

Ward, Ted W. 2013. Unholy Dissonance: A Threat to Evangelicalism. *Common Ground Journal* v11 n1 (Fall): 80-82. ISSN: 15479129. URL: www.commongroundjournal.org.

Abstract

"I found the sketchy original outline for 'Unholy Dissonance' in some materials I had been planning for a possible submission to *Christianity Today* sometime in 2010. The issue I was trying to get at is that we weaken the very cause we claim to stand for when we expect people to hear the claims we make about Jesus if they aren't seeing it acted out in our lives." (Ward) This essay indicates values Ward sees as essential bedrock for education regardless of mode.

This new century could begin with a rising spirit of hope. The ups and downs of world-wide political strife and economic mismanagement have brought a series of disappointments to almost everyone. Through it all, the church in America has continued in its gradual decline. Although "evangelicalism" has become a more widely recognized category of Christian affiliation, the category seems more and more internally inconsistent and politically explosive. From its origination in reaction to the "modernism" issue in Christian theology, it has come to designate a mixed bag of "off-shoots" ranging from a few very tightly defined denominations and sub-denominations to a large assortment of independent, autonomous, and self-designated local churches, including the clusters of video-churches and the converted shopping malls identified as "mega-churches."

As a social scientist, my life-task is to identify, to attempt to understand, and then to describe and communicate with reason and clarity what I perceive in the world around me. Sometimes an academic person becomes mired in complex explanations and unessential details about matters that need only a simple and clear illustration. Jesus knew this human tendency. He avoided it by commonly using stories and allegorical illustrations. Rarely did he speak to groups without a parable at the base of His message. I am quite willing to follow His example and find the easiest way to explain anything important, especially a dilemma.

The dilemma in evangelicalism emerges because it has become schismatic. Even the meaning of *Christian* is vulnerable. The schism confronts evangelicalism, adherents and critics alike, with a dilemma of the most difficult sort: how can fish that breathe so much air hope to swim? Perhaps more to the point, how can it be that white paint and black paint don't mix and change into gray paint but instead become polka-dotted? *Believers* are rated according to the words they use to "witness." Witness is assumed to be a verbal task. One way or another, the distinctive of being Christian in the thinking of many evangelicals is a matter of words. *I believe that the source of the dichotomy and thus the source of weakness in evangelicalism lies in the distaste for service. Witness is a good word. Telling people about Jesus is what Christians do. Quality in the Christian life is somehow wrapped up in knowing how to tell it well. The it is "the plan of salvation" or "the four spiritual laws" or whatever verbal formula is the latest evangelical catchword.*

Depending on the reader's socio-political leaning, noting the trend in *Christianity Today* brings either reassurance or further evidence that not all is well in Christian America. Not long ago I was asked by a student, "How should I answer the question, 'What does it mean to be a Christian?'" My first thought, nurtured by the rhetoric of many sound sermons was to answer with a definition based on a well-grounded

Bible based statement something like this: “A Christian is a person who has believed the truth of the Holy Bible, confessed before God that sin has affected his or her life and moral standards, and accepted Jesus Christ as God’s gift for the salvation of any and every person who so believes, confesses, and accepts.” Most evangelicals, and many Christians with variations on these understandings, have answered the question with these three steps: *Believe*, *Confess*, and *Accept*. Suddenly it dawned on me that these three steps can be accomplished silently with one’s hands folded. That is what being a Christian means? Yes, and no. The *yes* is for the words the *no* is for the action! And here is where the evangelical distinctive falls apart and the schisms set in. Action suggests work, effort, doing something about it. Right. And an important theological debate has long raged over the issue of whether salvation is more a matter of God’s actions or human actions. The deeper issue is more valid. Can one gain salvation through the quality, amount, and extent of efforts and actions. The evangelical position on this matter is clear and simple. *No*. This rules out candles burned, rituals performed, penitence penalties accepted, as well as confessional ceremonies and prayers to saints. All of this is deemed extra-biblical and is unacceptable for evangelicals.

The origin of the assertion that Protestants are best defined by what they will not do has roots in avoiding the characteristic Roman Catholic practices. But this posture really does leave a gap for evangelicalism to fall into.

The gap itself is only half the issue; the greater problem is the dichotomy between witness and service. The assumption that these two actions really are to some degree competing and in conflict is largely unexamined and too easily overlooked. Indeed, herein lies a grave threat to evangelicalism, the tension between *witness* and *service*. What the inseparable components of the Christian life should be, for many evangelicals, gives rise to conflict. REAL evangelicals put their priority on verbal *witnessing*. They also *believe* that service is a nice idea, if there is any time left. Others hold the opposite position

The majority tends toward verbal behavior. Service is of secondary importance. Test this out wherever you will. Ask an evangelical Christian to give you a valid answer to this question. Which is most important for a Christian? There are three possible answers: “Service,” “Witness,” and “Not a good question.” Unless you suggest the validity of this third response, you will rarely hear it or the first response either from evangelicals. Someday an interesting book could be based on the second chapter of James. It might be entitled, *Dead Faith*.

One way to understand the complex mess that has accumulated around and within evangelicalism is to reflect on the two major themes: *Witness* and *Service*. Some of the most ardent evangelicals are clearly more committed to witness than to service, and indeed they are observably more invested in it. Those in this sector are more likely to support preaching ministries, on the air or otherwise, external to their home churches. Evangelicals of the other sector are committed to service if it enables them to engage in verbal testimony. Thus the meaning of service to others, regardless of their standing before God, is at best a conditional responsibility and never as important as “telling people about Jesus.” This dichotomy between witness and service assumes that “Jesus” written on the cup is more important than the water in the cup. It may be that such Christians expect their witness more to “tell” than to “show.”

If all these Christians were to see the importance of both aspects of Christian witness, two outcomes would likely result. First, Christians would, as whole, have a more effective voice in world affairs, one consequence of giving more energy and resources to collaboration than to undercutting other Christians. Second, the important effects of evangelization and missionary outreach would be increased.

The Gospel seems evident. Christians are to be witnesses to the saving grace of God evidenced in Jesus Christ. At the very same time, and in ways that are completely harmonized, Christians are to be

witnesses, giving evidence through words and deeds that Jesus Christ is savior and Lord of the universe, and with similar commitment and vigor, to undertake and to fulfill the calling as servants, humbly utilizing the resources God provides to relieve, comfort, and to heal, fulfilling the works of compassion and assistance, thus to be engaged in the saving and restorative work of God in this fallen and broken world. Fulfilling these two grand tasks *together* is what it means to be a Christian.

To engage in one of these tasks, while excluding or ignoring the other indeed suggests bias or incompleteness of the Christian. To the extent that evangelicalism falls into such a flaw it loses claim to its identity as *evangelical*.