

## Postconservative Evangelicalism: An Update After A Decade

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Ten years ago I identified and described a new mood among some evangelical theologians. I coined the label “postconservative evangelical” for it. (“Postconservative evangelicals greet the postmodern age,” May 3, 1995) At the time I believed the term was new; I had not encountered it before. Since then I have become aware that an earlier evangelical author may have used it, but it was not published then. From what I have been told, then Fuller Seminary professor Jack Rogers intended for his book title to be *Confessions of a Postconservative Evangelical*. Instead it was published as *Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical* (Westminster Press, 1974) which was confusing; the intended title would have been more descriptive of the book’s content.

Because I believed I coined the label I felt a certain ownership of it. That was foolish because, like a child a label can be born but it cannot be controlled forever. It takes on a life of its own. That has certainly been the case with “postconservative evangelical.” Many have adopted it, played around with it, abused it, rejected it, misapplied it, stretched it and even tried to kill it. I have often wondered whether many who use it or criticize it even read the article in which I first used it! The time has come to respond to the critics of the label and the mood it is supposed to describe and to further expound on that mood. A lot changes in ten years even (especially?) in theology.

For those not particularly familiar with the evangelical theological scene it might be helpful to provide some background to my response to postconservative evangelicalism’s critics.

I wrote the article out of a certain exuberance combined with trepidation over some new developments in evangelical theological circles. I had been attending and participating in meetings of the then relatively new Evangelical Theology Group program unit of the American Academy of Religion. Later I became co-chair of that group for two years. I sensed a determination to remain evangelical combined with an equal determination to open the windows of evangelical thought to some new ways of thinking. Those I described as having a postconservative mood had no intention of departing from evangelicalism or discarding that heritage or label. But they were willing to question aspects of the “received evangelical tradition” and experiment with new ways of interpreting scripture and appropriating cultural changes in theological reflection.

Two major changes were stirring about among these evangelicals. First, many if not most of them were interested in seeing what postmodernity had to contribute to Christian thought and how Christian theology might critically appropriate some insights of postmodern philosophy. Many were especially attracted to the postmodern musings of postliberal thinkers such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas. They were also interested in dialogue with the writings of Lesslie Newbigin in theology and Alasdair MacIntyre in philosophy. Contrary to critics none of them (to the best of my knowledge) were particularly interested in adopting the postmodernisms of Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida or Michael Foucault. By and large my postconservative evangelicals were willing to listen to the latter without adjusting evangelical thought to their seemingly relativistic (if not nihilistic) philosophies. (More recently some postconservative evangelical thinkers have claimed with some cogency that at least Derrida was not a relativist but an iconoclast in the best sense of the term and that evangelical theology has

much to learn from him.)

Second, postconservative evangelicals were beginning seriously to rethink certain aspects of the traditional doctrine of God. This was especially true of those of a more Arminian than Augustinian-Reformed heritage and mindset. Even some of the latter, however, were and are willing to listen to calls for revisioning the evangelical doctrine of God within a more relational and dynamic ontological framework. Without accepting process theology lock, stock and barrel they willingly consider the possibility that God may face a partly uncertain future along with us. But to a person they made this a matter of divine self-limitation and held onto the traditional ideas of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) and divine omnipotence. Critics feared a wholesale evangelical sell out to process theology, but later developments proved this fear unfounded. Evangelical-process dialogues have revealed greater differences than similarities between so-called open theism and process theology.

These were certainly not the only two changes being rung in traditional evangelical thought by my postconservatives, but they stood out as especially significant in heralding a new mood among many especially younger evangelical thinkers. In my 1995 article I attempted to explore and assess this new mood by critically explicating several of its common (not universal) features. In that article I named names. This had unfortunate consequences which is why I am mostly refraining from it here. A backlash set in against the new mood and the label and some I named wished I had not named them. My intention was not to pigeon hole anyone or slap an unwanted label on them. I should have foreseen the unintended consequences of naming names.

During the intervening decade an inquisitorial spirit has gripped evangelical theological

circles and the label “postconservative evangelical” has become something of a kiss of death for budding evangelical careers (at least within the more traditionalist evangelical organizations and institutions). I was myself dragged reluctantly into a heresy trial of one influential postconservative evangelical theologian; I only agreed to participate for his sake. The outcome was favorable which has not always turned out to be the case. Most recently a leading postconservative evangelical (who happens to be an open theist) has been removed from his teaching position at an evangelical college. An influential Southern Baptist seminary president denounced postconservative evangelicalism quite publicly and, perhaps most surprisingly, the president of a seminary often considered progressively evangelical called for a moratorium on the term.

At least one book was published about postconservative evangelicalism. Conservative evangelical theologian Millard Erickson examined the mood in his 1997 *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Baker Books). I had trouble recognizing my own meaning of the term in that treatment of it. A more sympathetic exploration of postconservative evangelicalism was presented by Gary Dorrien in *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). There he captured the spirit of the new mood’s dissatisfaction with traditional evangelical theology quite well:

Evangelicals [postconservatives believe] are prone to fret that everything will be lost if they have no ground of absolute certainty or no proof that Christianity is superior to Islam or Buddhism. This fear drives them to impose impossible tests on Christian belief. Inerrancy or the abyss! It also drives them to invest religious authority in a posited

epistemological capacity that exists outside the circle of Christian faith. The truth of Christianity is then judged by rational tests that are not only external to Christian revelation but given authority over revelation. (201)

Several volumes by evangelicals exploring what I call a postconservative approach to evangelical theology appeared in the years after my 1995 article. Most notable among them are Fuller Seminary professor Nancey Murphy's *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Trinity Press International, 1996) and Stanley J. Grenz's and John Franke's *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). One should also mention here Henry H. Knight's *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Abingdon Press, 1997). Entire sessions of evangelical scholarly and professional theological societies have been devoted to exploring and critically examining postconservative evangelicalism. Numerous articles and essays in evangelical publications have dissected the mood and often distorted it beyond recognition. As the first person to identify it and name it I have often been grieved as uninformed or dishonest critics have created a straw man out of it only to tear it down and burn it. I have often wondered if some of them have even bothered to read any primary sources of postconservative evangelical thought such as the ones mentioned above.

In the interest of setting the record straight and hopefully getting the discussion back on a true and honest track I'd like to delineate what I mean by postconservative evangelicalism and then respond to some criticisms of it. By no means do I wish to imply that the mood is above criticism; in fact one aspect of the mood is a desire for greater self-criticism and less triumphalism

among evangelicals. How ironic it would be if postconservatives resisted all criticism! In fact, toward the end of my 1995 *Christian Century* article I presented some cautionary notes to postconservatives. Such self-criticism should characterize postconservative thinking. However, many attacks on it during the last decade have been simply unfair. The time has come to respond.

First, what is postconservative evangelicalism? The most important point to make first is that it is *not* anti-conservative or postevangelical. Postconservative evangelicals are thoroughly evangelical both sociologically and theologically; they have no desire to move out of or beyond evangelicalism. They are not pleased with the title of Dave Tomlinson's 2003 book *The Post-Evangelical* (Zondervan) even though it espouses many of the same concerns and moves.

Postconservative evangelicalism is a mood within the evangelical movement; persons I describe this way passionately identify with the four hallmarks of evangelicalism as described by David Bebbington and Mark Noll: biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism and activism in evangelism and social transformation. Most of them have studied, ministered and taught within the network of evangelical churches and organizations that have traditionally looked to Billy Graham and the National Association of Evangelicals for leadership. They are members of evangelical professional societies and publish with evangelical presses.

Because evangelicalism is generally conservative postconservative evangelicals are not anti-conservative and, within the broader scene of Protestantism, are conservative. Their postconservatism is tied to the distinctive brand of conservatism one finds dominating establishment evangelical theology; that is a conservatism that acknowledges a mythical

evangelical magisterium sometimes described as the “received evangelical tradition” and is nearly identical with some version of the “stout and persistent theology of Charles Hodge” (the title of a *Christianity Today* article about Hodge by conservative evangelical theologian David Wells).

When postconservative evangelicals look at the leading establishment of their movement they are reminded of a sign on Interstate 35 between Austin, Texas and San Antonio. It advertises a historic village now turned tourist attraction. The town’s motto is “Gently resisting change since 1872.” Charles Hodge who proudly declared that no new idea was taught at Princeton Seminary during his long tenure there published the first volume of his system of theology in 1872.

Postconservative evangelicals, as evangelicals, are by nature conservative compared to liberal theologians. One can see that clearly in Clark Pinnock’s 1990 dialogue with Delwin Brown entitled *Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Ecumenical Dialogue* (Zondervan). Pinnock was and remains a staunch conservative when standing face to face with a theologically liberal Protestant. What makes him postconservative in my book is that he dares to engage in dialogue with and not only polemics against liberals.

Postconservative evangelicals believe that many of the leading voices in contemporary evangelical theology are really fundamentalists or at least still have one foot firmly planted in that movement out of which post-WW2 evangelicalism emerged especially in the 1950s. They perceive a knee-jerk preference for the most conservative answers to theological questions and a tendency to defend the status quo (which means scholastic Protestant orthodoxy especially as articulated by Hodge and other representatives of the Old Princeton School of theology such as B. B. Warfield) uncritically. They believe that to far too great an extent establishment evangelical

theology's leadership is chronically suspicious of anything new and automatically rejects constructive theology in favor of critical or even polemical theology. Postconservatives are reformists *within* evangelicalism whereas they regard the most influential voices of the movement's theological establishment as traditionalists. Postconservatives wish to breathe new life into the old reformation principle of *reformata et semper reformanda*—reformed and always reforming—without in any way departing from basic Christian orthodoxy.

Postconservative evangelicals by and large (there are always exceptions when a mood and not a monolithic movement is under consideration) believe that conservative evangelicalism is captivated by modern habits of the mind spawned by the Enlightenment. This is a great irony since most conservative evangelicals decry modernity and the Enlightenment. According to postconservatives it is one thing to come to terms with modernity as both Bernard Ramm (an evangelical precursor of postconservatism) and Clark Pinnock have advocated. That means simply to acknowledge its reality and irreversibility and get over the *Sehnsucht* for a premodern golden age of Protestant orthodoxy. It does not mean accommodation to it. But postconservatives detect real accommodation to modernity among conservative evangelicals who claim to reject it. This is apparent in their insistence on tying evangelical thought inextricably with epistemological realism and the correspondence theory of truth as well as their slavish adherence to deductive logic in developing and criticizing theological systems.

This unconscious captivity to modernity also appears in an establishment evangelical tendency toward an implicit naturalism except in “biblical times.” Miracles happened then but no more. (Most conservative evangelicals pay lip service to the possibility of contemporary



miracles, but their real attitude is demonstrated by their chronic skepticism toward claims of miracles among third world Christians such as the Indonesia revival of the early 1970s and among charismatics and third wave Christians such as the “signs and wonders” movement.)

Postconservative evangelicals wish to explore the potential of some forms of postmodern thought for revitalizing a biblical worldview and spirituality among evangelicals. They find Macintyre’s epistemology of tradition communities attractive and they are inclined toward critical realism rather than common sense or naive realism. They believe that narratives and symbols convey truth often as effectively as propositions and they are leery of attempts to confine all of biblical import within a rational system. They fear that some conservative evangelical thinkers view the Bible as a yet-to-be-systematized set of propositions such that a perfectly coherent systematic theology could in theory replace it. They also find resources in some postmodern thought for rediscovering community out of the implicit evangelical acceptance of Enlightenment individualism. And they believe that postmodern openness to realities beyond the empirical and testable can help reverse the traditional establishment evangelical resistance to the supernatural in contemporary worship and Christian life.

But postconservatives do not embrace postmodernity uncritically. Combined with their attraction to a postfoundationalist epistemology and openness to non-propositional truth is a firm rejection of cognitive relativism and nihilism and especially of ontological anti-realism. Postconservatives insist on a distinction between epistemological non-realism (e.g., critical realism) and ontological non- or anti-realism. For them all truth claims are not merely masks for will to power and there is one true metanarrative—the gospel story enshrined in the Bible. But

no truth claim is identical with truth itself and even the gospel story is must not be imposed triumphalistically as a totalizing metanarrative that annihilates the others with their stories.

Second (after describing some of the contours of postconservative evangelicalism) is my response to some of postconservative evangelicalism's critics. Perhaps the most damaging criticism has been that it is tantamount to liberal theology or at least halfway down a slippery slope into liberal theology. In fact, however, one of postconservatism's main impulses is to rise above the conservative/liberal dichotomy in modern theology which is tied inseparably with modernity. Some conservative evangelicals simply do not seem capable of imagining theology without the old left-right spectrum that arose with the fundamentalist reaction to liberalism and modernity. For them every theological proposal and move must be located somewhere on that spectrum and evangelicalism is always located to the right of center. This is an evangelical habit of the mind and not something which even conservatives are always aware of. But it shows in their treatment of postconservatism as "the evangelical left." In fact, postconservatives do not identify with "the left" or "the right." They want to liberate evangelicalism from this hoary spectrum to a constant biblical reformation of life and doctrine. They do not reject Christian orthodoxy but call instead for a generous orthodoxy that holds to the biblical faith without insisting on all its humanly contrived traditional accoutrements.

Many critics of postconservative evangelicalism treat it as a monolithic movement as if it had a headquarters. It is not and it does not. In my 1995 article I made clear that it is a mood and not a movement although to be sure those with this mood tend to find each other and network together. In 2002 they produced a statement entitled "The Word Made Fresh: A Call for the

Renewal of the Evangelical Spirit” which was signed by a very diverse group of one hundred and ten evangelical scholars many of which would not wear the label postconservative gladly. It may be better to speak of postconservative moves in theology that of postconservative persons. No individual fits a postconservative profile perfectly, but some attitudes and moves in theology need this label and some persons so embody those attitudes and make those moves as to fit it.

One constant theme of criticism has been that “there cannot be a center without a circumference.” Postconservatives tend to view evangelicalism as a centered set or category rather than as a bounded set or category. Conservatives tend to insist that evangelicalism including evangelical theology has boundaries. I have always been puzzled by this insistence on boundaries enclosing a movement and its theology. Boundaries imply a setting and enforcing authority; what magisterium would set or enforce evangelical boundaries? Sociologically it makes no sense. A movement and its ideology cannot have boundaries, but it is defined by its center—a set of common themes and commitments. Whether a person or institution belongs to the movement is decided by relationship to the center.

Once a movement has boundaries it is no longer a movement but an organization. Organizations must have boundaries; movements never have boundaries. When postconservatives argue that evangelicalism is a centered set rather than a bounded set they are simply pointing to its nature as a movement rooted in pietism and revivalism and informed by Protestant orthodoxy. They are protesting attempts to establish an evangelical magisterium that excommunicates people from the movement. But that does not mean that postconservatives endorse or practice unfettered theological or ecclesiastical experimentation! The mindset that

sees an either/or between rigid dogmatism and confessional chaos is problematic. In fact, evangelicalism has always been a very diverse movement and such diversity around a common center (biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism, activism) should continue to define it.

Postconservatives do not argue that evangelical organizations cannot or should not have boundaries. Of course not. And therein lies a huge misunderstanding among their critics.

The harshest and least fair accusation thrown against postconservative evangelicalism is that it practices or endorses unfettered theological experimentation. The examples of open theism and inclusivism are generally given as proofs. This is, of course, nonsense. Open theists such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders and Greg Boyd have more than demonstrated that their theological revisions in the doctrine of God (viz., that God faces a partly open future) are fettered by scripture. If anything they are more literalistic in their biblical hermeneutics than their conservative critics! Evangelical inclusivists who argue that some who are never evangelized may nevertheless be saved by the mercy of God on account of their implicit faith (response to the light they have) can point to precedents among standard evangelicals such as Billy Graham, C. S. Lewis and even John Wesley. They argue on the basis of scripture and theology (the goodness of God) and not on the basis of a modern sentimentalism or postmodern relativism.

Postconservatives are conservative with regard to the Bible even as they are not so conservative with regard to the claimed “received evangelical tradition” that would burden and bind constructive evangelical theology.

Perhaps the unkindest cut of all has come from some friends. That is, some evangelical theologians and leaders generally perceived as progressives have been particularly unfriendly

toward the mood and those who express it. One president of a progressive evangelical seminary called postconservatives to drop the “post” and just be conservatives. He attempted to reduce the postconservative evangelical call for a perspectival epistemology in theology to little more than the traditional notion that sin has cognitive effects. In fact, it is much more. And that may be what really bothers some critics especially in conservative Reformed circles.

Postconservatives generally believe that not only fallenness but also finitude hinders clear, unbiased perception of truth. The fact that we, like Paul, see through a glass darkly is not only because of the blinders sin puts on the “eyes of our minds.” It is also because our minds are not yet elevated above the conditions of earthly mortality and to say that they could be is pure hubris. Postconservatives wish for a greater intellectual humility among evangelical thinkers; they regard doubt as an inevitable element in human life and not necessarily a hindrance to faith. In the inimitable words of Fredrick Buechner, “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. It keeps it moving!” While it may not be appropriate in the pulpit to confess “I don’t know” and “I could be wrong” these admissions should be more commonly heard from evangelical pens and lecterns.

Ten years after I first identified the postconservative mood in evangelical theology it is embattled but thriving. The decade has witnessed a conservative surge both in religion and politics. Just as moderates are less visible and vocal within the Republican party than once was the case, so moderates are marginalized within many established evangelical circles. The shrill voices of ultra-conservatives are often the ones that dominate the discussions. But postconservative evangelicals are determined to remain within the evangelical movement and proudly wear that label in spite of attempts by some to marginalize if not expel them. Above all

they wish to be understood correctly before being dismissed as false brethren; they wish their critics would take the time to listen and then represent their mood fairly before criticizing it.

I ended my 1995 article with some cautions for postconservative evangelicals and I will do that again. If postconservatism is to be a viable alternative to neo-fundamentalist triumphalism in evangelicalism it must embody a self-critical spirit. In that interest I offer these corrective suggestions. First, postconservative evangelicals should never abandon the label evangelical to the ultra-conservatives. Therein lies a part of the problem we face. People possessed of a fundamentalist mindset have infiltrated postfundamentalist evangelicalism and attempted to possess the label evangelical and decide who is and who is not really an evangelical. Giving up the label merely because it is contested is unwise and unnecessary. Evangelical has always been a flexible term to cover a wide variety of people and viewpoints. It should stay that way.

Second, when expounding their postconservative attitudes and approaches in theology and church life such evangelicals should highlight their evangelical commitments; they should make crystal clear that their hearts and minds are captive to the Word of God and that they are committed to a supernatural life and world view including conversion by the Spirit of God. They should demonstrate their evangelical piety through clear involvement in missions, evangelism, spiritual renewal and Christ-centered activism. Only then should they set forth their agendas for change in theology.

Third, they should clearly distinguish non-foundationalism and critical realism from relativism and ontological anti-realism; they should make absolutely clear their commitment to

the universal truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ while distinguishing the truth itself from any one particular interpretation of it. They should leave no doubt that perspectivalism and intellectual humility are not lazy relativism and lack of assurance of the truth of the gospel.

Finally, postconservatives must maintain a sweet spirit and a non-triumphalistic mentality and discourse in the face of persecution by fellow evangelicals. If they give in to the temptation to angry retorts and polemical responses in the face of ultra-conservatives' rhetoric of exclusion they will lose credibility.