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'A Thaw in the Cold War?' The National Association of Evangelicals and the National Council of Churches

Thursday, July 16, 2009

"I know what constituted an evangelical in former times," said the seventh Earl Shaftesbury, "I have no clear notion what constitutes one now." The confusion Lord Shaftesbury saw a century ago is now fully apparent. Millions of Americans claim to be evangelicals, but few seem to know what the word means.

That confusion is not likely to be relieved by the recent action of the National Association of Evangelicals to drop its by-law prohibiting member denominations from joint membership in the National Council of Churches.

The action came as the NAE met in metropolitan Washington, DC for its annual convention. It is likely to send shock waves through the evangelical movement, and the decision raises once again the essential issue of evangelical definition.

The NAE was founded in 1942 as conservative Protestants sought to coalesce around a basic evangelical program and establish an alternative to the liberal Federal Council of Churches, the precursor to the National Council of Churches. The language of the founders was unambiguous.

Harold John Ockenga, pastor of Boston's historic Park Street Church, and one of the NAE's chief organizers, warned of "the terrible octopus of liberalism" that was threatening Protestantism, and especially of the influence of the Federal Council of Churches.

The 1943 constitutional convention of the NAE stated that the Federal Council lacked "a positive stand on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith," included leaders who had repudiated those doctrines, and actively supported apostate institutions. "The National Association of Evangelicals was organized because of this fact and its creation is a testimonial to the conviction of its constituency that the Federal Council does not represent Bible-believing Christians."

In 1944 the NAE adopted a by-law preventing member bodies from dual membership with the Federal Council. So far as NAE leaders were concerned, the Federal Council was a lost cause.

Stephen Paine went after the Federal Council in his 1949 presidential address to the NAE, arguing that the council played games with language, and claimed the name of Christ while denying his deity. "What is the natural conclusion? Simply that words don't mean anything. And that the Federal Council men can somehow say that they believe in Jesus as God *when they do not so believe.*"

The Federal Council gave way to the National Council of Churches of Christ in 1950, and the NCC has been moving steadily to the left ever since. The NCC is notorious for taking liberal stands on almost every moral issue and for the support of leftist causes ranging from Angela Davis to imprisoned murderer Leonard Peltier.

Lately, the NCC has served as an apologist for the Cuban regime of Fidel Castro, and has pushed for the return of 6-year old Elian Gonzalez, sponsoring the infamous visit of the two grandmothers from Cuba.

Even as it celebrated its fiftieth birthday last year, the NCC showed signs of collapse. It suffers from a \$4-million budget deficit and its member denominations have been losing membership since the 1960s. Outgoing general secretary Joan Brown Campbell predicted that a new coalition would emerge, combining liberal Protestants with Roman Catholics, evangelicals, and Orthodox Christians.

Why would the NAE drop its barrier to dual membership? Carl F. H. Henry, one of the evangelical titans present at the 1944 convention, points out that “This would be the worst possible of all times to elevate the National Council of Churches.” The NCC has not moved to the right in recent years—it has moved constantly to the left.

“The record of the last decades reveals nothing but embarrassment rather than glory for the doctrinal position of the ecumenical movement,” Henry stated, adding that “few enterprises have failed so miserably.”

Rev. Eileen Lindner of the NCC's New York office saw hope in the NAE decision. “Weve had a growing *rapprochement* with the NAE in the last five years,” she said. She noted that Don Argue, then president of the NAE, brought greetings to the NCC in 1998 and that the bodies had worked together against pornography. “All these things have contributed to a thawing in the cold war between the groups.”

One can only wonder what Ockenga and his fellow NAE organizers would think of all this. The evangelical movement now embraces a vast assortment of theological positions, and the NAE represents considerable diversity. Is this now to include bodies that identify with the NCC and its liberal agenda?

The NAE motto has been “cooperation without compromise.” If admitting NCC members to the NAE is not compromise, what is?

