

 **Pro-Bilingual**  
Reflections on Webber's "The Younger Evangelicals"

**Welcome to the neighborhood...**

They say that with language, when you can read it... you understand it; when you speak it...you know it, and when you dream it... it has become a part of you. Learning a language is never easy. Most of us are comfortable with our native tongue and view those who are bilingual, as a rare breed. Bilinguals are able to bridge two worlds, yet often find themselves caught between both, living in what missiologists call the "3<sup>rd</sup> culture". All this can happen when an individual or family chooses to move away from their home, to a new land, with a new culture.

But what if a foreigner moves into our neighborhood? What if our new neighbors speak a different language and hold a different value system? Who needs to adjust? Our initial reaction might be to say; "Hey, we were here first!" and urge them to learn "our culture." Another, more dramatic reaction, found in our traditional, conservative, Christian circles may be for us to cope with differing views by labeling suspect neighbors "unbelievers" or worse... "liberals." When this is the case, our way of relating sadly turns away from seeking to be bilingual, turning us inward, and requiring us to only come out to inflict debate, correct bad behavior or implement conversion strategies. Neighbors stay strangers and the community disintegrates.

Webber writes to the western church community. He states that the, "burden of the book is to show how *different* (italics mine) the younger evangelical is from traditional and pragmatic evangelicals, the two dominant evangelical groups at the end of the twentieth century." I believe he is asking a maturing resident generation of evangelical leaders to take a look at who's moving into the neighborhood.

I do not believe that Webber intends "different" to mean "better," or "trendier," or "more enlightened." I believe he means, basically, "different." These different Younger Evangelicals (YE's) have moved into the neighborhood. Have you seen them? They speak a different language, they emphasize different values, and they look at the world differently than the existing leadership. The challenge, then, for leaders in the church today, is to be bilingual, allowing the emerging leader to move into the neighborhood of Christianity and treating them as neighbors rather than illegal aliens.

**Fences and trenches, fear and betrayal...**

For many, the fences are high in the neighborhood. Look around. Many resident evangelicals have presuppositionally, rejected liberal, post-modern thought convinced that it is deconstructing the very foundations by which we have built our Evangelical neighborhood. They view it as destroying the sacred tenets such as absolute truth, inerrancy of the Bible, and the saving of souls. Fences have become drawn battle lines and homes, fortresses prepared to take on the invading terrorists. And why such passion? Part of it is the feeling that the familiar Christian way of life being threatened.

But, I wonder, further, if part of it feels like betrayal. These same YE's are the ones the resident generation led and raised in Sunday school and youth group. All seemed fine until they left the neighborhood and didn't come back. Some, now, are venturing back, not to repent, but to reform, and the long-time neighbors resist any change, wanting things as they have always been.

My hope is that the established generation of evangelical leaders would at least seek to understand where the YE is coming from and to know the heart of the YE. My prayer is that that we would dream... dream together for the future and the continued expansion of God's redemptive plan through his church. This calls for leaders to be bilingual.

And this is where I think Webber's observations are so helpful for the church today. Even in his summaries, we see Webber trying to show how the YE "Approaches" communication, history, theology, apologetics, ecclesiology, leadership, etc.. YE's are not running from what the Evangelical church has always been about, but are taking a different road to get there. Will the resident generation learn from their journey or merely cut them off at the pass?

The other aspect, that may make Webber suspect to the established generation, is the resident evangelical's sensitivity to postmodern views. This book may be seen as a subversive act to promote postmodernity. I would remind those who are leery, that Webber does an excellent job stating that we are not looking at "postmoderns" as much as we are seeking to understand younger evangelicals. There is a clear starting point with the YE that is orthodox and I hope that the reader would not take their eyes off "evangelical" in the Younger Evangelical.

I believe this book challenges an established generation in the neighborhood of evangelicalism to really seek to understand the younger evangelical. This book is an olive branch from a 70-year-old evangelical extended to the emerging generation of leaders that says, "I want to understand you, I want to learn from you, and this is what I've discovered thus far." Before we critique Webber, may we applaud him for being a good neighbor, demonstrating a true embodiment of the Gospel.

### **Industrial Revolution or Disco...**

While I don't want to rest primarily on the anecdotal, I have observations of the evangelical church and its dance with postmodernism. It would seem that within this past decade, evangelicals have resisted postmodern thinking and have worked to keep it outside the community. Some have wanted to categorize it with other attacks on the faith, such as evolution, and parley it with good rational apologetics. Currently however, I can go to a major youth ministry conference, buy books on postmodernism and hear young leaders literally say, as I heard in one panel discussion, "I love postmodernism." The swing is dramatic.

The debate is out as to whether these worldviews (modernism and post-modernism) are a reflection of a major cultural shift, or merely a fad (as I have heard Chap Clark say, "Is this an industrial revolution or disco?"). I personally see it as the former that calls for leaders to live in an in-between time where worldviews are colliding and where the only hope for the church lies with the bilingual leader who must stand in the gap. We do not have the luxury of choosing sides. It is our job as ministers of the Gospel and shepherds of the people of God to not merely play favorites ("I like modernism" or "I'm postmodern", etc.) but to look seriously at our world together, with one eye on culture and the other eye on the text, allowing God to use us to beautify his bride. What will it take to be bilingual?

For those who feel that Webber has categorized them in the Traditionalist or Pragmatist camp, it may be hard to hear his message. One might feel that they are being labeled as out-dated or irrelevant. Some might even feel defensive, as if the YE or Webber is saying that they were wrong in their approach to living and/or ministry. It's time for the resident evangelical leaders to take a good hard look around the neighborhood and try to see what the younger evangelicals are seeing. Sometimes, a fresh set of eyes is helpful. The resident leader still sees the world and their ways of leadership as correct because they still hold to the initial, honorable intent. But as it is with time and human nature, original intent gets skewed and a correction in the trajectory is needed.

Can the resident evangelical see through YE's eyes what the YE has inherited? Do they see a current Western church tainted with individualism, consumerism, pragmatism, nationalism, and materialism? This doesn't negate the fact that the YE has benefited from leaders who have shown them how

to engage the culture, think strategically, and minister to teens through youth ministry. I do not believe that the YE doubts the fervor or excellence of the leaders who have gone before them.

Still, the YE's, in the west, are inheriting a church that has flaws. And the encouraging part is that the YE is not saying, "That's your problem," rather, they seem to be anteing up and saying, "we want to be part of the solution." I believe that the YE is wrestling with what to do with the neighborhood. It may feel threatening to the resident evangelical, because the YE does not merely want their own corner of the neighborhood (through pomo ministries and separate services... modern solutions), they want to influence the whole community.

It's frustrating to see the resident generation of evangelical leaders balk. They seem to view YE's merely as angst-filled rookies trying to establish their identity. They view YE's as going through a rite of passage that "we all go through." They even believe that YE's have bought into all of post-modernity and are to the church, wolves in sheep's clothing. Before accusations are made, I would urge the resident leader to evaluate themselves by the same standard and ask whether they have embraced any humanistic thought, saturated with enlightenment thinking. What the YE rejects is not the evangelicalism or their leaders to which they owe their roots. They reject the modernity that the resident evangelicals have over-embraced.

### **Pro-Bilingual...**

Time or space does not permit me to explore all angles on this very complex story problem. I think Webber does a good job in giving us snapshots of leaders in evangelical circles that serve as a starting point for understanding. What, then, might our next steps be toward being bilingual? I propose the following...



#### **Elevate understanding, seek to understand**

There is an element of humility that needs to come into play here. In many ways, it means taking down our fences and stepping out of our well ordered houses and go over and meet the neighbors. Both sides must realize that they are not going away, unless the church is going away. We cannot merely reduce all this to a fad, wishful thinking, waiting for the YE's to grow up, or the older evangelicals to die off. We, as leaders, must seek to understand where each other is coming from, based on their presuppositions and their definitions. Caricatures, name-calling and mockery will not get us there. Incarnational living will.



#### **Find a common language**

We need to recognize that, no matter, where we may fall in Webber's descriptions, we are first and foremost called to shepherd the church and we, as leaders, are the ones that must become bilingual. If Jesus prayed that his church would be one, I take that as an imperative, not a suggestion, and essential if we are to minister in Jesus' name.

Therefore, once we begin to understand each other, we must start with where we agree and find a common language and this starting point for the church must rest on good biblical, historical theology. Our common language is Christ, affirmed in the orthodox teachings preserved in community, over time. Let's start where we agree. Let's say in unison "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son...". Debate will range as to "why" we believe, but not on the "what." Dialogue on the expression of the Gospel, then, should be centered on good historical, theological language, not on form or personal preference (Can we appreciate the message regardless of

whether we prefer reading portrait or landscape?). Through a common, theological language we may discover that we agree on more than we think and push one another to a more accurate picture of God and his purposes.



### **Become bilingual dreamers**

The appropriate criticism of the resident evangelical leader to the YE is that the YE attempts to express what they are not, but has yet to define who they are. The criticism of the YE to the resident evangelical is that the resident evangelical is unwilling to change. The fact of the matter is that we need each other. The onus is not on the modern or postmodern, but on the leader to whether or not they are willing to go bilingual.

The bilingual leader needs to do more than understand the other side, even know the other side, but be willing to dream on both sides, together. We need to venture into the 3<sup>rd</sup> culture, as difficult and messy as this may be. For this is the narrow but right road for the future church. Through bilingual language we can attempt to unify the church and grow together, as we learn from the past and push toward the future. Churches and organizations will truly be a godly community showing a watching world that, while value tribes may divide, Christ unites. The ultimate issue is not a turf war between modern and postmodern, but a pursuit for the most accurate picture of God and his purposes.

### **All together, now...**

I commend Webber for his work. I believe it is a first step toward honest, real, dialogue between the generations of evangelical leaders. What I would love to explore now, is how, in his charts, there are two new "columns"... a gray, fuzzy middle in-between showing how these generations of leaders move toward a bilingual world. I can see the title... "Bilingual Evangelicals..."