Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History and Culture in Regional Perspective

Edited by Donald M. Lewis and Richard V. Pierard (IVP Academic, 2014)

Reviewed by Herbert D. Miller

Global Evangelicalism is an important contribution to historical and theological studies because of its scope and accessibility. The book is made up of an introduction, ten essays which are divided into three sections, and a glossary and index. The first section deals with basic theoretical issues, such as defining evangelicalism, describing its theological impulses, and its relationship to globalization. The second section is the heart of the book and is composed of five regional case studies of evangelicalism. The third and shortest section comprises two chapters discussing important contemporary issues relevant to evangelicalism—ecumenism/inter-denominationalism and gender.

The purposes of the book are to provide a general introduction to evangelicalism and offer a global survey of the topic. The editors have two audiences in mind—“in house” readers and interested outsiders. I understand “in house” readers to include both evangelical scholars and evangelicals who are not academics. Those who do not have confessional evangelical commitments will still find the book to be a rigorous primer on the history of evangelicalism.

The first section deals with theoretical issues. In ch. 1, Mark Noll appropriates Bebbington’s Quadrilateral as the most useful definition of evangelicalism to date. These four “key ingredients”—conversion, biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism—provide the necessary framework for a substantive and organized description of the regional case studies to come later. For those readers who want to move beyond the aims of the book and offer comparative analyses of the regional case studies, the Quadrilateral provides the thematic unity to accommodate that goal. Additionally, Noll discusses the contestable terms “fundamentalism,” “Pentecostalism,” and “charismatics,” as they relate to evangelicalism. In ch. 2, Wilbert Shenk describes the theological impulses that have gone along with evangelical expansion, including personal piety, the voluntary nature of religious commitment, and missions. In ch. 3, Donald Lewis discusses globalization and how evangelicalism has both benefited from this phenomenon and creatively critiqued it.

The second section contains the five chapters that comprise the book’s global survey: Europe and North America (John Wolffe and Richard Pierard); Africa (Ogbu Kalu); Latin America (C. René Padilla); Asia (Scott Sunquist); and Australasia and the Pacific Islands (Stuart Pigg and Peter Lineham). The general structure of each chapter is first to offer a historical description of the origin and expansion of Christianity in the region, and then follow it with observations about the strengths and weaknesses of evangelicalism in the present. In addition to learning a great deal about the diversity of evangelicalism in these regions, I took away two enduring, but not all that surprising, themes. First, evangelicalism in the two-thirds world is the main catalyst for the global expansion of the movement. Second, global evangelicalism struggles to cultivate the work of Christian unity across denominational lines.

The third section fittingly begins with David Thompson’s chapter (#9) about ecumenism and inter-denominationalism. Noting that “global evangelicalism today has no great enthusiasm for or sense of urgency about bringing separated churches together” (269), Thompson brings this ambivalence into sharper theological focus. I found his and the following chapter on gender to be fruitful starting points for critical analyses of global evangelicalism.

Readers of Priscilla Papers will be interested in Sarah Williams’s chapter (#10) on evangelicals and gender. Williams teaches history of Christianity at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. As she sees it, the basic problem with contemporary gender critiques of historical evangelicalism is that “the autonomy of the past has been collapsed” (271), and we have analyzed past events with current notions of gender as the guiding convictions. Citing historical examples that challenge overly simplistic binaries of the public and private spheres of life, Williams shows that historians often overlook evidence when they “rely on too narrow a definition of what constitutes leadership and influence in Christian communities” (276). Williams successfully shows that, in the history of evangelicalism, women have had an enduring leadership presence—though muted compared to our contemporary definitions of leadership. Contemporary evangelical egalitarians, expectedly, will not be content to replicate these muted expressions of leadership in current Christian practice. Those of us who have a normative commitment to gender equality in ministry can use Williams’s chapter to show that current egalitarian practices model faithful developments of an already existing evangelical tradition.

Global Evangelicalism is an important book for historians and theologians. It will most likely find its home in upper-level undergraduate and seminary classes; however, the book could also be used for church small groups. Regional specialists will probably quibble with a person or event not reported. But overall the book is an impressive contribution to the study of evangelicalism as a global Christian movement that reflects the beauty and diversity of the body of Christ.

Notes

1. In the interest of full disclosure, at the time of writing this review, Mark Noll was on the reviewer’s dissertation committee at the University of Dayton.

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