

The Worldly Evangelicals: Has Success Spoiled America's Born Again Christians? by Richard Quebedeaux

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In his 1974 book *The Young Evangelicals*, Richard Quebedeaux chronicled the emergence of a new breed of worldly-wise evangelical Christians. Now he continues the chronicle, and does so in a manner that should be very helpful to many who are puzzled about evangelical Christianity. Quebedeaux furnishes information about a wide variety of evangelical organizations: Anyone who has ever wondered about such groups as Presbyterians United for Biblical Concerns, the Good News movement, Campus Crusade for Christ, or the Patricia French Christian Charm Schools will find helpful information in this book.

But Quebedeaux's survey of contemporary evangelicalism will not be completely satisfactory to those who know the movement. For one thing, he divides the "new" evangelicalism (which he distinguishes from contemporary manifestations of the older fundamentalism) into two main categories: "right and center" and "left." There are all kinds of cases for which this division will not do. To mention just one: Francis Schaeffer, an evangelical guru who resides in Switzerland, is classified as "left" because of his interest in the arts; but Schaeffer is also a strong defender of "Biblical inerrancy," which is a mark of Quebedeaux's "right and center" group.

The author does not merely describe, he also evaluates. It is clear that Quebedeaux is less optimistic than he was in his first book concerning the direction of his favorite movement. He now recognizes that the new mood of evangelicalism, which he announced in glowing terms in *The Young Evangelicals*, has required some tradeoffs. Evangelicals are becoming more acceptable in North America—but only because they are coming to resemble the people who are accepting them. An evangelical feminist with a Yale Ph.D. does not seem all that weird to a liberal feminist with a Yale Ph.D. And the announcement that Jesus is coming back to earth very soon is

a little easier for secular radicals to take when it is accompanied by the insistence that, when Jesus does return, he is really going to stick it to General Motors.

It is difficult to understand exactly *what* it is that bothers Quebedeaux about the new acceptability of the evangelicals. He does seem rather pleased that there are evangelical feminists, evangelical critics of capitalism, and evangelical proponents of "black theology." But he seems to be troubled nonetheless, as is indicated in the subtitle of the book: "Has Success Spoiled America's Born Again Christians?"

This is a good question, and it is worth the attention the author devotes to it. If the question is going to be addressed clearly, it will be necessary to be a little more careful than Quebedeaux is in applying the term "evangelical." If Robert Schuller, the California-based impresario of big-time evangelicalism, is an evangelical—as Quebedeaux assumes—then we do have strong evidence that "success" is spoiling evangelicalism. And when the author announces, with no elaboration, that Harvey Cox has recently "come out" as an evangelical, it would seem that the label has lost all of its interesting content.

Nonevangelical readers will be puzzled by the attention (at times gleeful) Quebedeaux pays to changing evangelical mores. Evangelicals, he tells us, have loosened up their opposition to alcohol and tobacco. If one takes this past opposition to have been a central feature of evangelicalism, then change is certainly taking place. But elsewhere Quebedeaux treats Missouri Synod Lutherans and Christian Reformed Calvinists as evangelical groups. Since these groups have not had the same taboos as have Anglo-American evangelicals, one can take the recent changes in mores as mere shifts from one evangelical orientation to another.

Quebedeaux's treatment of his subject is also marred by a gossipy tone. He

reports a "rumor" that students at teetotaling Wheaton (Illinois) College have met their professors in liquor stores. Similarly, we are told that Hal Lindsey (of *Late Great Planet Earth* fame) and staff members of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship enjoy alcoholic beverages. This may be useful information for a whiskey-loving Episcopalian theologian who is planning a lecture tour on the evangelical circuit, but it does not contribute much to a careful discussion of evangelical trends. Even worse is Quebedeaux's fondness for naming young faculty members at evangelical schools who "bear watching" because of their views on this or that doctrinal matter.

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On the whole, however, this is an interesting, readable, and helpful book. Quebedeaux raises questions that are of crucial importance, especially for evangelicals. Can evangelicals resist being swallowed up by liberal Protestantism? If evangelicalism is to survive as a distinct Christian movement, what sorts of leaders and centers of power must emerge? What in the broad evangelical tradition is worth preserving at all costs? My impression is that Quebedeaux overestimates the degree to which some of us who call ourselves evangelicals are genuinely open to liberal, ecumenical Christianity. But if that is true, then Quebedeaux has pointed to an important obligation to articulate answers to the crucial—and potentially embarrassing—questions that he raises.