Something happened to conservative Christians on the way to Vietnam

Ethics in the Revival Tent

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Liberal Christian activists have been accused of making politics Lord and the cure for the ills of the world. And by some of their near friends, too. In Up to Our Steeples in Politics (Paramus, New Jersey, 1970) Will D. Campbell and James Y. Holloway, publisher and editor of Katellagete and leaders of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, have questioned the gospel of relevance-and-realism. In approaching Evangelicals descendingly, they argued, we have forgotten that the basic notion of these Christians is what we want persons to be—new men and women in Christ. To the question what should the people of today do, Campbell and Holloway answer, "Nothing." And to the question what should people be, they respond in an evangelical way: "What you are—reconciled, to God and man." This word from people who are battle-scarred veterans of social conflict in the Bible belt and long-time critics of Evangelical ethics comes as somewhat of a jolt to comrades in arms. Some observers suggest that this expresses a battle fatigue among those who have been engaged in the struggle for social justice for so long. If you can’t lick ’em, join ’em.

Given the rich variety of evangelical experiences in America it is very difficult, of course, to define the Evangelical. Up to a point Campbell and Holloway paint an image of the Evangelical which many of us have had. We usually associate the Evangelical with Baptist Billy Graham, the revivalist at large, and with a number of widely circulated magazines, among them Christianity Today, Decision, Eternity, and with the ecumenical agency, the National Association of Evangelicals. We also think of the Evangelical as having a very conservative, if not "fundamentalist," view of biblical authority, conservative theological ideas, and with an extremely individualized conception of salvation. The Evangelical is also known for ecclesiastical localism, which defines the nature and mission of the Church as that of “saving souls” and not, as the saying goes, “meddling in politics.”

But this is only one part of the image. Campbell and Holloway seem to imply that Evangelicals have not been up to their steeples in politics, while liberals have sold their souls for this potage. Just six years before their analysis, however, Langdon Gilkey presented a different picture. He argued in How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself (1964) that Evangelicals were at least up to their steeples in culture, if not in politics, and political decisions were made on the basis of this kind of capitulation. Moreover, Campbell and Holloway have not noted the renewed concern among Evangelicals, that conservatives not only be reconciled to God, but "to do" in a politically responsible way. The Congress on the Church’s Worldwide Mission of 1966, which issued the “Wheaton Declaration,” shows that Evangelicals were wrestling mightily with racism, and in the spring of 1973 over three hundred Evangelicals met at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, to discuss and establish a theological framework for social and political action.

A preliminary survey of some Evangelical literature suggests that the war in Southeast Asia has been a crucible in which some Evangelicals have not only had to rethink their attitude toward war, but also toward civil authority and the nation. These various forces have converged to create a crisis of identity among American Evangelicals.

Some Evangelical attitudes were sharply delineated by Billy Graham in a response to Ernest Campbell, pastor of the Riverside Church, New York City. Campbell had challenged Graham to clarify his position on the Nixon Christmas bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong in 1972. The exchange appears in “An

Graham maintained that he was a New Testament evangelist, not an Old Testament prophet, and that man’s problem was one of the spirit and heart. While he knew that we would always have war until the coming of the Prince of Peace, he never advocated war, he deplored it, and was “praying for every responsible effort which seeks true peace in our time.” He admitted, however, that he had avoided all expressions as to who was right and who was wrong with regard to the war in Vietnam, although he began his “clarification” by recalling a conversation with John Kennedy in a golf locker room in which the President told him that we could not lose Laos to the Communists. While Graham disclaimed being a prophet, he nevertheless claimed that he did speak out when he felt a definite moral issue was involved, and that he would continue to call for a “revived dedication to just government and a revitalized consecration to God in our national life.” This whole statement may be dismissed as incredibly confused and self-serving, but it does point to some very important dimensions of Evangelical thinking about civil authority and war.

One way of unraveling Graham’s statement is by suggesting that the Evangelical has a strong sense of obligation to obey civil authority. Since war is in itself not always wrong, the Evangelical is obliged to obedience when the civil authority under which the Evangelical lives engages in war. Most Christians, for example those associated with the more liberal National Council of Churches, share this attitude toward civil authority and the war, so that differences are not drawn sharply at this point. During the past years the Evangelical position has been articulated in a scholarly manner by Carl Henry, leading Evangelical spokesman and ethicist. Henry was for many years before his retirement the editor of Christianity Today. While Henry emphasizes evangelism as the primary work of the Christian and the church, he has also been aware of the fact that the evangelized has certain ethical responsibilities. He has been deeply concerned with the transformation of culture. In his Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism (1947) he lamented the fact that Evangelicals—who are supposed to know best about the ways of God with man, and human sinfulness and the need for salvation, and thus about the ills of society and what can be done about them—had not made a greater contribution to ethical discourse. Subsequently, he wrote several volumes for the guidance of Evangelical readers: Christian Personal Ethics (1957), Aspects of Christian Social Ethics (1964) and A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration (1971). Henry approaches the problem of ethics with a prescriptive model and a very conservative view of biblical and civil authority. This means that the Evangelical must take very seriously Romans 13 and Paul’s affirmation that all civil authority is given by God. Christians ought to be obedient to authorities for conscience, since they are given to promote the good and to restrain and protect us from evil. This is not to be a blind allegiance, however, since the Evangelical need not obey if the civil authority commands that which is contrary to the will of God.

When we examine Henry’s statements concerning the will of God with regard to war, he appears to say that the Evangelical may go to war on just and necessary occasions. I say “appears” because as a matter of fact, if I have read his volumes correctly, he gives his readers very little help in clarifying this question. Henry treats the problem of killing in Christian Personal Ethics under a discussion of the Decalogue, and he holds that the commandment forbidding killing has to do with murder. He does not correlate this with the ethical problem of war. When he discusses war, he confines most of his arguments to a debate with fellow Evangelicals, the Mennonites, over pacifism. He argues that the Sermon on the Mount is not a decisive prescription for the Christian in the matter of if and when and how a Christian may bear arms. “Jesus nowhere in his teaching,” Henry observes, “expressly prohibits military participation.” Drawing upon the Old as well as the New Testament, he claims that God often commanded his people to engage in war for defense; he does not use the term crusade. Nowhere in Christian Personal Ethics, nor in his later volume on Aspects of Christian Social Ethics, does Henry give a systematic treatment of just war theory which places responsibility for declaring and making war upon the civil authority. When Evangelicals moved into the sixties, they did not have from one of their most sensitive leaders much guidance on a problem which would become a consuming issue for many Christians. For assistance Evangelicals would have to turn, as many of us did, to books like Paul Ramsey’s War and the Christian Conscience (1961).

Henry’s ideas with regard to civil disobedience and resistance to the authorities seemed to grow. In Aspects of Christian Social Ethics and later in A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration he develops these concerns. In the former, published just after the Washington March for Civil Rights in 1963, Henry mentions with favor the famous sermon by Jonathan Mayhew of 1750 against unlimited submission to the civil magistrate. In an appendix to the book entitled “Christianity and the Revolution” Henry concludes that a Christian will gladly obey “where government observes it proper limits, protest where it exceeds those limits, and actively resist where a totalitarian demand requires disobedience to the revealed will of God.” Since war is one of those
occasions during which civil authority may make a total, if not a totalitarian, demand upon a Christian, it is somewhat surprising that Henry did not give more attention to this matter in his books.

A further look at the literature suggests that there is a strong assumption among Evangelicals that the United States Government will not command its citizens to do that which is contrary to the will of God and that it will not engage in war on unjust and unnecessary occasions. Furthermore, Evangelicals seem to be caught up in the ideological conflict between America and the “Free World” and communism and Russia and China. This is indicated in Graham’s statement about the war and in his allusion to President Kennedy’s unwillingness to lose Laos to the Communists. I have suggested elsewhere that most Christians shared this confidence and concern in the early part of the sixties, before the war in Southeast Asia became a national issue (“American Religious Bodies, Just War, and Vietnam,” A Journal of Church and State, Autumn, 1969). If there was a distinction between Evangelicals and other Christians, then it may be that the latter were more willing to raise questions and to criticize the civil authorities, and they had deescalated the ideological conflict between the West and the East.

If Carl Henry did not give much help to Evangelicals on the war, Sherwood Wirt sought to do so in his volume on The Social Conscience of the Evangelical (1968). In this he takes up Henry’s challenge to conservatives to think more seriously about ethical problems. Wirt is the editor of Decision, a publication of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and his book is introduced by Leighton Ford, a Graham in-law and prominent member of the Graham Team. Ford praises Wirt’s attempt to keep Evangelicals socially responsible. In a more systematic way than does Henry, Wirt exposes elements in the Evangelical approach to war as well as to societal problems in general. Wirt insists that the Evangelical has as his first responsibility the proclamation of God’s glad tidings of love and salvation. The Evangelical should keep the order straight, to be sure, but the proclamation of the Gospel comes before social action, or, as Wirt puts it, the horse before the eart. It is not clear whether Wirt is simply emphasizing the fact that evangelism is the most important work of the Evangelical, or whether the Evangelical must evangelize before he can engage in social action. He does not throw much light on the problem of the civil responsibility of the Evangelical citizen in a nonevangelized society in which a good many people are not Christian.

In a chapter entitled “Blessed Are the Peacemakers” Wirt speaks directly to the problem of the American involvement in Southeast Asia. The Evangelical, he affirms, stands for peace—if it is an honorable peace with justice and liberty. Recalling the lessons of history, especially of the experience of the 1930’s and 1940’s with totalitarian governments, and writing with a strong strain of anti-communism, Wirt calls for a “quality of hard realism” to make the Evangelical relevant. The Evangelical should not call for peace at the “expense of a victimized people.” Turning to the war in Southeast Asia, he reviews and rejects what he considers to be various alternatives: neutrality, pacifism, Marxism, indifferentism, appeasement, strategic retreat, over-the-brinkmanship and revolution. After rejecting these alternatives of 1968, he arrives at a position supportive of the civil authority. With his hard realism, Wirt does not review the history of the conflict, nor does he raise any questions about the relation of means to ends, which is an important aspect of just war theory and which had become a part of the debate by the end of the Johnson Administration. In his notes to this chapter, Wirt displays an almost total indifference to the many words which were written during the immediately preceding years; all but one of his references are from the 1940’s and ’50’s. It never occurs to him that in the ’60’s and ’70’s the United States might show totalitarian tendencies and be a victimizer of people.

In concluding this treatment Wirt makes an affirmation that Evangelical effort will count for little, and yet for much. He maintains, on the one hand, that perfect liberty and justice and peace will not come until the eschaton. “But when all the changes and upheavals of the twentieth century have taken place, will the world then be more just? Will there be peace? The evangelical wishes it were true, but his sources of wisdom indicate otherwise.” But this is not a summons to quietism, as it turns out. In a flourish, Wirt holds that a Christian must fight for freedom. For if he does not fight for freedom, “in a sinful planet he will not have it long.” For Wirt this adds up to the support of the actions of the American government in Southeast Asia in the struggle against communism. Before we dismiss this as merely rhetorical, however, we should note that for the Evangelical this emphasis upon freedom is undoubtedly related to his liberty to do the work of evangelism and to spread the gospel in the non-Communist world.

When we turn from individuals such as Graham, Henry and Wirt to the statements of the National Association of Evangelicals, we discover that according to the few statements made by the ecumenical agency, support of the United States effort does make a difference. There is a rightness to the purposes and policies pursued by our government. As far as I have been able to discover, the NAE made three statements pertaining to the conflict. In 1966 the NAE resolution read:

Since it is apparent that the people and government of the U.S.A. are confused as to the basic
issues of the war in Viet Nam, and the course of action to be followed by our government, we as evangelicals declare:

1. That we would decry any action by our government that would favor communism under the leadership of Red China.
2. That we would object to any action by our government that would weaken the security of the non-Communist nations of the world.
3. That we as evangelicals declare our loyalty to the established Constitutional government of our country and the accompanying requirements of civil obedience.

While this statement suggests that there may be confusion about the war, yet it was possible to affirm obedience to the civil authorities in the name of security and a strong anti-Communist position against China.

Not until 1971 did the NAE make another statement on Vietnam. At that time the Association reasserted support of the government, but it recognized that national policy on the war had been reversed.

America is being torn apart by dissenting voices concerning its involvement in Viet Nam. We note with approval the promise of President Nixon to disengage us from a war that has lasted too long and brought sorrow and suffering to many homes. We wish that it were possible to end our involvement overnight but we take notice of the fact that the consequences of such a precipitate action might worsen an already difficult situation. Therefore the National Association of Evangelicals assures our President of our approval of his intention to end our involvement in the war as soon as possible and of our prayers to hasten this objective.

This statement is notable for its concern about the internal condition of America and, perhaps, for the internal turmoil in the NAE. It expresses deep concern for those who had suffered as a result of the war—and the concern seems to embrace all who have been involved, and not simply those with whom we have been allied. The 1972 NAE resolution on prisoners of war lacks this larger dimension. After expressing sympathy for the plight of these persons, the NAE proceeds to condemn the North Vietnamese without questioning the morality of what many of our pilots were doing and with no expressed concern about the captives, military or political, in South Vietnamese prison camps. This was long after Don Luce had exposed the tiger cages of the South Vietnamese government, and the fact that the United States was deeply involved in the process of taking, keeping and even torturing prisoners in the South.

These statements of the NAE indicate that Evangelicals are not simply concerned about winning persons to be new men and women in Christ, as Campbell and Holloway hold in Up to Our Steeples in Politics. They suggest that—following Henry's affirmation about the legitimacy of civil authority—Evangelicals have been both obedient to, and supportive of, the United States Government, at first in its anti-
Communist statement, and then in its approval of what seems to have been President Nixon's strategic retreat from the engagement, a position Wirt specifically rejected in 1968. In *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*, published in 1971, Carl Henry suggested once again that Christians have the responsibility of disowning the authority of any ruler or power structure claiming prerogatives above the will of God and commanding that which is against God's explicit moral requirements. He warns Evangelicals against becoming sluggish over the status quo and against being satisfied with things the way they are. But in this volume Henry does not address himself explicitly to the agony of the nation over the war in Southeast Asia. In context Henry's cautious approach to nonconformity may be interpreted as a putdown of Evangelicals who were showing a great deal of concern for the war.

Evangelicals have not been of one mind with regard to the war. Taking seriously Henry's suggestion that a Christian must protest and even resist the civil authority when it exceeds its proper bounds, some Evangelicals have tried to discern the will of God with regard to the war in Southeast Asia and have come to different conclusions than Wirt or the NAЕ. In March, 1968, for example, *Eternity* ran two articles under the title "God and the U.S.A. in Vietnam" that exposed this division sharply. One author took a strong, anti-Communist, pro-American stand, while another sounded like a radical "dove." It should be noted, furthermore, that it was Henry W. Anderson, Presbyterian minister and chairman of Chicagoland Key 73—an evangelistic effort dear to the conservative heart—who first addressed Billy Graham and asked why he did not condemn the ruthless bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, Christmas, 1972. What seems clear is that some Evangelicals have concluded that it is unevangelical to support the civil authority uncritically even in time of war. Moreover, they have become deeply concerned about Evangelical acculturation and have been trying to extricate themselves from too close an identity with the nation.

This effort of extrication is apparent in the development of recent Evangelical ethical thought on justifiable wars. In the summer of 1970 Carl Henry completed his book *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*, in which he completely ignores the problem of the war. In the same year William E. Nix reviewed the Evangelical approaches to war in "The Evangelical and War" in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Summer, 1970), arguing that the Christian must take more seriously the obligation to discern whether or not a war is just and necessary. Soon after, the Evangelical ethicist, Norman L. Geisler, published a book entitled *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (1970) in which he devoted considerable attention to the problem of war. He takes a position between the activist, who believes that he is duty-bound to obey the civil authority and must participate in every war in which his government commands him to engage, and the pacifist, who believes that it is never right to participate in war. Geisler argues for a selectivism. He suggests on the basis of a discussion of just war theory, something lacking in the writings of Henry and Wirt, that the Evangelical may participate in some wars. But he opens the way for a discussion of war among Christians of the justice or injustice of origins and conduct, and suggests that the burden of proof rests upon those who would wage war. That seems to be much more in line with strong elements of the Evangelical ethic, which embraces both a critical judgment of civil authority as well as a healthy respect. The same approach may be found in the essays on international affairs, war and militarism in the book by Evangelical writers Robert B. Clouse, Robert D. Lindner and Richard V. Pierard entitled *The Cross and the Flag* (1972).

Some Evangelicals are protesting acculturation and the exploitation of Evangelical faith to bless the American way of life. *The Post-American*, for example, first appeared in 1971. Subtitled "Voice of the People's Christian Coalition," it is published by students of the evangelical Liberty Seminary of Deerfield, Illinois. Seared by the war—or so it would seem from articles in the paper—the editors call for a "radical awakening" which will pose a "direct challenge to the American status quo," almost the same words used by Henry in his volume *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*. Instead of being satisfied with accommodation, however, the editors give voice to disillusionment, alienation and anger over an American system which oppresses rather than liberates, by an American Dream which is an American Nightmare for so many in the world. Faulting a narrow orthodoxy as well as a naive and inadequate liberal theology, *The Post-American* calls for a radical Christianity with a commitment to both personal and social liberation. It criticizes in harsh terms American involvement in Southeast Asia and what it perceives as America's role in victimizing people and supporting authoritarian, if not totalitarian, governments.

Along with this attempt at deacculturation runs a more critical approach to the way in which Evangelical religion has been exploited, often by Evangelicals themselves, to support the civil authorities. An interesting illustration of this may be found in the attack on Billy Graham by the editor of *Inside*, an Evangelical magazine which deals with urban renewal, for what happened at Expo 72, the meeting in Dallas organized for attracting and training young evangelists for Key 73. Billy Graham, according to the editor, was asked to discuss the war in Southeast
Asia at the meeting. Graham responded that Expo 72 was a “religious gathering and not a political forum.” *Inside’s* editor explains how political the religious gathering really was as he saw it. Everyone recited the pledge of allegiance. Richard Nixon sent a long telegram, which was read at the affair. A South Vietnamese was introduced by Graham himself. He spoke about the justice of the war against communism and, receiving a standing ovation from the gathering, left an impression that it was a holy war. The American Friends Service Committee was shut out of a mammoth display area, being labeled as a “lunatic fringe group,” while the Chaplain Corps of all branches of the armed services was allowed to set up shop and represent the claims of such a calling. The lesson which the editors of *The Post-American* and *Inside* suggested is that Evangelicals had, in effect, sold their Evangelical birthright for a mess of 100 per cent Americanism.

Mark O. Hatfield, Baptist and leading Evangelical statesman, pointed this out at the Prayer Breakfast in 1972. The Prayer Breakfast was organized during the Eisenhower revival in 1953 and has been a regular Evangelical event since that time, involving Washington political leaders in a service of dedication at the beginning of each Congressional year. Hatfield, in the presence of Richard Nixon and Billy Graham, maintained that “corporately, as a people, we must turn in repentance from the sin that has scarred our national soul.” With this allusion to the war in Southeast Asia, he went on to say:

My brothers and sisters, as we gather at this prayer breakfast, let us beware of the real danger of misplaced allegiance, if not outright idolatry, to the extent that we fail to distinguish between the god of an American civil religion and the God who reveals himself in the Holy Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. If we as leaders appeal to the god of civil religion, our faith is in a small and exclusive deity, a loyal spiritual advisor to power and prestige, a defender of only the American nation, the object of a national folk religion devoid of moral content. But if we pray to the biblical God of justice and righteousness, we fall under God’s judgment for calling upon his name but failing to obey his commands.

Something is happening among American Evangelicals. It is not easy to generalize about this vast group of American Christians. When we listen to some of its leading spokesmen we get the impression that they are involved in nothing more than preaching the gospel, in doing what the Christian and the churches also should be doing, calling people to be new men and women in Christ, or, as Campbell and Holloway suggest, to be reconciled to God and man. What seems clear, however, is that Evangelicals have been up to their steeples in politics just as high as have been the liberals whom Campbell and Holloway are calling away from that “bitch goddess.” Evangelicals, according to their own spokesmen, have tended to bless the political status quo, and in international affairs they have assumed that the United States stood for liberty and justice and peace. These spokesmen are calling their fellow Evangelicals away from the “bitch goddess” of politics, not by asking them to consider politics as the messiah, but by asking them to display a greater social responsibility. David O. Moberg, for example, argues that Evangelicals lost a deep social sensitivity somewhere between 1910 and 1930’s in a preoccupation with the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Moberg suggests that there is a trend among Evangelicals to reverse this “Great Reversal” and to develop once again a creative Christian ethic.

The critical movement may be no bigger than a man’s hand, but it is important to keep an eye on it and for us to enter into critical dialogue, even cooperation, with it. Perhaps the movement, coming, will meet Will Campbell and James Holloway, going, and teach us something fresh about the Christian faith and the world in which we live. Maybe it will lift our flagging spirits and revive Christian hope that in the Lord our politics may not be in vain.