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# The Need for Evangelicals

## Engaging the Gospel in Every Sphere of Human Life

BY TAMARA LETTS

I am an Alaskan Presbyterian pastor and a member of Yukon Presbytery. We are comprised of various language and cultural groups. Our congregations reflect incredible diversity—from large urban churches to Eskimo village churches. We are living examples of Christian unity, even though we are very different from one another. There is nothing quite like saying The Lord’s Prayer in Inupiat, Yupik, Korean and English—all at the same time. It’s a slice of heaven!

I also am an evangelical woman in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In my experience, I have found that while many within our denomination insist on the importance of diversity, an understanding of diversity does not always include evangelicals. I believe that the essence of Reformed theology is powerfully displayed in the evangelical branch. Although I cannot speak for all evangelical women, I wonder why women like myself often feel estranged from their own denomination. I pray that in offering a brief reflection on my faith as an evangelical Presbyterian, God will work in

all our hearts to transform our understanding of diversity and heal estranged relationships in our denomination.

### So Who Are Evangelicals?

In a lecture in September 2007 at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Scott Sunquist, associate professor of world mission and evangelism, identified seven characteristics of evangelical Christianity found in the Reformed tradition:

1. A clear foundation of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to all people
2. The understanding that living a biblically integrated life is essential
3. The conviction that we are called to a new life in Jesus Christ through a conversion experience
4. The belief that the implication of living a converted life is an engagement in society
5. The recognition that evangelical faith is unitive: the body of Christ is bigger than our denomination,

and we are called to work with others within the body to represent the realm of God on earth

6. A commitment to prayer that is both intercessory and spontaneous
7. The understanding that our purpose on earth is to partner with Jesus Christ so as to share his love with all people and all nations.

### Involved in Every Sphere of Human Life

My evangelical convictions shape my life and the way I do ministry. I stand with others to bring peace and justice into our world. I’ve been significantly influenced by people such as Lesslie Newbigin, who committed his life to urging Christians to be about both the message *and* the mission of Jesus Christ, and never to separate the two. I pray for the witness of God’s realm in every sphere of human endeavor, whether it be social, political, economic or ecological.

A common assumption about evangelicals is that we only care about personal salvation, that our

only question is, “Are you saved?” The depth of this misjudgment is overwhelming. Evangelicals in our Reformed tradition are wholeheartedly committed to engaging the world. God’s mission involves the reconciliation and redemption of the *whole* of creation. They give visible witness to the transformative power of God through word *and* deed.

For many evangelicals, though, there is a sense that, within our current denominational climate, forces are cutting the PC(USA) loose from its historic evangelical and theological roots. I regularly encounter the assumption, from people on opposite sides of significant issues from myself, that I am ignorant, judgmental, even callous toward the pain and struggle of those who are oppressed and suffering. Yet, in my experience, evangelicals are intricately involved in bringing the hope of Christ to a hurting world. I am compelled to act in response to God’s grace. Whether taking young people to build churches in the barrios of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, or participating in environmental protection efforts in my town, I consider it a privilege to *act* on my faith in the world.

At the same time, I must recognize my sinful brokenness and need for Christ’s redeeming love. We all fall short of God’s intention for us. We all need grace. We are called into Christ’s service not because of our wholeness, but because of our confessed need and reliance on God’s gracious and transformative power in our lives.

## Sensitive to the Needs of our Neighbors

I experience evangelical spirituality as profoundly sensitive to the needs, pain and fears of those who have not entered into a personal relationship with Christ. The unique life-transforming power of Jesus Christ is a direct critique of secular reliance on human schemes for self-improvement. As an evangelical, I understand our confidence to be found solely in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Too often, however, we are so anxious about offending people that we refrain from sharing the only thing we really have to offer: the *good news* of Jesus Christ.

Too often, we act as if people will somehow know that God loves them simply by our actions. Evangelicals remind the church that this is a truncated gospel. Jesus spoke, and his words interpreted his actions; his actions illustrated his words.

My greatest joy is introducing people to the person of Jesus. I have a high view of the authority of scripture. I believe that it is only when I live a life integrated with biblical truth that I can experience abundant faith and life. It is only when I surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit that I have any hope of being shaped into the likeness of Christ.

## The PC(USA) Needs Evangelicals

Although I have encountered what I consider to be biased responses toward my evangelical faith within the PC(USA), I continue to be

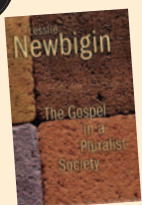
amazed at God’s transformative love in and throughout our church. As I sit in a meeting of Yukon Presbytery and look around at the diversity of Christian sisters and brothers, and feel the love we have for one another, I find hope for our denomination. I pray for a denomination that genuinely receives evangelicals and understands the importance of the deep heritage of Christian faith we contribute. This evangelical faith has the depth of all scripture, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the openness and desire to see all people profess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The PC(USA) needs evangelicals if it wants to be more than an institution for social reform. Throughout history, great social evils such as slavery, poverty and homelessness have been challenged by evangelical leaders. But these evils were not challenged just because they were evil in and of themselves. They were challenged because the message of Jesus Christ proclaims that we are to care for the “least of these” (*Matthew 25:40–45*). This same good news also claims that if people were to gain the whole world yet lose their souls, they would have gained nothing at all (*Luke 9:25*). For this great evangelical heritage and ongoing witness within the church and to the world, I am grateful to God. 🍓

Tamara Letts is associate pastor for ministry mobilization at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Anchorage, Alaska. She serves with her husband, Tom.



### Recommended Books



*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*  
By Lesslie Newbigin  
Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1989



*The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*  
By Lesslie Newbigin  
Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1995