

# Further Reflections



## The Stuff of Basic Evangelicalism

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Earlier today John R. W. Stott died at the age of 90.

I can't think of another evangelical theologian who would come close to Stott, both in the depth of his diligent scholarship and in the breadth of his unifying work in the global Body of Christ, especially through the Lausanne Movement.

I first heard him at Urbana in 1976 while I was still in college. That is where he delivered his message "The Living God is a Missionary God," which is the lead article for Lesson 1 of the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* course. Later, I spoke with him briefly during a meal at Billy Graham's Amsterdam 2000 gathering. Almost an octogenarian by then, Stott moved slowly but preached powerfully; the contrast was startling.

It is probable that his involvement in guiding and crafting the masterful Lausanne Covenant (1974) will be the most enduring single thing for which he will be remembered. As a part of the Statement Working Group at Lausanne's Cape Town 2010 meeting, I can say that we knew well that we were not trying to replace that document—which is amazingly timeless in many respects.

I wonder what evangelical leaders would write today? Could a wide-ranging group of committed believers agree on something important? Certainly, the Cape Town Commitment suggests that such agreement is possible (<http://www.lausanne.org/ctcommitment>).

But I am more and more convinced that, at another level, we must disagree—in love—for God to use our differences to further display His glory. In theory, we know God works through

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different approaches and giftings. In practice, however, we often we think we know what His preferred approach is for us—and for everyone else!

Since we aren't going to agree on every issue, we need to reemphasize the core: Repentance and salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Yet when I look at such a phrase, I am tempted to add more words in order to clarify its meaning still further, additional ideas that, according to my understanding of the gospel, are an integral part of the gospel. I include things like, "based on His death on the cross," "by the power of the Holy Spirit," and "resulting in fruit that remains."

What else do we think the unreached need to do or believe?

It's instructive to see how historian Mark Noll describes 18th-century evangelicalism, looking back on what he calls the period of "rising," when godly men like Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys led the charge. He summarizes the core of evangelicalism as follows:

- justification by faith, not human works;
- the sole sufficiency of Christ for salvation, without the need for human mediation;
- Christ's death on the cross as a once-for-all act, not something that needs to be repeated (as in the Catholic mass);
- belief in the final authority of the Bible, which every believer should read, rather than in the Bible as a

means, which the priest interprets;

- the priesthood of all believers, rather than inappropriate reliance on a class of priests ordained by the church.<sup>1</sup>

Noll's summary reflects the cultural, religious, and historical setting in which Edwards and the others ministered. I wonder what future historians, writing about today's evangelicals, would place on our list as we reach out in mission? Will they make a list of things we require people to stop doing before they can follow Christ? Or a list of things we have added to the basic requirement of faith. If so, that would reflect a dangerous loading on of works from our western Christian sub-culture.

Let's be very careful not to add to the basic "requirement" of faith or we could be in danger of loading on the works of our current western Christian sub-culture to the gospel.

It was Martin Luther's stand on *Sola fide*—faith alone—that began the Protestant Reformation. As we strategize to reach the unreached, we must clarify what "faith alone" means at some level. Certainly we include the works for which God has created us (Eph. 2:10).

So, echoing Stott's words in section #3 of the Lausanne Covenant, we: "... proclaim God's love for a world of sinners and ... invite everyone to respond to Him as Saviour and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith."<sup>f</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Noll, Mark 2003, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*, 16-17)