

## **Prophetic Evangelicals: Toward a Politics of Hope**

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The American political establishment's fascination with evangelicals is entering its fourth decade. It began with Jimmy Carter's 1976 candidacy for the presidency and continued through George W. Bush's 2004 re-election. Indeed, no shortage of tools has been used to examine evangelicals. Sociologists have looked at demographics and political scientists have analyzed tactics, but they have all neglected one important element. To understand politically active evangelicals in all their diversity – from store-front-church Pentecostals to members of the established African-American churches to white suburbanites who attend mega-churches – you have to explore their theologies.<sup>1</sup>

Deep theological conviction is what drives evangelicals to political action. Nineteenth century evangelical abolitionists who fought against slavery and twentieth century evangelicals who fought for the lives of unborn babies were united in their desire to embody Jesus Christ's gospel of love and justice. While many Americans think of evangelicals as "otherworldly" militant conservatives, there has been another stream of "earthly" generous activists deeply engaged in the struggle for justice. This group of justice-seeking evangelicals I describe as "prophetic evangelicals."

In this essay, I define evangelicalism (Section I) and introduce prophetic evangelicalism, using "progressive" as a contrast term for understanding some of the basic theological logics of evangelicalism (Section II). Focusing on the issue of racial justice, I describe prophetic evangelicalism's roots in the abolition struggle in the context of antebellum revivalism (Section III) and describe evangelicals' ambivalent relationship with the Civil Rights struggle (Section IV). In the context of this historical background, I argue that prophetic evangelicals currently play a vital role in the emergence of a new moral center developing around issues of racial, economic and environmental justice (Section V). Throughout American history, when white evangelicals have been in solidarity with the African American freedom struggle they have most fully embodied prophetic Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws on my research for a book titled *Lion on the Loose: Jesus, Evangelicals and American Politics, 1996-2006* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming). Given American evangelicals' vigorous rise to political power, this book analyzes four different evangelical social movements during the period 1996-2006: Focus on the Family, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and Sojourners/Call to Renewal. Numerous conversations with many friends have informed this essay, but especially Bruce Ellis Benson, Carrie Brunken, Al Bunis, Eric Convey, Ian Doescher, Vernon M. Dougherty, Dale T. Irvin, Jonathan Jackson, and Amy Reynolds.

## I. Who are the Evangelicals?

You cannot turn on the television today or open the *New York Times* without meeting a new evangelical. From T.D. Jakes to President George W. Bush, evangelicals are ubiquitous in contemporary American life. Who are these passionate Protestant Christians and where did they come from?

Contemporary interest in evangelicals is driven in part by the concrete political power this group of conservative Christians wields. President George W. Bush is seen by many as a symbol of the new evangelical political establishment. A self-identified evangelical, Bush's religiosity has been well received among many evangelicals. Esther Kaplan writes, "Bush's religiosity is so widely embraced on the Christian right that when Pat Robertson resigned as president of the Christian Coalition at the end of 2001, American Values president Gary Bauer told the *Washington Post*, 'I think Robertson stepped down because the position has already been filled. [Bush] is that leader right now.'"<sup>2</sup>

Evangelicals provided an important swing vote in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, the foundation of the Karl Rove strategy. One recent Pew survey showed that 87% of "traditionalist" evangelicals (10.7 % of the adult population) voted for President Bush in the 2004 presidential election.<sup>3</sup> While many evangelicals voted for President Bush in the past two presidential elections, not all evangelicals have categorically embraced him and his domestic and foreign policies. What is clear is that the lion's share of evangelicals heartily agrees with Bush's "pro-life" stand on the controversial abortion issue, the "pro-life" position being a central plank in the platform of the Republican Party since 1980.

Evangelical politics experienced a political rebirth in the 1970s through the abortion issue. While *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973 received the quick attention of evangelicals, it was not until the disclosure of the number of abortions performed per year was over one million that evangelicals were galvanized for political action. Not only did evangelicals throughout the nation protest in front of abortion clinics, they also set up crisis pregnancy centers and developed extensive networks of adoption and support for mothers contemplating abortion. When pro-life evangelicals migrated to the Republican Party in droves in 1980, they began to play an important role in the ascendancy of Republican politics that has continued to the

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<sup>2</sup> Esther Kaplan, *With God on Their Side: How Christian Fundamentalists Trampled Science, Policy, and Democracy in George W. Bush's White House* (New York: New Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, Post-Election Sample (N=2730, November-December 2004, University of Akron), as cited by John C. Green, "How the Faithful Voted: Religious Communities and the Presidential Vote in 2004," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, University of Akron.

present. Largely through the politics of the “traditional family” focused on the abortion issue, we have seen a growing identification between evangelicals and the Republican Party, an alliance that evangelical historian Randall Balmer calls “blasphemous.”<sup>4</sup>

American evangelicalism is more complex than contemporary recent historical and political accountings would often like us to think. The U.S. media frequently equate evangelicalism with the religious right. The left wing blogosphere, and sometimes the mainstream media, stereotype evangelicals as zealous Republican evangelists who want to reclaim a Christian America. This caricatured accounting of evangelicalism fails to differentiate the Religious Right (e.g., Jerry Falwell, Ralph Reed, and Pat Robertson) from more justice-oriented evangelicals (e.g., Tony Campolo, William Dyrness, David Gushee, Richard Mouw, Ron Sider, Glenn Stassen, and Jim Wallis). This latter group I term “prophetic evangelicals.” A thoughtful analysis of the history of American evangelicalism and its current political manifestation shows that prophetic evangelicals today represent a consistent, albeit sometimes a minority, stream of evangelicalism committed to social justice that dates back to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They, too, are evangelicals. How is that possible?

British historian David Bebbington identifies four distinctive features of evangelical faith and practice: 1) a conversion to Jesus Christ, 2) a view in which the Bible is the ultimate religious authority, 3) an activism expressed through evangelism and social witness, and 4) an emphasis on Jesus’ death on the cross and bodily resurrection from the dead.<sup>5</sup> Bebbington’s definition has become a standard in the field of American religious history and provides the basic theological parameters for understanding transatlantic evangelicalism. Bebbington’s definition is satisfactory only in the abstract; it is inadequate to the extent that it ignores the varied historical, cultural and political contexts within which evangelicalism has flourished. A fuller account of the evangelical movement would take into consideration the different ways that the theological themes Bebbington identifies are deployed to further political ends. In order to understand prophetic evangelicalism in America, it is necessary to take account of different pockets of American culture, including their histories.

Many historians argue that in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, all Protestant Christians in America were broadly evangelical.<sup>6</sup> Slavery in the antebellum South became the decisive issue that divided evangelicalism in half. Evangelicals who argued for slavery

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<sup>4</sup> Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical’s Lament* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 2-19.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003).

and those who argued against it both appealed to the same bible to forge their arguments. Slavery became a hermeneutical, theological and ethical dilemma for evangelicalism of the greatest proportion. Prophetic evangelicalism has its historic roots in the abolition struggle against slavery. Its ancestors are people like Jonathan Blanchard, the founder of Wheaton College, Charles G. Finney, the father of modern revivalism, Asa Mahan, the first president of Oberlin College, and numerous others—particularly leaders of American Methodism, who are discussed at more length below.

## **II. Prophetic Evangelicals**

Prophetic evangelicals today continue the 19<sup>th</sup> century radical tradition. True to these roots, they are concerned with “a whole ethic of life,” one that includes addressing racism, poverty, and militarism, and more adequately meeting our needs in education, health care, AIDS, and the environment, among other issues. In all of their struggles for justice, prophetic evangelicals persistently bear witness to the gospel. They are bible-believing, Christ-centered ambassadors for justice. For prophetic evangelicals the call to world evangelism and the call to embody an ethic of global justice go hand-in-hand. The Word of God finds its fulfillment in the concrete work of loving the neighbor. Prophetic evangelicals are honest about past failures to be on the side of justice at important junctures in American history. As we shall note below, the Civil Rights movement is one moment that many white evangelicals chose to sit on the sideline. Repenting for these sins of omission, prophetic evangelicals seek now to march ahead, bearing gospel witness at the sites of the most intractable injustice. What distinguishes them from other forms of evangelicalism is their distinct commitment to the struggle for peace and justice, both in this country and in the world.

The struggle for justice is the one reason that prophetic evangelicalism is, or always seeks to be, prophetic. Hermeneutics is the beginning of evangelical politics. Since evangelicals believe that the bible is their ultimate authority, evangelical politics will always be biblical politics. But the key to interpreting the biblical text, according to prophetic evangelicals, is the Christian obligation to apply Scripture to all dimensions of our contemporary context, including its political and economic realities. This way of interpreting the sacred past is central to biblical prophecy and the prophetic tradition.

Prophecy is a prominent genre in the biblical literature and a theme that spans the breadth of redemptive history. Prophecy is the very word of God that is shared with God’s people through a messenger called a prophet (*nabi*). An act of prophecy always begins with

God. God is the source, the sustenance, and the future of the prophetic word. The prophet's words are vital because they provide a discursive medium to reconnect people of God with their creator.

Prophecy has always played an important role in the apocalyptic imagination of American evangelicals. Typically, however, the evangelical emphasis on prophecy is connected to Christology. Evangelicals focus their understanding of prophecy around predictions of the coming Messiah, a focus that is representative of their Christocentric hermeneutic habit. When evangelicals interpret the bible it is often through the lens of Jesus Christ. While other Christian traditions may use alternate hermeneutical strategies, evangelicals time and time again come back to "the words in red," the words spoken by Jesus Christ. Since Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised by the Hebrew prophets, the "prophetic" motif fits the biblical and Christological parameters of the evangelical imagination.

In summary, prophetic evangelicalism more accurately describes the form that evangelical politics takes since it is fundamentally biblical politics. American evangelicals, like the magisterial Reformers, see the bible as their sole source of faith and practice. They frame their contemporary political action with the background of redemptive history. Jesus Christ's teaching, life, and redemptive death and resurrection become the animating locus of social engagement in the world. Prophetic evangelicals are committed to world evangelization, but see robust social witness as another vital form of evangelical testimony.

Since this essay is written for *Progressive Christian Witness*, we will take a moment to explain why "prophetic" is a better designation than "progressive" for this band of justice-making evangelicals. It is not simply that evangelicals prefer the term "prophetic" because it is more biblical and more Christocentric; it also reflects a different philosophy of history than does the term "progressive." The evangelical's allergic reaction to the term "progressive" is in part due to its etymology—its deployment in Marxist discourse to designate being on the right side of the French Revolution.<sup>7</sup> In this system, any given political agent either flows out of this liberation struggle for "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*" as a "progressive" or conservatively reacts against it as a "reactionary." Adopting a Hegelian notion of human history including an inevitable dynamic toward progress as driving the historic process, many early Marxist historians viewed history as moving in one direction (toward socialism). Given this historic trajectory, political agents and collectives need to fall in line with history's flow toward

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<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Dale T. Irvin for suggesting the etymology of the term progressive in Marxist discourse as a way of exposing reasons for which many evangelicals find the term problematic.

economic democracy. While the Marxist theoretical background of the term “progressive” does not exhaust the term’s multiple sources, it has enough of an effective history to be uninviting to most evangelicals. In the context of Marxist thought in general there are at least two reasons this is the case: atheism and socialist economics.

Evangelical’s initial concern with the term “progressive” is the atheist underpinning of Marx’s thought. Much of the evangelical apologetic struggle in the twentieth century was spent in focused defense of biblical theism against its atheist detractors. In Marx’s thought, religion is part of the problem with political economy. It is a part of the old regime that needs to be shed like the skin off of the back of a snake. Scientific and economic facility and skill are what are critical for humanity to progress, while religion is an “opiate of the people” precisely because it hinders this greater societal progress. Marx would interpret contemporary evangelical religiosity as the last gasp of air for a religion that is withering quickly as a tree in an eternal desert. For evangelicals, the “Judeo-Christian” heritage provides God’s moral law and Jesus’ ethical example to provide a common moral center for the ordering of society.

Evangelicals’ second concern with the term “progressive” is the utopian aspirations of socialist economics. While the French Revolution was primarily a project in political liberation, Marx applied aspects of the revolutionary project to economic liberation. As this conjunction of politics and economics would develop within Marxist analysis, one was “progressive” if working for economic democracy while “reactionaries” supported free-market capitalism. While Marx saw history as moving toward socialism, evangelicals saw history moving toward the second coming of Jesus Christ. While an evangelical ethic may include cooperative forms of community, it does not see socialism as a necessary economic system or the end of history. Evangelical concern with socialist economics has to do in part with a robust doctrine of sin that casts suspicion on historic attempts to “hold all things in common,” thus pushing evangelicals more toward a defense of personal property and the creativity necessary in a free-enterprise culture to fuel economic growth.

Evangelicals’ concern with the threat of atheism and the false idealism of socialist economics was exacerbated with the escalation of the Cold War. Atheism and Communism often became identified with each other in the evangelical imagination, particularly in the fundamentalist flank. The communist threat abroad and the liberal threat at home put many evangelicals on the defensive, inspiring them to fight more heartily in defending the gospel and the American way of life.

As a result of these problems with labeling evangelicals as progressive, I suggest using prophetic discourse as a framework for developing and proclaiming a Christian alternative to the Christian right. The language of prophecy is biblical, Christocentric and activist, capturing the spirit of those evangelicals who are committed to lives of justice-seeking and peacemaking. Further, it makes possible all that a “progressive” Christian witness today seeks to claim, without the unfortunate inheritance of Marxist progressivism.

But what is the future of prophetic evangelicalism? What can be learned about its potential power from the successes and failures of evangelicalism’s past? In what follows in this essay, I would like to focus on prophetic evangelicals’ engagement of racial justice in the abolition movement, the Civil Rights movement, and in new coalitional movements for justice. I am particularly interested in how white evangelicals in the North and South responded to African Americans at moments of crisis and why. My thesis is that white evangelicals maintained their prophetic character when they were in solidarity with the freedom struggles of African Americans and lost their prophetic character as they refused to participate in these movements for racial justice. If this thesis is sustained, it may contain lessons not only for evangelicals, but for all Christians who seek to provide a prophetic witness today.

### **III. Evangelicals, Revivalism and Abolition**

Evangelicalism of all varieties has roots in the trans-Atlantic revivalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is often referred to as “classical evangelicalism” and emphasizes the conversionist and pietistic strands of American evangelicalism. While much of colonial America bore a Calvinist and Puritan imprint, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries’ revivalism and radical reform is better characterized as Methodist. Wesleyan doctrines of sanctification were often applied both to personal piety as well as societal transformation. With the free-will orientation of Arminian forms of Methodism and a postmillennial eschatology, 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicals were often engaged in ministries of social transformation, including the struggle to abolish slavery, one of the great founts of the prophetic evangelical social ethic.<sup>8</sup>

A significant cross-fertilization occurred between white and black evangelicals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both shaped by streams of antebellum revivalism. Revivals created a new religious landscape for whites and African Americans to meet on equal footing. Through the great revival meetings many individuals, regardless of race and ethnicity, were brought to

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957); Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

faith in Jesus Christ. John Wesley and George Whitefield arrived in the South during the late 1730s. Meeting his first black slave on August 1, 1736, John Wesley quickly began to share his faith with African Americans. When George Whitfield came ashore in the Carolinas in 1738 African Americans converted in droves. As a result of these conversions, a strong African American Protestant presence emerged in the lower South and Mid-Atlantic States.

At points, revival meetings functioned as a new space for racial reconciliation. At their best, revivals would often provide positive consequences, including blacks and whites worshipping together, some white slave owners letting their slaves go, and other white slave owners beginning to treat their slaves more humanely.

Within the revivalist ethos there were moments of near equality. Mechal Sobel writes, "Virtually all eighteenth-century Baptist and Methodist churches were mixed churches, in which blacks sometimes preached to whites and in which whites and blacks witnessed together, shouted together, and shared ecstatic experiences at 'dry' and wet christenings, meetings and burials."<sup>9</sup> Revivals provided African Americans both with a message of equality before God and a physical space where they were free to express themselves through singing, shaking, running, dancing, chanting and shouting.

Revivalism provided a new space outside the rigid hierarchies of the plantation for African Americans to sing and dance and express themselves in the rituals and cultural forms of their African past. It also provided an opportunity for many African American men to preach. For example, Harry Hosier, nicknamed "Black Harry," preached on the circuit with Francis Asbury and audiences along the revivalist journeys consistently preferred Hosier's passionate preaching to Asbury's staid sermons. Thus, revivalism provided a place where African Americans could bring contemporary expression to their ancient African past as well as be empowered to minister to blacks and whites.

Revivals created a space for blacks and whites to express their spirituality in an interracial communion. In the context of these revivals, there was also freedom of emotional expression. As whites and blacks were free to express themselves bodily and emotionally in the context of revival meetings, a process of mutual mimicking emerged that becomes a metaphor for present multicultural hybridity within evangelicalism.

In the context of interracial communion that flowed from American revivalism at its best, a growing group of white and black abolitionists emerged. American abolitionism took great inspiration from the abolition movement in Britain. Beginning with a meeting of twelve

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<sup>9</sup> Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1987) 180.

abolitionists in London, the anti-slavery movement in Britain culminated in the British Parliament's voting for slave emancipation in 1833.<sup>10</sup>

During the period of 1840-1860, the "new measures" revivalism of evangelists like Jacob Knapp, Timothy Weld and Charles G. Finney often led to radical abolition efforts in the North. Preachers in the Oberlin school led by Finney sought a higher life of entire sanctification that also had a strong social dimension. Timothy Weld's passionate preaching was a fascinating synthesis of revivalism and reform, as he would use altar calls at the end of services to enlist Christians for the abolition movement.

Phoebe Palmer, a popular woman evangelist who focused on an experience of "perfect" love, joined the Oberlin preachers in promoting a more socially engaged Wesleyanism. Jonathan Blanchard, the first president of Wheaton College founded in Wheaton, Illinois in 1860, joined the Wesleyan abolition struggle from his base in the Chicago metro area. While the evangelical abolition movement had more numeric strength in the North, it also had a faithful, but smaller remnant in the South. Those evangelicals, black and white, who joined the struggle for the abolition of slavery, are the freedom-fighting forebears of prophetic evangelicals.

#### IV. Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement

As evangelicals moved into the twentieth century, the broader struggle for social justice often became narrowed to matters of personal morality, like drinking, dancing, smoking and cursing. This fundamentalist focus on personal morality was exacerbated by other factors that marked early twentieth century evangelicalism: cultural isolationism, a pre-millennial dispensational eschatology and anti-intellectualism. Overcoming this fundamentalist retrenchment was the primary theological task of mid-twentieth century evangelicals.

In the 1940s a new socially conscious neo-evangelicalism emerged from fundamentalism as an ecumenical coalition after World War II.<sup>11</sup> This new movement quickly institutionalized: through the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, through the founding of Fuller Seminary in 1947, and through the establishment of *Christianity Today* in 1956. The crusades of Billy Graham, including his New York crusade in 1957 that reached out beyond his fundamentalist base to the New York Council of Churches,

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<sup>10</sup> See Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (New York: Houghton Mifflin/Harper, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2006).

were also critical to its formation. Neo-evangelicals like Carl F.H. Henry and Harold John Ockenga sought to hold on to the primary theological convictions of the fundamentalists, while enlarging the vision to include cultural engagement, political activism and social transformation.

In 1947 Carl Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* was a splash of cold water in the faces of evangelicals. Henry's "uneasy conscience" was a loud wake up call to evangelicals to come out from their cultural isolation and join the struggle for broader social transformation.<sup>12</sup> Henry called evangelicals to confront specific political issues of the day, including "aggressive warfare, racial hatred and intolerance, the liquor traffic, and exploitation of labor and management."<sup>13</sup> In addition to taking up the lead issue of "liquor traffic" that drove the Prohibition movement, Henry also challenged evangelicals to work for racial justice, economic justice and international peace. Rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolition struggle, this broader evangelical social ethic represented an important paradigm shift in evangelical social action.

Henry began his editorship of *Christianity Today* with hopes of a courageous evangelical engagement of the great social issue of the day, but met resistance within evangelicalism. While Henry personally spoke and wrote about the importance of racial justice, throughout the 1960s, *Christianity Today* gave the Civil Rights movement only limited coverage.<sup>14</sup> For example, as editor of *Christianity Today* Henry sent his colleague Frank E. Gaebel to cover the Selma March to Montgomery; however, he was not allowed to print the stories. Disagreement over editorial policy, where Henry would represent a more prophetic evangelical position, was one of the reasons that Henry would later be asked to resign as editor of the magazine. The fact that *Christianity Today* avoided significant coverage of the Civil Rights movement that was covered extensively by its mainline rival *The Christian Century* is an illustration of a continued cultural isolationism of many white evangelicals from the struggle for racial justice. These editorial decisions symbolize the great distance between the experiences of many white evangelicals and those of African

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<sup>12</sup> Carl Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids.: Eerdmans, 1948).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> On the lack of attention to racial justice in *Christianity Today* during the 1950s and 1960s see Mark G. Toulouse, "Christianity Today and American Public Life: A Case Study," *Journal of Church and State* 35 (Spring 1993): 255-57; 272-274 and Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46.

Americans throughout the country in the 1960s, a problem that has continued to our current day.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was disappointed with the lack of white evangelical participation in the Civil Rights struggle. King wrote in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s greatest stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until a more ‘convenient season’. Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”<sup>15</sup>

King was “gravely disappointed” that white moderates were not joining the struggle for racial justice. During the 1960s, the great majority of white moderates, regardless of their theological or ecclesial identity, was sitting on the sidelines during the Civil Rights movement. This silence, which was legitimated by a theological commitment to “order,” ensured a noticeable absence of participation in the national struggle for racial and economic justice. Whether mainline or evangelical, white moderates years later were happy to embrace the positive fruit of the Civil Rights movement, while history indicates only a small group who actually did or said anything to usher it in.

## V. Prophetic Evangelicals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The African American freedom struggle has been difficult for many white evangelicals to understand. They have struggled to overcome their white power and privilege, in order to fully enter into a sympathetic understanding of people of color. New friendships can translate into common actions to dismantle institutional racism. If there is to be a reconciliation between white evangelicals and African American Protestants, it will mean that white anti-racist moderates, the very ones that King called to from the Birmingham jail, will need to wake up and cross the lines to join the struggle for peace and justice with those on the margin.

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. James Melvin Washington. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 295.

While Martin Luther King, Jr. and Carl Henry came from very different places theologically and in terms of their cultural contexts, they held much in common. They both drew on rhetorical and political themes in their tradition of Baptist revivalism, to “reform” a deeper cultural and political isolationist tendency within their Baptist traditions. Martin King and Carl Henry were both prophetic Baptists who thought that the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges the church to have a radical social witness in society.

King and Henry shared a common revivalist tradition within American religion. Mark Noll points to the continuity between the projects of King and Henry by noting their prominence as great communicators and the way that they both effectively applied a common tradition of revivalist rhetoric and public speaking. Henry’s manifestos and editorials and King’s sermons and speeches galvanized two important social movements because they communicated in ways that tapped into the deepest roots of American populism and spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

While King and Henry shared a common revivalist ancestry it took very different historic expressions during the decade of crisis, the 1960s. William Pannell argues that while the black and white church share a common evangelical heritage embodied particularly in Baptist and Methodist streams, after the Civil War there is a divorce between these two theological traditions.<sup>17</sup> As Henry tried to heal the divorce between theology and ethics within evangelicalism in the 1940s, he also sought to heal the divorce between white and black evangelicalism that began even much earlier than the 1860s. We see intimations of this in *The Uneasy Conscience of Fundamentalism* (1947); however, it is particularly in *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (1971) that Henry presents the glimpses of a more rigorously socially-engaged anti-racist evangelicalism. The first paragraph of *Plea* is a manifesto for a radical evangelicalism, Henry writes,

This is a call for authentic evangelical protest.

A sensitive Christian conscience must openly confront enduring and intractable social injustices. Biblically-concerned Christians need not forego a moment of open identification with those of other faiths and alien views in protesting what all together recognize to be unjust.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 156.

<sup>17</sup> William Pannell, “The Religious Heritage of Blacks,” *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975) 102-106; 96-107.

<sup>18</sup> Carl F.H. Henry, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1971), 13.

From the lead sentence of the book we see that Henry is really interested in “protest,” not “demonstration” in the sense of an apologetic proof for biblical theism. Henry is concerned about inspiring a new generation of evangelicals to embody God’s justice in the world.

It is fascinating that in these two first sentences of the book Henry reclaims that language of “protest” and “confrontation,” the language that he had always reserved for the opponents of his previous writing, particularly the neo-Protestant social gospellers. Here he takes that language back for an evangelical ethic. Not only should evangelicals protest, but they should do it with atheists and people of all faiths. This is a reference to the coalition politics of the Civil Rights movement. Finally, and most importantly, Henry claims that we need to protest “what all together recognize to be unjust,” echoing King’s comment in the Birmingham jail that “injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.” The Henry of *Plea* is a Henry on fire for lasting social change as a vital expression of our gospel witness.

In this *Plea*, his call to justice in *Uneasy Conscience* is even more clear and intense. Henry writes,

The Christian is morally bound to challenge all beliefs and ideologies that trample man’s personal dignity as a bearer of the divine image, all forms of political and economic practice that undercut the worth of human beings, all social structures that discriminate in matters of legal rights. He has every reason to confront political powers with God’s revealed will in the interest of justice in human relationships.<sup>19</sup>

He goes on to illustrate this evangelical struggle by embodying a multi-ethnic, multi-socio-economic reality, pushing beyond its “ghetto-mentality” that produces a homogenous community reduced to a “racial or class or ethnic enclave.”<sup>20</sup>

While at first glance, one might think that Carl Henry’s evangelical politics is far from Martin Luther King’s, closer inspection shows their affinities. Both argued that the church should get involved in politics and both saw racism as an “intractable injustice” that all people of goodwill should organize to eradicate.

While they shared a common vocational call as public prophets, King and Henry came from different contexts and cultures. While King came from a culture of slavery and segregation, Henry came from a culture of cultural isolation and white privilege. King and Henry were both frustrated in the 1960s by much of the evangelical world’s inaction on the race question. Henry shared and promoted Billy Graham’s vision of world evangelism implemented through a strategy of mass crusades, but he did not see this as at odds with a broader struggle for justice. The National Association of Evangelicals that Henry helped

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 111-112.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 112.

found in 1942 became an important gathering for evangelicals, be they fundamentalist, moderates or progressives. Together they could work for the unity of the church and together “openly confront enduring and intractable social injustices.”

After King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee as he organized sanitation workers for just working conditions, the freedom struggle within the churches would live on in the SCLC and in Operation Breadbasket, which would become the Rainbow/PUSH coalition led by Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr. Even white evangelicals like Jim Wallis would find inspiration in Dr. King’s life and vision, so much so that Wallis created an inner city community for justice in Washington, D.C. This Sojourners community has since developed into a thriving expression of prophetic evangelicalism that includes the magazine *Sojourners* and a new ecumenical campaign to end poverty named *Call to Renewal*.

There are many signs of hope for the emergence of a new theological vision for prophetic evangelicals. The NAE’s *For the Health of the Nations* document demonstrates that evangelicals in the tradition of Carl Henry embody a worldview that embraces social justice as well as personal salvation, including their recent prophetic stands on the environment. In addition to justice-making in the world, King’s vision for racial equality and reconciliation continues to open a new horizon of hope.

Black and white evangelical churches have been segregated too long. It is time to develop new coalitions of justice that are not limited to traditional racial/ethnic constituencies. However, this collaborative move must also be from the standpoint of strong respect for the particularity of different racial realities. White evangelicals must relate to evangelicals and non-evangelicals of color in ways that acknowledge and respect their differences.

We are beginning to witness some positive signs of white evangelicals thinking in more depth about the problem of race.<sup>21</sup> However, unless white evangelicals join a broader coalition for justice, it is unclear how they can truly and effectively work for racial and economic justice. As we move ahead, it is vital that white and black evangelicals lead together as equal partners, joining together with Hispanic and Asian-American evangelicals in

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<sup>21</sup> See John Perkins and Thomas A. Tarrants III, *He's My Brother: Former Racial Foes Offer Strategy for Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1994); John M. Perkins, ed., *Restoring At-risk Communities: Doing It Together and Doing It Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995); George A. Yancey, *Beyond Black and White: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996); Dennis L. Okholm, ed., *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

the struggle for reconciliation. If there is a future for democratic politics in America, a multicultural evangelical coalition for justice must play a vital role.

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