

This thinksheet, in preparation for and as a (formal or informal) presentation to the Craigville '84 (June 12-17) meeting of ISAE (Inst. for the Study of Am. Evangelicals), is a challenge not to the organization's existence but to its achieving goals appropriate to its existence. It's a response to the only paper I received, viz., Geo. Marsden's "Proposal for Discussion at Craigville Conference 1984." Nothing personal: I've never met Geo., know nothing of him other than that he's an ed. of the REFORMED JOURNAL, a periodical I respect. As for form, I choose to write him a letter on his nine "purposes and goals that we should have in studying American evangelicalism and Am. religion and culture more generally....What do we hope to accomplish as scholars in the next 20 years?"

Geo., "scholar" and "Evangelical" are uneasy bedfellows, in my experience. An Evangelical is, by definition, a propagandist; and propagandists are willing to betray their mothers, to say nothing of truth, in getting their job done. Jesus says they make converts to hell, not heaven (Mt.23.15). One-half century (+ 3 months) ago I was converted, became an Evangelical, and so am still; and, through all these years, my central anguish about Evangelicalism is its facile willingness to crucify truth/facts/data in the interest of rhetoric and successful persuasion (and self-confirmation). I am the only son of a NY judge whose religion was truth and who (not without good reason!) despised Evangelicalism, which he considered a shame to Jesus and a corruption of humanity; and who, though he lovingly supported all my passions and endeavors, was understandably never reconciled to my association with Evangelicals (though, in the early 1930s, he did not object to my association with Communists, who, though they also were truth-distorting propagandists, at least had the virtue of caring about the Depression-caused suffering of "the masses," whereas Evangelicals seemed concerned only to get souls to heaven). (In my 1966 NCC debate with Billy Graham, I accused him, on this point, of Orphism. Subsequently, he gave more attention to the social context and social implications of conversion.)...Of course all scholars have a point of view, but an ax to grind? I have the pleasant feeling that ISAE is trying to further point-of-view scholarship while rejecting ax-to-grind scholarship, and that is very good news indeed! God bless you if that's what you're really up to, and may you be up to it!...Now for my commentary, point by point:

1. You want to "help the leadership and reflective people in the evangelical community to see that their beliefs reflect not only some eternal verities but also the conditioned historical circumstances of a movement." Wonderful service to one function of scholarship, which is to humiliate arrogance (and thus be "gospel preparation" for repentance and authentic life). In this, what is authentic witness, in contrast to sellout accommodationism? As pastor, college and university professor, seminary dean, and executive in a national church office, as well as participant and president at a number of levels of the conciliar movement, I have wrestled with this question of faithfulness/betrayal. To go silent on the verbal and vital witness of Jesus is to betray the Faith; to dig in against honest dialog with outsiders and internal dissidents is to betray the Faith. How, now, be faithful to the God of Truth and Love vis-a-vis insiders, dissidents, and "cultured despisers"?After the 1966 debate (NCC Triennium, Florida), Billy, time and again asked to stand against me (here and in Britain), said, "Doctor Elliott is as Evangelical as I am, but he has a different way of being Evangelical, and he has a different task." Billy's magnanimity has always struck me as a miracle of grace. He didn't go to seminary, though many of his fellows did--and I, and Carl Henry, had them in class at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in the early 1940s as they were graduated from Wheaton; but Billy understood and understands my burden.

2. You want "our scholarship to point out the subtle and ironic aspects of our traditions and of the Christian tradition generally." And here you allude (to my delight) to Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian historical irony, and hope that your tolerance for & patience with complexity (though this is my interpretation of your position) will "help people not favorable to Christianity to see some of the nuances of some aspects of the movement that they despise." Cheers on all this!....Are you aware that this frame and mood of mind was considered, in the days of the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy, a sellout to Modernism? In 1943 I was on the committee that shaped up the doctrinal statement of the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action, and I can witness to the dominance then and there of a narrow-minded, mean-spirited antiModernism (which was a trial to my mind and a pain to my soul: that year, I got the ThD from Northern Baptist Seminary and passed all but my thesis-defense for the PhD at the University of Chicago Divinity School--neither school believing me honest to be taking a degree from the other!).

3. Bucking for academic respectability and door-openings ain't exactly noble, but it's OK: how else be in dialog with humanity's other options? And bravo for your will to listen, for God oft speaks with a strange voice. ...4. Amen, too, for your desire to translate from "the academic" to "the questions within the evangelical tradition."....5. And for "how much, and in what ways, we should be using history to explicitly edify for a popular audience," helping Evangelicals "take a more critical look at their heritage, to see the ironies and ambiguities in it, to get rid of the nonsense." (Here you refer to Wilbur's boy Don, who wrote DISCOVERING AN EVANGELICAL HERITAGE. I persuaded the father to come to summer seminary with me (and Carl Henry), 1937: Winona Lake School of Theology, which was Evangelical (with many liberal teachers) and, at the time, the only summer seminary in America.)....6. "Is enough of this (pop works such as Eerdmans' HANDBOOK FOR AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY) done without us doing it?" Yes, I say. Party-spirited publishing has its place, but a smaller one than getting the Evangelical word out under any label. Instead of being naive enough to imagine we can teach the general public to read nihil-obstat Evangelical works, let's educate Evangelicals to read solid stuff not bearing the Evangelical stamp of approval.....7. As to whether Evangelicals should produce texts to be used in Christian schools, I say yes only if the quality is at least as high as that of comparable secular texts. Most of the "Christian school" stuff I've seen is no honor to Jesus or anybody else....8. Yes, Evangelical historians and sociologists should provide, for the Church and for secularists, perspective on where we've been, where we are, and where we can/should go....9. I say a flat no to "an evangelical Christian university where we can offer PhDs," but I say yes to such "new structures" for seminary curricula as "contextualizing theological study by analyzing the cultural setting in which we operate" at home (as we do, abroad). I've long been related to a seminary that since 1969 has been doing just that: NY Theological Seminary ("Continuing The Biblical Seminary in NY").

Finally, "They'll know we are Christians by our love," not by our scholarship. Austin Craig, after whom Craigville was named, had both--but love above scholarship. Further, intellectualism and scholarship are enemies, and hermeneutic brilliance can make any paradigm plausible and even persuasive. (In a 1942 debate between Carl Henry and me, each was to interpret a passage presented by the other. Carl masterfully interpreted what I called "a Shakespeare sonnet" (which I'd made up of various Shakespeare lines, to trick him into an innocently fraudulent performance).) Evangelical thought has been too much syllogistic sense-making and too little hair-and-skin, house- and street- and power-relevance.