embarrassment, are softened, ignored, or changed in their meaning. The most obvious examples fall in the realm of sexual-gender issues. It seems to be getting harder to tell the difference between a theological liberal and an intellectually sloppy Evangelical.

### **FEMINISM**

In the world of evangelical social activism, there are some who assume that everyone who is keeping socially and culturally current believes that women should be accepted as pastors and preachers, that this is progress, and that those who are opposed to it are not only failing to grow, but may actually be oppressors of women. The ordination and elevation of women preachers is not consigned to liberals alone, as some Pentecostal and prosperity preachers are women.

My participation in evangelical social activist circles becomes offensive to feminist adherents when I use male-focused language and imply that only men are preachers. Though they have little patience with my convictions, they seem to expect that I will support women preaching and participating in leadership in the events we commonly attend and support.

The trend I see at some events is a desire to have more women preachers. Sometimes, this whole area is fudged a bit by referring to a “plenary speaker.” I have no problem with women being plenary speakers; some of them have great things to say, and I need to learn from them. It is the assumption of the preaching office that causes concern. The problem is not women, the problem goes back to the interpretation of Scripture, and with a lack of consistency on that part, too, many things begin to shift in Biblical application.

I don’t see very much concern, by leaders in evangelical social action settings, for those of us who don’t really believe that women should be up there preaching. I believe they mistakenly think that justice for women requires this elevation of women, which conservatives believe God designed for men. The desire for gender diversity has sometimes trumped content. As with several of these trends, this tends to drive conservative believers away from participation as they seek other venues where they will not have this conflict. I am not sure if social activist Christians even know that there are many Christians who no longer attend their events.

### **EVANGELISM AND THE LOCAL CHURCH**

One of the things I don’t hear very often from evangelical social action folks is the necessity of conversion, which implies the necessity of evangelism, and the irreplaceable part the local church plays for true community and cultural change. Corresponding to those necessities, then, is an imperative to plant holistic, gospel-preaching, and Spirit-empowered, neighborhood-loving congregations in the communities of the poor.

In fact, one might misunderstand some of the economic community-development rhetoric and believe that God is already in the communities of the poor, that we need to listen to the poor and not tell them anything, and that by utilizing their assets and their own ideas they can change their own communities. Well, maybe it is not a misunderstanding; maybe this is what some evangelical social activists think. Of course, God is already among the poor. He is already everywhere. Yes, the poor have resources and they need to use their own assets and take ownership of their own development. Yes, many outside forces have coalesced to create poor communities, and they are not simply the result of the moral or immoral personal choices of the poor.

However, it is a denial of the gospel and the entire missionary history of the church to think that any individual or community, poor or otherwise, doesn’t need a spiritual conversion into a life of discipleship. It is also a denial of reality that those captured by their sins among the poor don’t need to be set free from them; that freedom cannot happen by social improvement. Does the preaching of the cross matter? If it does, then it doesn’t matter as a historical anachronism, as something we evangelicals used to do, or did once in a

neighborhood. The proclamation of the cross is as much needed today—for everyone, but especially among the poor—as it has ever been. The commission of Jesus is still in force. Any evangelical social activist who doesn't believe in the necessity of preaching the cross and the need for people to be saved is simply and only a social activist, but not truly an evangelical, and without the gospel, his or her social activism is inherently limited in power.

Can people socially, culturally, and economically change without believing the gospel message? Certainly they can. I don't think one has to be a Christian to stop being a drug addict, a gangster, or an alcoholic; though many have found deliverance from these things through Christ. One doesn't have to be a Christian to value education, finish school, and learn a good work ethic. One doesn't have to become a Christian to learn how to manage money and gain financial literacy, or to value marriage, or to raise children with love and boundaries. I think Christianity gives a person a great foundation, and reasons, to pursue such things, but these things don't require Christianity, and they are not the same as Christianity. This was the great mistake of 19<sup>th</sup>-century missions with their so-called Christian civilizing of the savage.

However, real character change cannot happen without the gospel. A real understanding of purpose and identity cannot happen without the gospel. An assurance of the forgiveness of one's sins cannot happen without the gospel. A hope of heaven cannot be real without the gospel. The power to love neighbors and even enemies, and to come together as a church community in love, cannot happen without the gospel. I don't want to give up either side of the challenge, that of preaching and believing the gospel, and that of holistic love that provides resources for communities to achieve justice and human flourishing.

### **ETHNIC JUSTICE VERSUS RECONCILIATION**

Another dynamic within evangelical social activist circles is the discussion of how we should deal with racism, with white privilege, and with institutions that wittingly or unwittingly support white advantage. This terminology is problematic. Proclaiming white supremacy as the enemy, with its historic horrific icons of the KKK, the Nazi party, and violence, without a differentiation between the average and often clueless white person who lives in the luxury of white privilege, produces misunderstanding and alienation.

The growing antagonism of people of color who have become frustrated with evangelical institutions and their slowness of change, or resistance to it, or the deafness of white evangelicals to the pain of those who continue to suffer the brunt of police brutality, profiling, over-policing, and mass incarceration has given a seeming new incentive for racial separation.

As the commission on race riots once pointed out, anger is often a symptom of improved conditions, due to heightened expectations married to a rising frustration. There is also a feeling of power, a self-confidence to not care for the feelings of those perceived as the problem. So language becomes more strident, declarations are made, and division is seen as acceptable. The reality and problem of racism in America has created a long history of division and separateness, sometimes by overt racism by white people, and sometimes by reactions

from people of color. The black church is a creation of white racism, at least if one remembers the story of Bishop Richard Allen and the African Methodist Episcopal church.

Many of these voices of frustration are not from people of color who grew up in segregated churches, but by many who have been reached, educated, mentored, and supported by white evangelical institutions and churches. They have experienced these institutions from the inside, even as these institutions were, in and by their conscious effort, trying to be less "white." Being too slow, too late, and still unaware of issues can make the evangelical experience hard to take; especially when evangelicals take political actions that seem monolithic while being racially obtuse if not hostile.

There are multi-ethnic churches which are mono-cultural, and some of them are identity- and culture-killers for minorities. Other multi-ethnic churches are more cross-cultural, where people are "becoming" like each other in culture, with majority folks becoming "slaves" to other peoples' groups to serve them. Discerning the difference between these kinds of churches is important. There are reconciliation heroes, and they have not wasted their lives. They will bear eternal fruit, and on earth they are seeing the Kingdom realized; which is what we all are supposed to be praying for in the Lord's Prayer.

The realization and actualization of love in a mixed-cultural community is hard, and cannot come without cost and sacrifice. It happens intentionally, by faith, and God's grace. I have found it worth every bit of effort, and wished all my brothers and sisters in Christ thought it so.

<https://randysrag.blogspot.com/2017/10/this-is-attempt-tohighlight-and-maybe.html>