A Response and an Invitation

by Casey Winfield Jones

The January 2007 issue of Perspectives, a publication of the Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), featured an article by Dr. R. Milton Winter entitled, “Presbyterians and Separatist Evangelicals: A Continuing Dilemma.” In a footnote, Dr. Winter states, “This paper takes issue only with those who hold an un-Presbyterian theology, namely ‘separatism,’ and seek to exploit the church’s form of government to lead others away from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”

Unfortunately Dr. Winter’s article does not do what he sets out to do in the title or in that footnote. Instead, he is quite critical of his fellow Christians in the body of Christ in the PC(USA) who are evangelical. In most of the article, he makes no distinction between separatist evangelicals and evangelicals in general. I have to say that, in my opinion, Winter offers an articulate and well-written article that is very biased and, at times, rather mean.

After complaints from me and others about this article appearing in a publication of the Office of the General Assembly, our General Assembly Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick graciously asked me to write an article for Perspectives. He asked that it be “a positive article obviously in response to Mr. Winter’s article” but “not as a point-by-point rebuttal.” He requests that it address the “contributions of the evangelical movement to the peace, unity, and purity of the church.”

Unfortunately, the clerk’s request to do this came the night before I was to leave for Wales for twelve days. I could either have an article ready for the February issue of Perspectives in less than three days, or I could have about three weeks to write an article for the March issue of the magazine. Given some of the reactions to Dr. Winter’s article, Mr. Kirkpatrick, Sharon K. Youngs, (the editor of Perspectives), and I felt that it would be good to have something for the February issue. Therefore, for obvious reasons, this will not be the same sort of footnoted, semi-scholarly piece that Mr. Winter wrote, and it will not be nearly as long.

Now that I am in Wales and trying to finish this article to meet the deadline, I have become aware of some feelings I have. First of all, I feel as if, in trying to write a positive article about evangelicals, I am a little bit like the man who is asked when he is going to stop beating his wife. Therefore, I must begin by directly answering some of the charges Dr. Winter makes about evangelicals, because some of these charges are wrong and to me are quite unjust.

Based upon Winter’s article, I would like to make two suggestions about our current squabbles in the PC(USA).

First, those who write about Presbyterian evangelicals need to arrive at a more realistic and clearer understanding of current Presbyterian evangelicalism.

Dr. Winter certainly shows that he has read books about evangelicals — Noll, Rogers. Unfortunately, he relies most heavily on Barr’s Fundamentalism, a text that is almost thirty years old and, as the title suggests, is not about evangelicals at all but about fundamentalists. The Reverend Paul Leggett points out that “the 1977 American edition of this book upon which Dr. Winter bases so many of his criticisms was roundly denounced for its bias and inaccuracies by the noted evangelical journal Christianity Today when it was first published thirty years ago.” Leggett continues, “If you seek to define your opponent in terms he or she cannot recognize, it’s hard to take your criticism seriously.”

Obviously, reading about evangelicalism does not necessarily mean that one understands evangelicalism. Winter hopelessly confuses and conflates evangelicalism with fundamentalism,
with pentecostalism, with dispensationalism, and with the charismatic movement. There is no nuance with Winter—these are repeatedly interchangeable concepts. He uses oversimplifications and generalities to the point of the ridiculous. His method is to find any negative point he can about fundamentalists or evangelicals or dispensationalists — even outside of the denomination (see reference to Robertson and Falwell) — and then use these negative comments to criticize Presbyterian evangelicals. Then, on page 27, he contends that fundamentalists are “uneasy … with nuance.” Winters says that “evangelical leaders … play ‘fast and lose’ with facts.” This, unfortunately, is something Winter does throughout his essay.

For example, on page 6, he says that evangelicals require a “specific moment of ‘conversion,’ apart from and even in opposition to the fact of being reared in a covenant home or within the rites and graces of the church.” He also uses a footnote on that page to refer to a nineteenth-century denominational conflict on the point of a “moment” of conversion. How does he know that Presbyterian evangelicals now require this? Oh, he read that evangelicals (not necessarily Presbyterian ones) require a “specific moment” of conversion in a book written ten years ago (Noll). Hmm… When was the last time Dr. Winter heard any contemporary Presbyterian evangelicals stress the necessity for a defined “moment” of conversion? Evangelicals certainly do stress the need for faith, but Dr. Winter skews this emphasis into an emphasis on a “specific moment” of conversion. It would be interesting if Dr. Winter were to ask even a dozen leading evangelical leaders as to whether they insist upon what he says they do. I suggest that once in awhile he actually interview real Presbyterian evangelicals if he is going to write about them.

Winter discusses two theological institutions he says are very extreme in their fundamentalism and conservatism — Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and Belhaven College in Mississippi. While there may be some PC(USA) evangelicals who went to these two institutions, I do not know any. Most PC(USA) evangelicals I know of went to PC(USA) seminaries or to seminaries like Fuller or Gordon Conwell — institutions that are light years away from Westminster, with which I am more familiar than Belhaven. But, as I understand it, Dr. Winter did attend Belhaven and Westminster, which may be why he talks so much about them, even though they are outside the experience of most PC(USA) evangelicals. In fact, this may explain a lot about Dr. Winter. Apparently, he has been exposed to some of the most radical forms of evangelicalism — forms that really do merit the term “fundamentalist;” and so, when he thinks of evangelicalism, apparently that is all he can see. In his book, *Freud, Mind of the Moralist*, Philip Reiff discusses Freud’s use of the term “synecdoche,” which is to take a part of reality for the whole.

Perhaps because of the kind of rigid fundamentalism to which he was exposed in Mississippi in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and then because of his experience at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, I am afraid that Dr. Winter has fallen into synecdoche — taking the reality he has experienced and confusing it with the larger reality of evangelicalism in the PC(USA). Maybe I am wrong about the reasons for this, but it is apparent that whenever Dr. Winter thinks about evangelicals, he thinks the worst.

So I invite Dr. Winter to become more familiar with living, breathing evangelicals in the PC(USA). He spends much time in heated battle with an enemy of his imagination.

Second, we must not give up hope that liberals and evangelicals could have fruitful discussions about theology.

Winter does make some thoughtful and helpful points about how election relates to our current denominational discussion. He challenges the evangelicals of our denomination to rethink their ideas of the unity of the church. Winter’s ideas about election and ecclesiology are helpful and could provide the basis for discussions worth having. But the PC(USA) would have been much better served had he simply moved forward these points and omitted many of his others. He should certainly have better researched his claims about what the confessions do and do not say.
about salvation. Please read my article about this online, whose accuracy about the confessions our clerk has affirmed.

Next month, I shall finish this article by dealing with Part II, “Positive Contributions of Evangelicals to the Life of the PC(USA).” In that article, I intend to deal with the peace, unity, and purity of the church in connection to its calling in the world as the body of Christ. In other words, how do the six great ends of the church in Chapter 1 of the Form of Government and the beliefs in Chapter 2, “The Church and Its Confessions,” crucially help to define the church whose peace, unity, and purity all Presbyterians—including evangelicals—are called to uphold and further? I shall then focus particularly on what evangelicals have done—and could do—to further the peace, unity, and purity of the PC(USA).

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i. Footnote 12 in Winter’s article

ii. I will honor the clerk’s request and not do a point-by-point rebuttal of all that I disagree with in Dr. Winter’s thirty-two-page article. But here are some quotes about evangelicals that I found particularly disturbing:

“Almost as with the secret handshakes of a lodge, evangelicals are able to identify fellow travellers….” (p.6)

“Evangelicals adopt an ‘ends justify the means’ type of action, which compels evangelical leaders to play ‘fast and loose’ with facts. Jerry Falwell, in a recent CNN interview volunteered that ‘none of the outrageous things I’ve said has been an accident’” (p.16)

“Still, political activity of evangelicals has contributed to an unfortunate situation in which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has come to be divided on lines similar to those in partisan politics” (p. 5)

“Evangelicals demand strict conformity. Thus if anyone breaks rank on one point, they are likely to be ostracized with a ferociousness that is breathtaking to outsiders.” (p.16)

“Evangelicals must assume some responsibility for their strident language, for no other group in the church has resorted to such.” (p.26)

“…evangelicals have failed to rely upon, or to trust in, God’s election in the composition of the church’s membership, or to wait upon divine determination in the resolution of its disputes.” (p.28)

What do these quotes have in common? In each quote Dr. Winter is critical of evangelicals in general, not just those who wish to leave the PC(USA). Is it really acceptable for such a wholesale attack on a part of Christ’s body to be published in this way? How is it appropriate to single out a sub-group in the church and to subject it to such relentless, undifferentiated criticism?

iii. Letter to the Editor as posted on presbyweb