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UNIVERSITY MINISTRY *and* *the* EVANGELICAL MIND



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.....PART 1.....

AN ON-CAMPUS OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT

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For the sake of transparency, I note that I am both a product of parachurch ministries and a career-long parachurch professional. I became a student leader with Cru (then Campus Crusade for Christ) at Miami University (Ohio) back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, served with Cru for twenty-five years, mostly at Yale, and then became a cofounder and the executive director of another parachurch organization at Yale, the Rivendell Institute (which is also a founding member of a relatively new national movement called the Consortium of Christian Study Centers). So although I have throughout my career served as a leader in local evangelical churches, I am a university parachurch baby and adult.

For the purposes of this volume, the takeaway from my experience is twofold: (1) I am convinced that the staff and members of university parachurch organizations are among those who most keenly appreciate

the many difficulties of professing evangelical Christian faith in today's society. (2) The task of sustaining evangelical faith in the future will in no small measure be carried forward by these organizations and will do so, though by no means exclusively, in some distinctive and important ways.

I consider two basic questions here: (1) What has been the impact of secular university-based parachurch organizations on the growth and development of evangelicalism both quantitatively and qualitatively? (2) How might these organizations figure significantly in the future of evangelicalism and evangelical thought—mainly in an American context? Some statistics gathered from two of these organizations will help validate answers to these questions, showing why we should be looking at these movements when telling the story of evangelicalism in America. Sheer numbers do not, of course, reveal many of the pertinent aspects of a story that help to evaluate questions of impact. However, my purpose here is to indicate how such large movements warrant the kind of attention that more thorough studies will help to illuminate. I also argue that the distinctive setting and goals of university-based parachurch organizations have required their members to negotiate evangelical identity for their Christian constituencies while also seeking to hold forth evangelical Christian faith in ways that resonate with their largely secular and, in many ways, disaffected audiences. This “frontline” confrontation between traditional Christianity and contemporary culture has necessitated nuanced understandings of evangelical faith and practices on the part of parachurch organizations, including those practices that have to do with the life of the mind.¹

¹There are of course many denominational ministries serving at secular colleges and universities (e.g., Chi Alpha), and this is not an argument about church versus parachurch, or what some mean when they describe parachurch ministries as an “arm” of the local church. And with respect to impact, in whatever ways local churches may have failed to take on especially the evangelistic mission, there has undoubtedly been a remarkable surge in creativity and

THE NUMBERS

Like any appropriately self-suspecting amateur sociologist or historian such as myself, I need to offer some caveats. For one thing, despite the good-faith efforts of these organizations to engage in accurate counting, these can be soft numbers: criteria—how an organization counts an “involved” person, what that involvement means, whether those who are involved, or converted, go on to a lifetime commitment to Christ, and so forth—are often difficult to pin down. It is also difficult to discern or describe what kind of influence staff and members have had on Christian thought (more on that presently). Accordingly, the interpretation of the available data in terms of *impact* can only be *suggestive* rather than *conclusive*. Despite various studies that consider the presence and influence of evangelicals in academia as well as society at large—such as Michael Lindsay’s *Faith in the Halls of Power*—there has been no complete study to track a correlation between university-based parachurch involvement specifically and the present influence of graduates from these organizations in, for example, evangelical churches or various spheres of influence within society.² The sheer numbers do encourage us to imagine a significant impact, but the hard data remain to be uncovered. One hope I have for this brief introduction to the issue is that it may inspire much-needed historical studies of university-based parachurch organizations in the future. That said, the very lack of such data only underscores how little of this work has been done, including on the part of those who have published histories on evangelicalism but without serious consideration of the contributions made by these organizations.

entrepreneurship among local evangelical churches to re-engage their communities with what is often an even fuller sense of the gospel’s scope for their unbelieving neighbors.

²D. Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Caveats notwithstanding, the numbers are impressive. The following statistics are from the two largest campus parachurch organizations, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) and Cru.³

For the years that data is available, between 1968 and 2017 IVCF saw dramatic growth and then sustained membership across the board: with its annual involvement of students and faculty increasing from around ten thousand per year on a few hundred campuses in the late 1960s to a steady level of twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand by the late 1970s and early 1980s on more than seven hundred campuses. Although its campus presence has wavered in the past thirty years—now around six hundred sites—the number of chapters has grown to more than a thousand, with some forty thousand students and faculty involved last year, and more than 1,300 field staff.

The number of faculty participants did decline after the mid-1980s, with an average of more than two thousand involved annually until 1987. But faculty involvement has grown again in the past several years, almost to that previous high level. It is important to track faculty participation in these organizations because the figure represents more than the potential influence of the parachurch on these campuses; in regard to the present and future state of the evangelical mind, the interaction between Christian professors and students yields a mutual benefit. These professors are supported and influenced by the mission of parachurch ministries even as they also serve as role models and teachers—both within and beyond the classroom—for Christian students and the organization's staff. Campus organizations, with institutional affiliations that local churches often do not have, are in a unique position to offer a platform for ministry for Christian faculty.

³The statistics included here were provided by leadership representatives of these two organizations as well as their own official records.

Cru similarly has seen remarkable, sustained growth over the course of the past decades. By the mid- to late 1990s, for example, Cru saw a steady increase in involvement from some twenty thousand to more than forty thousand per year, which continued to grow over the past two decades; by the 2010-2011 academic year Cru reported more than seventy-three thousand students and faculty involved. That figure grew to nearly 103,000 in 2015-2016, with more than 4,600 field staff serving 1,700 campus movements.

These two organizations combined currently claim more than 140,000 students and professors involved in their respective ministries each year, served by nearly six thousand field staff. They send forth tens of thousands of evangelical graduates who are entering the marketplace and churches across the country. Over the course of their histories, these ministries have influenced hundreds of thousands of college and university students and several thousand faculty.

I also note the *conversions* reported by these organizations, which is significant to the growth of evangelicalism not only in regard to the numbers but also because their explicit evangelistic calling shapes intellectual interests and commitments.

As reported by IVCF, in 2000 the number of people indicating decisions for Christ through its ministry was some 1,500 (consistent with what they saw from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s). But over the past three years, this has increased to more than four thousand per year. Cru reported over 127,000 decisions in 2010-2011, which jumped to more than two hundred thousand in 2013-2014; 315,000 in 2014-2015; and 378,000 in 2015-2016.

Even with significant margins of error, when considering the cited numbers of involved participants and conversions, it is clear that university-based parachurch organizations represent one major stream of people populating the pews and pulpits of evangelical churches as

well as domestic and overseas mission fields. And those who are committed members of these organizations represent a major stream of trained *leaders* and *laborers* within these churches and the “mission fields” of prominent societal spheres of influence.⁴

From a historical perspective, given this flow of hundreds of thousands of evangelicals coming out of these organizations over past decades and up to the present, we cannot call any account of evangelicalism complete that does not pay attention to these statistics and what they might indicate about evangelical Christianity in America.

We would, of course, have a clearer picture of what that influence looks like with more comprehensive studies that attempt to track correlations between involvement in one of these ministries and subsequent influence within churches and society. There is a need for this kind of scholarly work. While admitting such limitations, we can nonetheless suggest (1) how university-based parachurch organizations have made, and continue to make, positive contributions to evangelicalism in America and (2) why they have an important role to play in the future of evangelicalism. Here I will refer mainly to my own longstanding involvement with these organizations over more than thirty-five years.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

From this brief statistical survey, one question arises immediately: given the large numbers of evangelicals influenced by the parachurch campus ministries, how does this relate to the state of the evangelical *mind* in particular? I suggest that histories of evangelicalism in America have not more seriously considered university-based parachurch organizations in their accounts of Christian thought and scholarship in part

⁴Again, I am not arguing that this is *exclusively* the case, as Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries do a remarkable job of equipping and sending thousands of their graduates into the same arenas of influence and service.

because these organizations are not seen as arenas in which high priority is given to the life of the mind or, more to the point, where academic work is promoted or produced. Is this an accurate evaluation? If so, then it is appropriate only to consider the impact of university-based parachurch organizations *in general*. But when we speak of the state of the evangelical *mind* specifically—whether now or in years to come—then we need to look elsewhere. My own answer to that question and concern is yes and no, as I will briefly explain.

I make a couple of initial observations, again from my own experience. First, where we find anti-intellectualism among evangelical students, it is as likely to be a disposition they have absorbed from their home church environments and brought with them to college as one they adopt at college as a result of their involvement with parachurch campus ministries. Furthermore, the mission and goals of parachurch campus ministries, together with the circumstances students face while at secular colleges and universities, tend to inspire a *more*, rather than less, intellectually engaged faith; the same is true for the evangelical staff members of these organizations who seek to mentor them.

Taking first the matter of an evangelical student's (or professor's) environment on a secular campus, two factors make this person's experience not unique but *distinctive* and, I would argue, significant with respect to the current and future state of evangelicalism: *constant confrontation* and *troubled negotiation*.

From the dorm room to the classroom, evangelical students face daily, personal exposure to people with views and values that challenge their own Christian commitments. It was my own experience while an undergraduate at a major secular university, and it is the common experience reported by the students I have mentored over the past three and a half decades, including graduate students at Yale. Feeling at odds with those around us is certainly not unique to secular campuses. But

that constant pressure widely felt by evangelical students and faculty, even in more heavily Christianized parts of the country, roils with a level of intensity that often exceeds the daily experience of most evangelicals in local churches.

I suggest a vital point to consider in light of such experiences: if we want to find one cultural cutting edge, where evangelical identity is being hammered out under some of the most incessant pressure from current and often contrary trends in outlook and values, we should consider the experience of evangelical students and professors in secular academic institutions. Not only are they forced to evaluate their own convictions, but they worry about *whether they should identify as evangelicals at all*. Such negotiations place them in the vanguard of evangelicals who feel the pulse of a post-Christian culture with an immediacy that often does not compare to experiences beyond the secular university campus.

Again, evangelicals in many walks of life and circumstances experience this tension. But one difference is that academic institutions are such prominent sources of societal ideas and values. However much media and entertainment may dominate our cultural discourses, academia remains the fountainhead for thought; its faculty are the acknowledged experts across a wide range of issues and are frequently the go-to spokespersons on those issues. The pressure to conform ideologically in these secular institutional settings is intense. But Christian students, as well as faculty, receive the support of local and nationwide parachurch organizations—support often not available to average church-going Christians. Their staff enter into the breach in order to care for evangelical Christians on campuses and help them work through the usually disorienting and often faith-eroding challenges of being a more conservative or traditional Christian in these highly secularized settings.

This is not to say that the staff and leaders of these ministries always succeed in their efforts to help preserve the evangelical faith of their constituencies or that their methods have always proven effective in meeting this need. But to a larger extent than I have seen among most any other population of Christian leaders serving university communities, parachurch workers step with extraordinary faithfulness into that place of troubled negotiation even as they keenly understand its complexities. Such support—often in the form of personal mentoring—in navigating the challenges to traditional faith of late-modern secularism is unique in the evangelical world. That these challenges almost always have an intellectual component, particularly within an academic context, likewise demands a higher level of intellectual engagement on the part of parachurch campus ministers.

The response to this constant confrontation and troubled negotiation can, of course, be one of retreat. Many evangelical Christians, both students and faculty, simply choose not to deal with it and in some measure hide their faith. As missionary movements, however, the parachurch ministries that serve on the campus tackle this inclination and bring something else of great significance, which also has remained largely unrecognized in accounts of evangelicalism: they pursue and call and train their constituents for a mission of evangelism. In short, they challenge Christians to be *engaged* with their non-Christian contemporaries as witnesses, and the evidence of this is the extraordinary numbers of conversions they report.

This evangelistic priority has had at least two outcomes of note with regard to the state of evangelicalism and the evangelical mind. As indicated, the effort to bear witness to the gospel in the contemporary university inspires, first, a thoughtful faith. In addition, that priority has prompted the development of creative new approaches to Christian witness within the contemporary university. These approaches feature

a pronounced emphasis on the life of the mind more broadly and on Christian scholarship in particular.

Regarding this first outcome—a thoughtful faith—I again speak from my own experience: although many evangelical students have graduated from secular high schools with an environment as discomfiting as their college campuses, they have not previously felt as challenged to think about what they believe or *why* they should believe it. Nor have they had Christian peers and leaders, such as parachurch staff, who call them to embrace that challenge and who attempt to provide resources and opportunities to meet it.

Has this been done universally or effectively? My answer is once again both yes and no. As a student I experienced an intellectual awakening while involved in one of the largest parachurch campus ministry chapters in the country. Both that secular environment and the summons to be a witness spurred me to grapple with the questions being asked by my non-Christian peers and provoked by my non-Christian professors. The ministry staff who mentored me encouraged these pursuits. As a parachurch campus minister since that time, I have done the same with others.

That evangelistic priority has not been without its downside, however. It has too often led parachurch staff and students to diminish (1) the value of career pursuits other than professional ministry and (2) the value of academic scholarship as a vital pursuit for the church's calling in the world. This has in turn promoted (1) a truncated understanding of the mission field of a university and (2) a *thin* understanding of what gospel commitment and gospel witness consist of. To recognize that an academic institution holds scholarship and the dissemination of knowledge as its primary mission means that to make significant progress “missionaries” in these settings require a deep engagement with ideas as well as a broader appreciation of institutional presence. A “thick”

understanding of the gospel as a vision of life and of Christian witness as honest engagement with any human enterprise promotes both undertakings. Former president of the UN General Assembly Charles Malik, a devout Christian academic and scholar in his own right, noted that because of the abiding importance of the university, *both* evangelism and serious study of the state of the university, together with rigorous academic engagement, constitute the “two tasks” of the church in this age.⁵

This is not to say that a renewed commitment to Christian scholarship across academic disciplines will supply all that is lacking with respect to the gospel mission within the contemporary university. There is, for example, an abiding need for high-quality apologetics and all manner of “translation” work that address post-Christian questions and sensibilities. I find it remarkable, though perhaps unsurprising, how rudimentary many of the objections to Christian faith raised by students and faculty alike still are. They are often uninformed about even basic answers to questions regarding the nature and character of God, the Bible, Jesus, the resurrection, the problem of evil, and so forth. Although apologetics is not the same thing as scholarship but one application of it, the life of the evangelical mind requires careful, well-thought-through responses to contemporary academic skeptics and seekers alike, in order to help them see how Christianity is “decisively relevant to their humanity,” as Rowan Williams has put it.⁶ University parachurch ministries are

⁵Charles Malik, *The Two Tasks* (1980; repr., Wheaton, IL: Evangelical Missions Information Service/Billy Graham Center, 2000). Originally delivered as a lecture at the dedication of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in 1980. Malik elaborates, “If evangelization is the most important task, the task that comes immediately after it . . . is not politics, nor economics, nor the quest for comfort and security and ease, but to find out exactly what is happening to the mind and the spirit in the schools” (36). For a more thorough investigation into this concern and his recommendations, see also his *A Christian Critique of the University* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982).

⁶As he writes in regard to theology’s “communicative task,” “Theology seeks also to persuade or commend, to witness to the gospel’s capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment. . . . The Christian movement . . . is a *missionary* movement: that is, it works on the

in a unique position to be the promoters and purveyors of this work and historically have led in both endeavors. Despite some of their shortcomings, the evangelistic priority and desire to be effective in witness has spurred university parachurch ministries to think more holistically about their mission and to seek creative new approaches to this apologetic task.

Still, while the ongoing and broadly influential work of these ministries continues, a more thorough engagement with scholarship and the life of the mind remains urgent, as does the endeavor to establish a winsome, more institutionally established presence. Uniquely situated to pursue both goals as servants within, rather than apart from, secular universities, other university-based parachurch groups have emerged as a further outcome of gospel mission objectives. These organizations represent efforts both to redress some of the historic weaknesses of parachurch ministries noted above and to further the second task, as Malik identified it, of examining the state of the contemporary university and formulating Christian responses to all areas of academic inquiry.

This latter goal is as vast in its scope as it will be long in its achievement. In short, it is a *generational project* whose horizon needs to contemplate where the university mission and the culture of the university will be not two or three years from now, but twenty, thirty, or forty years from now. Accordingly, my colleagues and I at Yale founded the Rivendell Institute as just one example of many, with the aim to more deeply engage the *institution* of the university as well as the individuals there through the cultivation of a long-standing

assumption that it has something to say that is communicable beyond its present boundaries and is humanly attractive or compelling across these boundaries. It assumes that it has the capacity and the obligation to seek to persuade persons from all imaginable human backgrounds that it is *decisively relevant to their humanity*." Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), xiv, 230; italics added.

“faithful presence” (as James Davison Hunter describes it).⁷ And—inspired by both a missional urgency and a “thick” gospel sensibility—we have made the aim of bringing faith into sustained, vigorous, and creative engagement with scholarship and professional training a paradigm for our nurturing of Christian students and faculty, as well as the goal of the research conducted by our fellows across a range of disciplines.

Another parachurch movement that has now spread to twenty-four secular campuses around the country is the Consortium of Christian Study Centers (CCSC). Although member organizations, by intention, represent a diverse range of approaches and programs (some have been in existence for decades, while others are recent start-ups), they share and promote the values of institutional presence and the life of the mind. Significant to consideration of the current and future state of the evangelical mind, the annual meetings of the CCSC have focused especially on what we mean by evangelical faith and what it means to sustain and stand for it in the contemporary university.

From such developments, in addition to the hunger for knowledge and understanding that they stimulate, I believe we will see increased intellectual and scholarly productivity as those who serve university-based parachurch organizations produce their own academic work and promote the same among a new generation of evangelical scholars and leaders whom they mentor and train. What they need are the intellectual resources and the vision for the life of the mind that thoughtful evangelical scholars in fields across the spectrum of academic and professional disciplines both model and help to supply.

⁷In James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).