Rice University Evangelicals on Evangelism

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I. Introduction

Many of the surges in Christian evangelistic activity, particularly in America, have grown out of movements on college campuses. For example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Student Volunteer Movement sent 20,000 students to various missions fields around the world.[1] This movement itself was a student initiative, based on the Young Men's Christian Organization (YMCA), but student-led. Not surprisingly, then, in the mid and late twentieth century, a number of evangelical Christian organizations began to specify target college students as both recipients and potential perpetuators of evangelistic activity. For, example, the largest of these groups, Campus Crusade for Christ International, has as its express purpose "to turn lost students into Christ-centered laborers."[2] With over 16,400 full-time staff members and 200,000 volunteers serving around the world, most of them on college campuses,[3] Campus Crusade for Christ has permanently changed the college atmosphere in the United States and numerous other countries. As further evidence of the interest in college students among Christians in general, as of the writing of this paper, fourteen Christian student groups (out of a total of more than twenty explicitly religious groups) had officially registered as clubs at Rice University.

As a Christian student in a secular university, it occurred to me to wonder, "What do evangelical Christian students actually feel and believe about evangelistic activity in a college setting?" So, in March of 2001, I conducted a survey, consisting of a number of open-ended questions and a number of limited-response questions, of 18 students involved in different major evangelical groups at Rice University, specifically those involved in at least one of the four primary groups: Baptist Student Ministries (BSM), Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC),

[1] Little, Kevin. "Lesson 9: Students in Missions." http://www.thetravelingteam.org/2000/world/9.shtml. 2000.
[2] "Campus Crusade for Christ – About Us." http://www.uscm.org/aboutus/mission.html. 2001.
[3] "Are you ready?" http://www.ccci.org/opportunities/. 2001.

Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF). I hoped to answer the following questions:

1) How comfortable are the students in these groups with actually taking part in evangelistic activities? Does this vary based on group affiliation?
2) Do these students feel that the current primary forms of evangelistic campus activity are effective (in terms of conveying the basic tenets of Christianity clearly), offensive, or both? How does this vary with group affiliation?
3) With which forms of evangelistic activity are evangelical students most comfortable? How does this vary with group affiliation?

I anticipated finding a lower comfort level with evangelistic activity than the much-publicized plethora of advertisements for Christian activities and Christian beliefs on campus might suggest. I also anticipated finding that many students found current evangelistic methods, such as tracts, ineffective and offensive to non-Christians, preferring instead indirect and non-confrontational forms of evangelistic activity. Finally, I anticipated that students in Campus Crusade for Christ, generally recognized at Rice as the most direct (some say "confrontational") in its evangelism, would see evangelism as more important in the Christian life and be more supportive of the major methods that Campus Crusade for Christ uses, such as the "Four Spiritual Laws" tracts and "Freshman Survival Kits." For the most part, these hypotheses were supported by the students' responses. Before beginning an examination of which ones held and why, however, some background will prove helpful.

II. Historical Background

Higher education itself got its foothold in America through Christianity. Thus, many of the first major universities in America were founded by individuals or groups with particular denominational ties: "Princeton was formed by Presbyterians, Columbia (as King's College) by Episcopalians, Brown by Baptists, Rutgers by members of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Dartmouth by Congregationalists."[4] As John Butler has said,

> "Although none of the schools had a list of required religious beliefs or sectarian purposes, religion was a daily part of the curriculum, faculty responsibilities, and the overall life-style of the campus. The common belief was that the future of the new society depended on having educated clergy and public leaders. Most of the courses led to the ministry…"[5]

Almost from the beginning, voluntary religious groups, called societies, some of them secretive, developed on campus. In the original thirteen colonies, sixteen of the twenty-two schools had such societies. The societies concentrated on "study of Scriptures, prayer, and the relationship between faith and the academic experiences of the membership." Though the groups were often short-lived, they also corresponded with groups at other schools, forming the early basis for organized religion on campus.[6]

The first organized religious activity on any large scale in the American universities, however, came from Britain. The Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations (YMCA and YWCA, respectively), established programs at the Universities of Virginia and Michigan in 1857 with the purpose of developing Christian leadership. This led to the formation in 1870 of the National Student YMCA, followed in 1886 by the National Intercollegiate

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[4] Butler, John, Ed. Religion on Campus. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1989. 4.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid.*

YWCA. By 1900, the Y programs "had become the primary expression of religion on campus," with 628 campus Y associations, focusing on social activities, community service, student orientation, and interdenominational religious activities.[7]

At the national Y conference in Northfield, Massachusetts, in 1886, among a small group from Cornell University, was an attendee name John R. Mott. Deeply moved by the conference, Mott decided to work professionally in the Y's. In 1888, Mott co-founded the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), which would send 20,000 students to China and other countries as full-time missionaries.[8] In this work and in his later role as executive director of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), he "was most effective in developing both a cooperative spirit and a global consciousness on campuses throughout the United States."[9] The SVM provided the motivation for a slew of later movements, including the Millennial Pledge drive within Campus Crusade for Christ at the present time, the organizers of which have referred frequently to the SVM and hold very similar aims to those of the SVM. The earliest members of the SVM signed a declaration, reading, "We, the undersigned, declare ourselves willing and desirous, God permitting, to go to the unevangelized portions of the world."[10] Similarly, the modern-day Millennial Pledge reads, "…it is my commitment to go anywhere and do anything that my Lord directs me to do…. it is my pledge, the Lord willing, to give at least a year of my life in full-time service to further the work of the Gospel in my generation, in the new millennium."[11]

As late as 1948, Raymond M. Hughes, then the president of Iowa State University, said, "Next to the library, without which a college cannot exist, daily chapel can be the most powerful

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[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Little. The other key figures in founding the SVM were Luther Wishard and Robert Wilder. Mott was elected the first chairman.
[9] Butler, 5.
[10] Little.
[11] "The Millennial Pledge." http://www.thepledge.org/resources/thepledge.doc. 2000.

influence on a college campus."[12] Nonetheless, the shift of American universities away from officially organized religion started as early as 1850, with the "Report to the Corporation of Brown University on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education."[13] Around this time, the significance of the college campus as a target of the ministry of the church finally began to sink in, and the denominations began establishing college ministries: the Roman Catholic Church in 1883, the Episcopalians in 1887, the Congregationalists in 1902, the Presbyterians in 1903, and the others soon thereafter. An official Jewish response followed in 1923, though the Harvard Menorah Society, a student initiative, had existed in 1906.[14] By the twenties and thirties, other religious groups had joined the melee, including the Mormons, Christian Scientists, and Unitarians.[15]

The final large wave to date of formations of Christian campus organizations occurred in the 1940's and early 1950's. In 1945, six hundred youth leaders formed Youth for Christ International (YFC), targeting students and members of the military. This particular group had an extremely straightforward approach to evangelism, using all manner of dress, entertainment, publicity, etc. to draw attention before presenting the gospel in a sermon. Billy Graham, the movement's first official representative, explained it this way: "We used every modern means to catch the attention of the unconverted – and then we punched them right between the eyes with the gospel."[16] Still, it was not until 1951 that anyone targeted college campuses as their primary mission field. In that year, Bill Bright, a graduate of Fuller Seminary, founded Campus Crusade

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[12] Butler, 6.
[13] Hofstadter, R., and Hardy, C. D. The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States. New York: Columbia UP, 1952. in Butler, 6.
[14] Butler, 7.
[15] *Ibid.*, 8.
[16] Martin, William. With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America. New York: Broadway Books, 1996. 26.

for Christ International.[17] The other major non-denominational groups got their start at roughly the same period: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (actually an English import) in 1938, Young Life (targeting high schools and colleges) in 1941, the Navigators in 1950, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 1954. Only a handful of major religious groups on campuses have begun since that time, most notably Jews for Jesus (1970) and Maranatha Christian Fellowship (1972).[18]

The sheer number of groups currently and historically in existence, chapters of each, and student participants nationwide has led to a variety of flavors of evangelical students. Moreover, it has led to a variety of attitudes toward evangelism itself, even within the Christian community:

> To speak glowingly and enthusiastically of evangelism in certain campus haunts is a certain path to immediate acceptance. The user of the word becomes identified immediately as a member of the group. He belongs. Not only will he have his hand wrung and his back slapped; he may also be appointed chairman of a committee.
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> Where do we find this warm response to evangelism? Most likely, it is in a group of conservative Christians. They believe in evangelism – of a certain kind. To them, a Christian is one who "tells other individuals about Christ" and spends time winning souls." This is evangelism as they it, and they are in favor of it.
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> Then again, try speaking of evangelism in other circles, and the thermometer takes a decided drop….
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> Fire and ice do not exhaust the campus responses to evangelism. There is a lukewarm middle group, though here the thermometer seems uncertain and jumpy.[19]

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[17] *Ibid.*, 28.
[18] Butler, 9-10
[19] McCoy, Charles S. and Neely D. McCarter. The Gospel on Campus: Rediscovering Evangelism in the Academic Community. Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959. 12-13.

Out of this background arises the situation on the post-modern, secular, university campus. There is a perceived war for the souls of college students, and not all of the participants are equally enthusiastic, whatever their opinion on the matter.

III. The Evangelical Situation at Rice

At Rice University, in Houston, Texas, this perceived war does not seem so theoretical as practical at times. In recent years, Christian groups on campus have caused a good deal of controversy, specifically over certain evangelistic strategies. The campus weekly, student-run newspaper, the Rice Thresher, provides the most continual and large-scale arena for dialogue on such topics. For example, fliers advertising Christian activities to the general student body have been a topic of controversy since at least the early 1990's.[20] Similarly, a series of editorials and letters to the editor in the Thresher in Fall 2000, as well as a smaller number in Spring 2000, debated for nearly half a year the propriety of advertisements run by a group of openly Christian faculty and staff, including the names and sometimes departments or even titles of the signers. The tension over evangelistic efforts also comes out quite clearly in the BackPage, the Thresher's last page in each issue, which is intended to be humorous and not necessarily factual. This section frequently boasts commentary, though perhaps not serious commentary, on evangelical groups on the Rice campus, such as "The Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker Holy Evangelical 'The BPEs [BackPage Editors] are Going to Rot in Hell' Award for Religious Fervor and Commitment to Campus Wide Propaganda," the candidates for which were: "Campus 'Jesus is our club presi- dent [sic]' Crusade for Christ," "Campus 'If I'm failing orgo, it's 'cause God wants it that way' Crusade for Christ," "Campus 'The more ads, the more

[20] Ewing, Terzah, and John McCoy. "The Thresher Online: Religion at Rice (April 16, 1992)." http://www.rice.edu/projects/thresher/issues/79/920416/Features/Story03.html. April 16, 1992.

converts' Crusade for Christ," and "Campus 'Intolerance is OK if God says so' Crusade for Christ."[21] Clearly, the activities of evangelical groups on the Rice campus have raised some questions in the public arena, and have been doing so for some time. The questions I hope to answer essentially ask, "What has been the evangelical perception of and response to the tensions rising from evangelical activities at Rice?"

At this point, a small bit of background about the relevant Rice Christian organizations will be helpful. The four largest groups on campus, Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Baptist Student Ministries, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes, in order of size, represent at least two hundred and possibly as many as four hundred or so students, or seven to fifteen percent of the student body.[22] The other, smaller, groups account for an unknown number of other evangelicals (that is, beyond those also involved with one of the four primary groups). Again, though, exactly how many students are involved, or even exactly how long a given group has had a presence at Rice, is not often easy to establish.

The results of the survey I conducted contain some striking patterns and some equally striking absences thereof. Eighteen students in all participated. In response to my first question which I posed, as to how comfortable the students in these groups are with actually taking part in evangelistic activities, most students (11 of the 17 who responded) expressed a positive level of comfort with sharing their faith at Rice. This question was open-ended, so another three

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[21] "The Thresher Online: First Annual * Willy ** Awards (April 26, 1996)." http://www.rice.edu/projects/thresher/issues/83/960426/Backpage/Story1.html. April 26, 1996.

[22] These figures are based on the observations of the author and estimates from the SAINTS (e-mail) listserv at Rice, which has 312 distinct subscribers as of this writing, the vast majority of which have at least some cursory involvement with one of these four groups. However, this list does not include all or even necessarily most of those who are involved even with these four groups. For example, I was once asked (by a Campus Crusade for Christ staff member at Rice) to estimate the number of students involved in the ministry through the "large group" meetings, Bible studies, focus groups, and other activities. Our best estimate was 250 (in April 2000), but this could easily be off by fifty or so. The same degree of uncertainty holds for InterVarsity and especially Baptist Student Ministries, whose NoonPraise event draws a somewhat different crowd every week, with anywhere from forty to one hundred fifty in attendance.

expressed neutrality or mixed views, and three expressed discomfort. Moreover, the negative responses were distributed equally among CCC, IVCF, and BSM, so nothing movement-specific could be drawn from those statements. More interestingly, all but three (15 of 18) respondents felt that Christians "have an obligation to do evangelism."[23] Two of those three still felt that Christians should be "compelled" to evangelize others, taking issue only with the word "obligation." Over half (11 of 17) indicated that this obligation stems from a divine command; three specifically cited the so-called "Great Commission," the most familiar form of which can be found in Matthew 28:18-20:

> "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'"[24]

Interestingly, however, only one person claimed to participate in evangelistic activity more than once a week. Three others claimed to participate about once per week. Considering that nearly all of the respondents felt that evangelism is an obligation of Christians, and considering the emphasis given to sharing frequently, especially by Campus Crusade, this was not something I expected to find.

The results became far more interesting as students expressed their opinions on tracts such as Campus Crusade's "Four Spiritual Laws." Though nearly half (8 of 18) claim to have used evangelistic tracts at Rice before, all of them involved somewhat in Campus Crusade for Christ, nearly all (14 of 16) of the respondents expressed definite discomfort with and sometimes

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[23] A note here: "do evangelism" is somewhat vague intentionally, and "obligation" is strong intentionally. I recognize that there are many interpretations of "evangelism," which I never defined for participants. As Marvin Olasky says, there is the "Religion of the Deed" and there is the "Religion of the Word" – I anticipated encountering both and hoped to tease out *where* I would find each, rather than asking everyone to evaluate certain activities from a viewpoint that may not accurately reflect their own.

[24] The New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

concerns about personally using evangelistic tracts. One of the others claimed to have no basis for judgment, having never tried to use such material, and the other said she was "getting more comfortable with it." When asked the most and least effective evangelistic methods, four of ten respondents named the use of tracts. In yet another question, three of eleven respondents named tracts as one of the most offensive forms of evangelism. Opinions on mass-evangelism tools such as Freshman Survival Kits[25] varied a bit more – of thirteen responses, six students expressed discomfort, four expressed a good degree of comfort, and three were neutral. These responses were also distributed fairly evenly by group. Most students (12 of 18 and 9 of 17, respectively), however, felt that ads placed in the Thresher by Christian students or by Christian faculty and staff effectively communicated the gospel to the campus. Six students felt the ads were more effective when placed by faculty and staff, while three felt they were more effective if placed by students. "Rez Week," the evangelistic activities held about two weeks before Easter each year, is effective, most people (9 of 15) agreed. Five more were neutral – the one negative comment came from a freshman who had not yet heard of Rez Week. On all of these criteria, however, the group affiliation bore little significance.

In terms of the most effective forms of evangelism, thirteen of seventeen respondents stressed relationships as the best context for evangelistic activity. Two preferred "role model" evangelism – to witness by setting a good example in one's own life – and two preferred the activities of the groups themselves as the best context. On every other issue, though, huge divides appeared. For example, four students felt that fliers and advertisements were the most

[25] These are distributed by Campus Crusade for Christ and contain a Bible, a book (either Josh McDowell's More Than a Carpenter or Lee Strobel's The Case for Christ), a video (either on drinking or relationships), a CD of contemporary Christian music, a card with more information and a web address, and a toy (in 2000, this was a bouncy ball which lit up when it hit something). Nationwide, Crusade plans to distribute about half a million such kits in 2001-2002. Rice Campus Crusade distributes approximately one per incoming freshman, primarily through leaders of freshman Bible studies.

offensive forms of evangelism, while two felt that they were the least offensive. To be able to draw clear conclusions about group affiliation and opinions on such matters would require more data.

IV. Conclusions

Evangelical Christian movements on college campuses have a rich heritage, leading to a large degree of diversity of thought on how to relate to the rest of the campus. Rice is no exception; with, for a secular school of its size, a very large and active Christian community,[26] Rice has varying opinions on all things evangelical. We can draw a few major conclusions, however: Rice students are basically uncomfortable with impersonal and "cold turkey" evangelism (the latter defined as proselytizing individuals with whom one had no prior contact), preferring instead to evangelize within the context of their friendships, if at all. Moreover, nearly everyone expressed the belief that the methods of evangelism with which they are comfortable are also the most effective (or that this is the reason why they are comfortable with particular methods). Few, if any, are comfortable with mass-evangelism methods involving tracts or condensed presentations of Christianity to strangers. Some prefer entirely silent "proselytizing" – a Religion of the Deed, in which others see the truth lived out, but do not necessarily need to hear it spoken. These tensions will certainly continue to exist at Rice; how they play themselves out in terms of group affiliation remains to be seen. More importantly, as long as evangelism is a controversial subject within the Christian community at Rice, it will remain more so outside that

[26] As a point in case, consider the Rice Campus Crusade for Christ ranks first nationally in "sending" – that is, numbers of students going to major conferences and/or missions trips.

community, and that community will suffer a loss of effectiveness. More study needs to be done to learn more about Rice University evangelicals.

[3,205 words]

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