My Enemy, Myself
What brings evangelicals together is also what pulls them apart.

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Two decades in evangelicalism didn’t do it. Planting a church didn’t do it. A master’s degree from Fuller Seminary didn’t do it. Years of teaching theology at evangelical schools didn’t do it. It was a Saturday morning trip to the Rose Bowl that finally showed me what evangelicalism is all about.

That day a revival meeting came to my town, as The Call (www.thecallrevolution.com) inaugurated a 40-day fast in Southern California. When I arrived, an estimated 20,000 people were praying, kneeling, dancing, and milling around. The news reports called them “young people,” probably because reporters are used to associating church with the elderly, but in fact they spanned at least three generations. The parked buses said they came from all over the western United States and all over the denominational map, and the faces in the crowd said they came from nearly every tribe and tongue and nation.

On my way out, I couldn’t resist visiting the three demonstrators who had caught my eye on my way in. “The Call leads to hell,” their signs warned. An exasperated audience surrounded each. “Who are you?” one listener demanded. Her answer came as a pamphlet from a group called A True Church (www.atruechurch.info). It featured a list of the false teachers and enemies of the faith the protesters had come to warn us about: “Benny Hinn, Billy Graham, Bobgan’s, Charles Spurgeon, Charles Stanley, Chuck Smith, David W. Cloud, Dr. [David] Jeremiah, the Early Church Fathers, Glen Conjurske, Greg Laurie, Jack Hayford, James Dobson, John Hagee, John MacArthur, Keith Green, Miles McPherson, Paul Chappell, Raul Ries, Steven Shoemaker, T.D. Jakes, Tony Evans, Vernon McGee, Catholicism, Central Christian, Church of Christ, COGIC, Coptic Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Laurel Glen Bible, March for Jesus,
Mormonism, New Life Center, New Wine Christian Center, Promise Keepers, Seventh Day Adventists, Stine Road Baptist, Valley Baptist, Valley Bible, Weigh Down Workshop.” Whew!

“How many are there in your church?” another asked.

“Thirty-five.”

“What is so wrong with tens of thousands of Christians praying together?” asked someone else.

“They are ecumenical.”

It hit me that day that there are two kinds of evangelicals: those who make distinctions, and those who don’t. The dialectic of hospitality and separation is what brings tens of thousands into the Rose Bowl to plead for the Spirit to come, and also brings three outside it to warn us away. It is the key to who we are.

The Message of a Mixed Metaphor

“You are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9). Praise God that Paul wrote before the rule against mixed metaphors. Ramming these two images together exposes the dialectic that keeps evangelicals together even as it pulls us apart.

The trick is to keep the metaphor mixed, to be both a field and a building at the same time. Theologians call it “apostolicity.” The apostolic way embodies unity and difference with practices of both continuity and discontinuity.

We evangelicals have been about as good at that as the Corinthians. Eschatological confusion has created unnecessary and unhealthy tension between these practices in our movement. Inside the Rose Bowl, the people of God are a field of possibility. It lacks everything but the promise that alone assures a harvest. Under the picket signs, the people of God are a strong building. It lacks nothing so long as it stays securely on its one foundation. One looks up
and so it finds itself glancing outward; the other looks down and finds itself drawing inward. Each looks at the other and sees an enemy, yet at the same time it sees itself.

*Evangelical* is an instance of what W.B. Gallie called an essentially contested concept:

Those who use it also debate its meaning insolubly but fruitfully. Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston describe evangelicalism in terms of multiple centers that are more easily identified than the movement’s shifting and overlapping boundaries. The three centers embody practices of confession, personal commitment to Christ, and evangelism.

The Protestant Orthodox agenda centers in dogmatically *conserving* the apostolic heritage. It draws boundaries and looks for commonalities in order to identify “evangelical” communities and beliefs (as in the five Fundamentals or the current battle over divine foreknowledge). The Pietist agenda focuses on *renewing* the apostolic relationship between God and his people. It draws practical and experiential distinctions within dogmatic communities (such as experiences and evidences of spiritual rebirth) and overlooks denominational boundaries that would divide people of such living faith. The missionary agenda focuses on *spreading* the apostolic message into and across cultures. It draws distinctions between Church and world and strives to overcome domestic and foreign cultural boundaries that impede the gospel’s progress (with strategies for inculturation, social relevance, church growth, and cultural transformation).

Our respect for theological boundaries is an evangelical strength. Our disrespect for them is another. Apostolicity makes us anxious to remain faithful to the apostles as irreplaceable foundations of the Church, yet it also makes us restless to follow the apostles to the ends of the earth.
Complex Corinthians

Similar concerns drove the apostle and church-planter to the nations. One marvels to watch Paul struggle in his first letter to the wretched Corinthians to strike a balance between rhetoric of exclusion and rhetoric of inclusion. Chapter 1 assails them for their partisanship; chapter 5 commands them to excommunicate an unrepentant brother. Chapters 2-3 distinguish between the spiritually mature and the immature, then group them together as God’s temple, then sort them into workers of gold, silver, hay, and straw, then hand them all things and forbid any to boast. Chapter 4 contrasts its readers with the apostles, only to beg them to erase the contrast through imitation. Chapter 6 draws a bright line separating the holy body of Christ from the unholy world; chapter 7 blurs it with mixed marriages that sanctify unbelievers, unmixed marriages that secularize believers’ lives, and singleness that ordains the status quo.

But Paul isn’t moderating difference with indifference, as we might. For him exclusion and inclusion are two sides of the same coin. Pauline life is not an Anglican *via media*, but a bold Lutheran dialectic.

We are only halfway through the letter – but Paul’s wearying rabbinical intensity is part of his power, so it is only fair to press on. Chapter 8 proclaims freedom to eat religiously tainted food; chapter 9 submits to others’ scruples for the sake of freedom’s good news; chapter 10 warns of the plagues that punish idolatry. Chapter 10 assures of liberty at table with pagans; chapter 11 reminds of obligation at table with fellow believers. Chapter 11 prioritizes the body into male and female, then refuses to prioritize the body into factions. Chapters 12-14 envision spiritual gifts in a participatory democracy of love that bears with one another, then in a hierarchy of order that defers to the stranger. Chapter 15 takes on the theological ignorance of
some, then promises the eschatological transformation of all. Chapter 16 is a feast of greetings of faraway assemblies, a curse upon hearers with no love for the Lord, and grace and love for all.

What would this letter be without its respect for boundaries? What would it be without its disrespect for boundaries – sometimes the very same boundaries? Ecumenists see the Corinthian church as a chaos of sects at war with one another. Puritans see it as an undisciplined and undiscerning mob. Both are right.

Paul’s task is evangelical theology’s task. We are here to do more than restore unity or impose order. Our job is to nurture holiness in a holy fellowship made to live radically for both the Lord who is its head and the world that is its beloved enemy.

**Apostolic Boundaries**

It does not help that we face this task in a western setting that tends to dichotomize the heart, head, and hands. Some camps play favorites: Fundamentalists, the head faction, may reduce mission to protection and promotion of conceptual theological purity; Pietists, the heart faction, to pursuit of personal spiritual experience across the ecumenical spectrum; and missionaries themselves, the hand faction, to assisting or resisting cultural adaptation and participation. Others may try to strike a balance by partitioning them: in a Christian college the Bible department may become the reactionary guardian of theological orthodoxy, chapel the promoter of devotional revival, and the ministry office the pursuer of cross-cultural adaptation.

Moreover, we face the task of sanctification in a political setting determined by robust civil identities. Walter Russell Mead’s *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* sketches a typology of four schools of American foreign policy. According to Mead, businesslike Hamiltonians pursue American integration into international affairs only on the terms that best serve American interests and particularly American commerce. Diplomatic
Wilsonians concentrate on propagating American ideals across the world – democracy, human rights, and so on – and unapologetically seek to influence other states’ domestic affairs in order to advance them. Populist Jacksonians defend American honor and life when provoked, are proud of military strength, and are unembarrassed about their lower regard for the well-being of America’s rivals and enemies. Protective Jeffersonians fear the threat foreign entanglements pose to fragile democracy at home, making them diplomatically cautious and sometimes even isolationist.

Mead’s characterizations have provoked lively debates about each school and about their current conflagration in post-9/11 America. We need not join those discussions to see how American visions have seeped into modern notions of Christian mission. The concerns of these four camps just happen to resemble concerns of different camps and different eras in American Christianity. Wilsonian internationalism haunts the mainline bodies that have turned mission into interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Jacksonian patriotism animates the restorationist Christian right. The Constantinian agendas of the oldest and most established churches have a Hamiltonian ring. Jeffersonian worries reinforce the vast self-protective subcultures of Dispensationalism. Our political culture has long been influencing how American evangelicals interpret the apostolic mandate. The picketers outside the Rose Bowl are Jeffersonian protectionists as well as Protestant Orthodox cult-watchers; the masses inside are Wilsonian expansionists as well as Pietistic revivalists.

By turning fellowships into factions and fellow workers into rivals, all these camps grieve the Spirit who confers holiness. We have the same problem as the Corinthians: not too many boundaries nor too few, but boundaries that are out of step with the Holy Spirit. We keep trying
to build crops and plant buildings! Our strategies fail to sanctify not because they are too narrow or too wide, but because they compromise apostolicity.

The word “apostle” simply means “one who is sent.” Jesus is God’s apostle (Heb. 3:1); the Twelve who journey through Israel are his apostles (Matt. 10:2); his commissioned witnesses are apostles to the nations (Acts 1:26). At its heart, apostolicity describes the deep continuity between the Church’s original witnesses and the eschatological frontier at its expanding margins. To be the apostolic Church is to be sent into the world bearing the same Christ the Father sent there.

Yet when the apostolic Word meets the world, their creation is truly new. The field’s harvest embodies Christ in unpredictable ways. The new building’s architecture is still cruciform, but freshly stylized. The church’s polities shifting through the centuries tell the tale: Hebraic presbyteries morphed into Roman hierarchies, then European fiefdoms, then American democracies, and now global corporations. Every local adaptation has had its excesses and dangers. Yet each has respected Christ’s headship in a distinctive way.

At first the distinctions seem like repudiations of Christian unity. Yet in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that the vast cultural diversity of worldwide Christianity is the best confirmation of Christ’s true universality. If Jesus were King merely of the Jews, then accepting his governance would mean becoming culturally Jewish, as becoming a Sunni Muslim means becoming more and more culturally Arab. Because Jesus reigns among all peoples rather than over against them, all discover that we can look like him without having to look like each other.

Nevertheless, every one of the gospel’s culture crossings has raised tensions among the old creation, the earlier new creation of prior faith, and the later new creation of frontier faith.
“Stay off the slippery slope of accommodation,” apostolic elders urge, tempted to protect their heritage by controlling the apostolic center. “Stop withdrawing into irrelevance,” apostolic youth reply, tempted to keep their edge with pragmatic alliances with the world. Reactionaries try to build crops, and accommodationists to plant buildings. As they set themselves against each other, the old creation gains a foothold in the new.

Surrendering to either temptation causes evangelical talk of identity and distinctiveness to metastasize from apostolicity’s servant to its threat. Yet we fight these temptations as much as we fight each other. Our coalition building also springs out of our love and hatred of boundaries, not just our hyperdenominationalism; our cross-cultural zeal, not just our ethnocentrism; our burden for others, not just our spiritual elitism.

Members of A True Church – whose evangelical charity keeps them from naming themselves The True Church – took the time to come to Pasadena to take their message to thousands of evangelical heretics and to strengthen fellowship with whatever true believers they might find there. The Call took the time to bring together tens of thousands of brothers and sisters to beg the Holy Spirit to fall afresh on their dead churches and oblivious cities. I find both of these efforts signs of hope.

Vestiges of apostolicity – and really much more than just vestiges – remain even at the extremes of our complicated and self-mutilating movement. Neither God’s field nor God’s building has finally conquered the other. Our farmers and our builders keep entering the fray not just out of a wish to prevail, but also out of a hope that we can work things out.

The reason Paul could address his letter to all the saints in Corinth is the reason we all can be called evangelicals. It is a label I still bear with pride.