"Diagnosing an "Unholy Alliance": The Radical Black Evangelical Critique of White Evangelical Nationalism"

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ABSTRACT

Largely forgotten by black theology and evangelical studies scholars alike, the "radical black evangelical" movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was organized primarily as an explicit critique of and alternative to a white evangelical culture shot through with racism. This paper argues that a number of these "new black evangelical" thinkers—figures like Tom Skinner, William Bentley, and William Pannell—not only diagnosed the un-interrogated white cultural assumptions of mainstream U.S. American evangelicalism, they also offered trenchant critiques of white evangelicalism's entanglement with U.S. American civil religion. Such critiques, I will further suggest, presciently prefigured much of the contemporary "identity crisis" in U.S. American evangelicalism by more than four decades.

INTRODUCTION

In the first edition of the first volume of Wilmore and Cone's landmark *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, in his essay, "The New Black Evangelicals," Ronald C. Potter explained that, sometime during the late 1960s, a "new breed of Black Evangelicals" had emerged, lamented that, "to date little if anything has been written about the history, theology, and current debate among" this group, and aimed to remedy this oversight. Recognizing that, despite holding theologically evangelical beliefs, the vast majority of the "mainline Black churches" were not the least bit interested in being known as evangelicals, Potter defined the black evangelical *movement* as consisting of "those that adhere not just to doctrine but to a mentality, a subculture, a lifestyle." 20th century black *evangelicals*, he explained, were by and large a product of the "'Bible School' and 'Christian College' movement of the 1950s," were thus united by a shared proximity to the particular, trans-denominational, "post-World War II phenomenon" sometimes described as "neo-evangelicalism," and had thereby developed some striking commonalities—pointing out, for instance, that black evangelicals of the early to mid 1960s mostly viewed the mainline Black church tradition as having "very few 'biblically sound' churches."[1]

Although, according to Potter's account, "during most of the turbulent sixties, [these] Black Evangelicals remained conspicuously quiet," that all changed when "a vocal minority of militant Black Evangelicals came on the scene" by decade's end. Recounting how, as the decade wore on, many black evangelicals had increasingly realized that they had received more than just a "biblically sound" education in the predominantly white evangelical institutions in which they had been trained—discovering that these institutions had also given them "a White reactionary world-view"—he explained that, "In short, mainline Black Evangelicalism had tended to see Black Church/Black Christianity through White eyes." Radicalized by the realization that what they thought was an evangelical view of the world was in fact a *white* evangelical view of the world—

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[1] See Ronald C. Potter, "The New Black Evangelicals," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, vol. 1, 1st edition, eds. Gayraud S. Whitmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 302-309, "new breed of Black Evangelicals" and "to date little if anything has been written about…" quotes on page 302, "mainline black churches" "those that adhere not just to doctrine…" "'Bible School' and 'Christian College' movement…" "post-World War II phenomenon" and "very few 'biblically sound' churches" quotes on page 303.

one which, crucially, could not "speak meaningfully to the social, economic, spiritual, and political powerlessness in America's Black communities"—in Potter's estimation, by the end of the 1960s, a "new breed of black evangelicals" had thus fully emerged.[2]

Developing among a small group of self-consciously evangelical black Christians as a direct response to their disillusioning experiences in a predominantly white evangelical subculture shot through with racism, from the outset, the radical black evangelical movement of the late 1960s and 1970s indicted with its very existence a mainstream evangelical establishment that had proven unable to reckon with its un-interrogated racism and unwilling to acknowledge black evangelical concerns. Led by figures like Tom Skinner, William (Bill) Pannell, and William H. Bentley, the movement, with one or two notable exceptions, has unfortunately fallen almost completely out of the historical record—Potter's essay, for instance, was dropped from the second edition of the Cone-Wilmore volume.[3]

Since I cannot do it justice in this paper, for the next few minutes I will focus on one particularly recurrent theme of the radical black evangelical movement—the trenchant critique of the white cultural assumptions and nefarious nationalism of mainstream evangelicalism—and will conclude by suggesting that this incisive and hauntingly prescient diagnosis prefigured much of the recent "identity crisis" among U.S. American evangelicals following the 2016 presidential election by more than four decades. So, toward that end, consider the following three examples.

II. THE RADICAL BLACK EVANGELICALS

a. William H. Bentley and the NBEA

Born in 1924 and raised in a Pentecostal tradition that didn't encourage his "insatiable quest for knowledge," William H. Bentley's first entrée into the wider evangelical world of the mid-20th century came through his study of founding neo-evangelical figures like Carl Henry. After disappointedly finding that many fundamentalists held "backward attitudes toward such an important issue as race in America," Bentley's journey "passing from Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism" eventually brought him to Fuller theological seminary, where, in 1959, he would become the first black graduate of the school's bachelor of divinity program. By the early 1960s, much to his dismay, Bentley had nonetheless realized that neither white fundamentalism nor the white neo-evangelicalism of places like Fuller were particularly hospitable environments for black Christians. After finding that he was not alone in this discovery, Bentley helped spearhead the development of the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA), first founded as the National Negro Evangelical Association in 1964, and served as the organization's Commissioner of Social Action for several years before his election as its president in 1970.[4]

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[2] Ibid., "during most of the turbulent sixties…" "a vocal minority of militant…" and "In short, mainline Black Evangelicalism…" quotes on page 304, "a White reactionary world-view" quote on page 303, "speak meaningfully to the…" quote on page 308, "new breed of black evangelicals" quote on page 302.

[3] For two notable exceptions, see Soong-Chan Rah, "In Whose Image: the Emergence, Development, and Challenge of African-American Evangelicalism," Doctoral Dissertation, Divinity School of Duke University, 2016; as well as Albert G. Miller, "The Rise of African-American Evangelicalism," in *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, ed. Peter W. Williams (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 259-269; see also the second edition of the Cone-Wilmore book, Gayraud S. Whitmore and James H. Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, vol. 1, 2nd edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

[4] For more on Bentley's life, see Kenan Heise, "Pentecostals' Rev. William Bentley," *The Chicago Tribune*, May 22, 1993, online at: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1993-05-22/news/9305220099_1_black-church-theology-fuller-theological-seminary; see also William H. Bentley and Ruth Lewis Bentley, "Reflections on the Scope and Function of a Black Evangelical Black Theology," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, eds. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1990) 299-333, "insatiable quest for knowledge" and "backward attitudes toward…" quotes on page 300, "passing from Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism" quote on page 299; for reference to Bentley's graduation from Fuller, see Miller, "The Rise of African-American Evangelicalism," 267; see also Albert G. Miller, "National Black Evangelical Association," *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, 2nd edition, vol. 4, ed. Colin A. Palmer (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006) 1606-7, *Gale Virtual Reference Library* (accessed December 16, 2018); as well as William H. Bentley, *The National Black Evangelical Association: Reflections on the Evolution of a Concept of Ministry*, revised edition (Chicago,

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, Bentley provided indispensible leadership to both the NBEA and to the burgeoning black evangelical movement, writing countless speeches, essays, and monographs, in which he dauntlessly argued that what black evangelicals needed was a black evangelical black theology. Suggesting, for instance, that black evangelicals should appreciate and learn from the pioneering work of black theologians like James Cone, he nonetheless stressed that radical black evangelicals had something unique to say to American theology. In his telling, what had passed for "evangelical theology" for most of the 20th century was tragically inseparable from a white worldview—a fact that made white evangelicals constitutionally incapable of reckoning with evangelicalism's role in America's long and lasting history of racial oppression—and it was thus entirely unsurprising that white evangelical theologians could so reliably be found aligned with the status-quo on matters of racial justice. Until back evangelicals were ready and willing to cast aside the white worldview lurking inside the evangelical theology that they had been taught, Bentley believed that they would never be able to develop their own distinctive, unapologetically black, but simultaneously and self-consciously evangelical or "biblical" voice.[5]

For that very reason, he consistently reiterated that the NBEA needed to become a wholly independent and self-sustaining organization totally free from white evangelical theological and financial paternalism. Describing his position as "evangelical Black Christian Nationalism," for the next several decades, Bentley served as the foremost advocate of a separatist, Black Nationalist, black evangelical worldview, offering it as a clear alternative to and replacement for the white U.S. American version of evangelical theology masquerading as just "evangelical theology," which white evangelicals seemed fundamentally unable to understand was both white and U.S. American.[6]

In Potter's telling, as "the 'godfather' of militant Black Evangelicals," Bentley was in fact "attempting to raise the social and ethnic consciousness of Black Christians years before Black Power was in vogue," he thus, "perhaps more than anyone else…contributed to a distinct Black Evangelical nationalist school of thought," and, in so doing, he thereby paved the way for the eventual emergence of the "new breed of black evangelicals." But, as Potter would later suggest, if Bentley was the godfather of the "Black Awakening of Negro evangelicals" in the late 1960s, then the title of radical black evangelicalism's "quintessential public intellectual" went to William Pannell.[7]

b. William Pannell and My Friend the Enemy

Born in Sturgis, Michigan in 1929, William Pannell first became "an anti-modernist, anti-

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IL: Published by William H. Bentley, 1979) 3-15.

[5] See Bentley, *The National Black Evangelical Association*, "Chapter 2: Earlier Leadership and Organizational Methodology," 16-26, "Chapter 3: The Cruciality of Methodological Strategy: The 'Umbrella Concept' Revisited," 27-33,"Chapter 10: White Christians: Members, Ministry and NBEA!," 100-116; as well as William H. Bentley*, The Relevance of a Black Evangelical Black Theology For American Theology* (Chicago, IL: BECN, 1981); see also William H. Bentley, "Reflections," in *The Chicago Declaration*, ed. Ronald J. Sider (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1974) 135-6; and William H. Bentley, "Bible Believers in the Black Community," in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They are Changing*, revised edition, eds. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1977) 128-41; see also William H. Bentley, "Toward a Biblical Black Theology," *The Other Side*, July-August 1975, 20-3; for more on the discussion of black theology in the NBEA, see also Jimmy Locklear, "Theology-Culture Rift Surfaces Among Black Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, May 23, 1980, 44; as well as John Maust, "The NBEA: Striving to Be Both Black and Biblical," *Christianity Today*, June 27, 1980, 58-9.

[6] See Potter, "The New Black Evangelicals," 305; see also William H. Bentley, "Black Christian Nationalism: An Evangelical Perspective," *Black Books Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 26-31, 66, "evangelical Black Christian Nationalism," quote on page 29.

[7] See Potter, "The New Black Evangelicals," "the 'godfather' of militant Black Evangelicals" "attempting to raise the social…" and "perhaps more than anyone else…" quotes on page 305, "new breed of black evangelicals" quote on page 302; see also Ronald C. Potter, "Race, Theological Discourse & the Continuing American Dilemma," in *The Gospel in Black & White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation*, ed. Dennis L. Ockholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997) 27-36, "quintessential public intellectual" quote on 32-3, "Black Awakening of Negro evangelicals" quote on page 33.

RSV, anti-World or National Council and anti-Roman Catholic" kind of Christian—in other words, a fundamentalist—while attending a predominantly white evangelical Bible College. Graduating in 1951 having learned to think "white thoughts about black people," he worked for several years an evangelist and pastor, and was eventually appointed director of leadership training for the pan-evangelical organization Youth for Christ in 1964—a job that lasted only four years due in large part to the fact that the group was not particularly open to his emphasis on the need for "urban ministry" and social action.[8]

By the time he left Youth for Christ in 1968, Pannell had spent years navigating the kinds of predominantly white evangelical spaces in which he had been asked to "sing one of your songs" or to "sing 'your national anthem,'" instructed that his bitterness over the "race problem" would only hurt his "cause," told that no responsible person could support the violence incited by the Civil Rights marches, and reminded that, as an evangelical, he should know better than to imagine that laws would change anything anyway when it was really hearts that needed changing. Weary of having to explain "what it was like being a Negro in America" to white evangelicals who seemed all-too-willing to call him brother and invite him to speak to their churches but who simultaneously seemed to worry that he "might just show up at their favorite bank and request to borrow enough money to move next door," that same year, Pannell published a book with a title that left little to the imagination: the searing 1968 volume, *My Friend, The Enemy*.[9]

For Pannell, the book was both a "personal confession and an accusation." Admitting that he had mistakenly believed that the Civil Rights Movement didn't have much to do with him as a Northerner, he now confessed that he knew just how wrong he was and why: "Wrong because I underestimated my own pride of race and overestimated the compassion and commitment to justice of my white friends." In light of the newfound recognition that his white evangelical friends' constant probing of his views on Martin Luther King Jr. and Civil Rights, their denunciations of "the demonstrators, the liberals, [and] the activists," and their admonishments that, "you just can't force these things," were merely the "games conservatives play," Pannell pulled no punches. He told them, for instance:

> Don't preach love to me. Especially if you intend I do all the loving. Amazing how white people who have owned black people have a way of demanding that we love everybody. What right has the oppressor to demand that his victim be saved from sin?…Because you see, I know that the same conservative brother who refuses to link my social needs with his preaching of the Gospel is the same man who lobbies against the Supreme Court, fluoride in the water, and pornographic literature…But mention the inhumanity of a society which with unbelievable indifference imprisons the 'souls of black folks,' and these crusaders begin mumbling about sin. All right. I'll play the game, my brother. Whose sin shall we talk about?[10]

According to Pannell's diagnosis, the hypocrisy of his white evangelical friends' responses to the Civil Rights Movement was part and parcel of their underlying, unquestioned partisan loyalty and their uncritical American nationalism. He saw it during his college years at white evangelical institutions—suggesting, for instance that, "Sadly for me, and conceivably for non-white students on similar campuses today, this conservative brand of Christianity perpetuates the

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[8] See "Biography," Collection 498: Interviews of William E. Pannell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton, Illinois, collection description available online at: https://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/498.htm#2; see also William E. Pannell, *My Friend, The Enemy* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1968), "an anti-modernist, anti-RSV…" quote on page 50, "white thoughts about black people" quote on page 52; as well as William E. Pannell, Interviews by Robert Schuster, February 28, 2000 and August 18, 2003, Collection 498, audio tapes T4 and T6 respectively, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton, Illinois.

[9] See Pannell, *My Friend, The Enemy*, 61-75, "sing one of your songs" and "sing 'your national anthem'" quotes on page 14, "race problem" quote on page 118, "what it was like being…" quote on page 61, "might just show up at…" quote on page 74.

[10] Ibid., "personal confession and an accusation" quote on page 119, "Wrong because I underestimated…" quote on page 57, "the demonstrators, the liberals, [and] the activists" and "you just can't force these things" quotes on page 63, "games conservatives play" quote on page 61, "Don't preach love to me…" quote on pages 64 and 65.

myth of white supremacy [and] tends also to associate Christianity with American patriotism (it's called nationalism when we criticize its manifestation in Africa), free enterprise, and the Republican party." And he saw it again in the conservative political backlash of the 1966 elections, judging, for example that, "Hard-nosed bigots didn't swing those elections, secure those results. The poor surely didn't, nor others similarly handicapped. My conservative friend with the firm grip on the status quo, cast his Republican vote."[11]

When the book stunned many of his white friends, Pannell wasn't particularly surprised: they simply would and could not recognize what the country looked like to a black person watching black children bleeding in the streets. "But what would my white brother know of this?," he queried, "He taught me to sing 'Take the World But Give Me Jesus.' I took Jesus. He took the world and then voted right wing to insure his property rights."[12]

c. Tom Skinner and Urbana 1970

The final example of the radical black evangelical critique of 20th century white evangelicalism's pro-American pro-Republican outlook comes from the dynamic speaker, fiery evangelist, and eventual NFL chaplain, Tom Skinner. Consider, for instance, the electric 1970 speech that he delivered to more than 11,000 mostly evangelical college students at that year's meeting of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's annual missions conference in Urbana, Illinois.[13]

Skinner began his address, "The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism," by giving the students a whirlwind overview of America's 350 years of racist history to disabuse them of, "any illusions that America was founded on godly principles." After highlighting the role that "a group of ad hoc biblical dispensationalists" played in justifying slavery based on the so-called "curse of Ham"—and noting that he could name at least a half-dozen Christian colleges that still taught this kind of interpretation—recounting the "wave of lynchings and murders and drownings and disappearances of black people unequalled in the history of the Western world" that followed reconstruction, and pointing to the ongoing horrors faced by black people forced to live in the nation's segregated ghettos, Skinner explained why the self-made mythos of the American dream was a farce. Calling "the bootstrap theory…one of the most damnable lies being preached in America today," he suggested that, "in the case of black people, it is difficult to pull yourself up by the bootstraps when somebody keeps cutting the straps."[14]

Though America at large received its fair share of Skinner's criticism, he saved his severest indictment for the, "evangelical, Bible-believing, fundamental, orthodox, conservative church," thundering against both evangelical responsibility for underwriting slavery and segregation and evangelical complicity in the yet-ongoing oppression of black people. "Understand," he noted…

> …that for those of us who live in the black community, it was not the evangelical who came and taught us our worth and dignity as black men. It was not the Bible-believing fundamentalist who stood up and told us that black was beautiful. It was not the evangelical who preached to us that we should stand on our two feet and be men, be proud that black was beautiful and that God could work his life out through our redeemed blackness. Rather, it took Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown and the Brothers to declare to us our dignity. God will not be without a witness.[15]

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[11] Ibid., "Sadly for me…" quote on page 53, "Hard-nosed bigots didn't…" quote on page 72.

[12] Ibid., 6-7, "But what would my white brother know…" quote on page 7.

[13] For a retrospective profile of Skinner and his work, see Edward Gilbreath, "Thomas Skinner: A Prophet out of Harlem," *Christianity Today*, September 16, 1996, 36-43.

[14] See Tom Skinner, "The U.S. Racial Crisis and World Evangelism," in *Christ the Liberator: Urbana 70*, eds. John R. W. Stott et. al. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1971) 189-209, "any illusions that America…" quote on page 190, "a group of ad hoc biblical dispensationalists" quote on page 191, "wave of lynchings and murders…" quote on page 193, "the bootstrap theory…" and "in the case of black people…" quotes on page 200.

[15] Ibid., "evangelical, Bible-believing…" quote on page 194, "Understand that for those of us…" quote on page 199.

Worse still, while figures like King were offering a liberating word to the black community, evangelicals were calling for "law and order" and trying to "prove that Martin Luther King was not a Christian" or "that he did not believe the Word of God" as a way of dismissing him entirely. The black community would continue having "difficulty in coming to grips with the evangelical message of Jesus Christ," he suggested, so long as, "most evangelicals in this country who say that Christ is the answer go back to their suburban communities and vote for law-and-order candidates who will keep the system the way it is."[16]

In Skinner's judgment, white evangelicals had mistakenly placed their trust primarily in the worldly kingdom known as America, forgetting that the "kingdoms of the world" were demonic. Not him…

> That is why, just as the Indian Christians had to renounce the British Empire, I as a black Christian have to renounce Americanism. I have to renounce any attempt to wed Jesus Christ to the American system. I disassociate myself from any argument that says a vote for America is a vote for God. I disassociate myself from any argument that says God is on our side. I disassociate myself from any argument which says that God sends troops to Asia, that God is a capitalist, that God is a militarist, that God is the worker behind our system.[17]

In Potter's telling, given his blistering attack on "white evangelical racism, militarism, and American civil religion," Skinner, "who was previously tagged as the 'Black Billy Graham,'" had seemingly transformed into the, "Stokely Carmichael of the evangelical world."[18]

III. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, as promised, I briefly note only one of the many reasons that contemporary evangelicalism would do well to remember the radical black evangelical movement.

In the last two years, there has been a near endless tide of think pieces, articles, and, indeed, entire books trying to reckon with, explain, or quibble with the fact that 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump. A number of commentators have tried to remind the watching public that the numbers were far lower among non-white evangelicals. Some mainstream evangelical publications have tried to suggest that the numbers would be far lower if pollsters culled for *true* evangelicals instead of just self-identified evangelicals. A variety of high profile evangelical leaders have continuously tried to defend the president, while others have called closed-door meetings trying to address the apparent identity crisis currently facing American evangelicals stunned by their co-religionists' support for a man famous for openly flouting almost every item on the "family values" short list.

In one such meeting, held this past April at Wheaton College, Fuller Seminary president Mark Labberton told a small group of evangelical leaders, for instance, that, "The central crisis facing us is that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been betrayed and shamed by an evangelicalism that has violated its own moral and spiritual integrity." As the editor of a recent volume titled *Still Evangelical?*, Labberton reiterated this sentiment in his introduction—suggesting that, "evangelicalism in America has cracked, split on the shoals of the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath, leaving many wondering whether they want to be in or out of the evangelical tribe."[19]

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[16] Ibid., "law and order" "difficulty in coming to grips with…" and "most evangelicals in this country…" quotes on page 196, "prove that Martin Luther King…" and "that he did not believe…" quotes on page 199.

[17] Ibid., all quotes on page 204.

[18] See Potter, "The New Black Evangelicals," all quotes on page 304.

[19] See Mark Labberton, "Political Dealing: The Crisis of Evangelicalism," speech, April 16, 2018, Wheaton College, Chicago, IL, available online at: https://www.fuller.edu/posts/political-dealing-the-crisis-of-evangelicalism, "the central crisis…" quote is taken from this speech; see also Mark Labberton, "Introduction: Still Evangelical?," in *Still Evangelical?: Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning*, ed. Mark Labberton (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018) 1-17, "evangelicalism in America has cracked…" quote on page 1.

In his April speech, the president of evangelicalism's flagship seminary highlighted four areas in which contemporary evangelicalism's "violation of spiritual and moral character has shown itself": 1. A lust for power evidenced by evangelicals' alignment with forces that seek "dominance, control, supremacy, and victory over compassion and justice" 2. Support for economic policies "serving elite interests and disregarding the 99%" 3. An idolatrously self-interested nationalism that saw no problem with the current administration's "odious, pejorative, and totalizing…rhetoric…against our international neighbors" and 4. The "unreckoned-with reality of white evangelical racism [that] permeates American life." On that last point, Labberton noted that, "When some white evangelicals triumphantly pronounce that we now have 'the best president the religious right ever had,' the crisis it underscores to millions of people of color is not an indictment of our President as much as it is an indictment of white evangelicalism and a racist gospel."[20]

Well, yes, on the one hand, that seems about right. And maybe the fact that it came from someone in what is arguably one of the highest posts in the nebulous "evangelical establishment" lends extra weight to the statement. But then, on the other hand, perhaps evangelicals who are presently aghast at what has happened in the past two years and who are sympathetic to this diagnosis—which was made in 2018—might do well to consider that the radical black evangelicals of a past generation said precisely the same thing a full fifty years ago and begin reckoning instead with why it was that they were largely ignored and mostly forgotten in the first place.

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[20] All quotes are from Labberton, "Political Dealing: The Crisis of Evangelicalism."