

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_european-journal-theology_01.php

In a Mission of Convivence – Evangelicals Work for Unity in Europe

Johannes Reimer

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Europa ist ein geteiltes Haus. In politischer, kultureller und sogar religiöser Hinsicht finden sich Europäer häufig in konträren Lagern wieder. Evangelikale Christen in Europa tragen zu dieser Vielfalt und sogar zu den damit verbundenen Spannungen bei. Nichtsdestoweniger sind sie berufen, die Einheit untereinander zu wahren und sich in einem Dienst der Versöhnung in ihren jeweiligen Nationen zu engagieren. Der Auftrag der europäischen evangelikalen

* * * *

SUMMARY

Europe is a divided house. Politically, culturally and even religiously Europeans often find themselves in opposite camps. European evangelical Christians add to this diversity and even to the tensions. Yet they are called to unity among themselves and to a ministry of reconciliation in their respective nations. The mis-

* * * *

RÉSUMÉ

L'Europe est une maison divisée. Politiquement, culturellement, et même religieusement, les Européens se trouvent souvent dans des camps opposés. Les chrétiens évangéliques européens ajoutent à cette diversité et même aux tensions que cela crée. Ils sont pourtant appelés à l'unité entre eux, ainsi qu'à un ministère de réconciliation au sein

* * * *

1. European Evangelicals: a factor of unity in a divided house?

Europe is a multifaceted continent. It is divided into West and East by ideology and religion: there are Roman Catholics, Protestants and Anglicans in the West and South, and mainly Orthodox believers in the East. It is divided into high and less

Kirchen muss eine Verpflichtung zu einer Berufung zum Zusammenleben beinhalten. Der vorliegende Artikel erläutert sowohl die Herausforderung der bestehenden Vielfalt als auch die Verpflichtung zu einer Berufung zum Zusammenleben. Biblische und theologische Argumente unterstreichen diese Berufung der Gemeinde, ein Instrument von Veränderung in ihrem eigenen Umfeld zu sein wie auch in der Nation und sogar auf dem europäischen Kontinent.

* * * *

sion of European evangelical churches must include a commitment to a mission of convivence. Both the challenge of diversity and the commitment to a mission of convivence are defined and discussed in this article. Biblical and theological arguments underline this call for the Church to be an agent of transformation in its particular context as well as in the nation and even on the continent of Europe.

* * * *

de leurs nations respectives. La mission des Églises évangéliques européennes doit inclure un engagement à œuvrer au vivre ensemble. L'auteur apporte des arguments bibliques et théologiques pour étayer cet appel adressé à l'Église à être un agent de transformation dans son contexte particulier, ainsi qu'au sein de la nation et même à l'échelle du continent européen.

* * * *

developed, into rich and poor, into natives and diaspora communities.¹ Yet Europe longs for unity. The religious upheaval during and after the Reformation² and the communist revolution in Russia centuries later, as well as World Wars I and II, resulting in a time of cold war, have drawn borders and boundaries across Europe. Our conti-

ment has become a metaphor for disunity, division and split. It is surely a miracle that after the end of World War II attempts to bring peace and unity to the continent resulted in the establishment of the European Union (EU) and brought peace to most European nations, a peace that has been holding for more than 70 years. Never before has most of Europe enjoyed peace and rest for such a long period of time. The motto of the EU, *In varietate concordia* ('United in diversity'), which was adopted in 2000, means according to the European Commission (EC) '... that, via the EU, Europeans are united in working together for peace and prosperity, and that the many different cultures, traditions and languages in Europe are a positive asset for the continent'.³

Today, however, once again strong nationalistic forces request the reestablishment of national borders. They fight passionately against any refugee programmes and create new divisions.⁴ Europe longs for unity, but who is bringing unity of spirit to the European table?

This article explores the role of European Evangelicals⁵ as they are found in the Evangelical Alliances throughout Europe⁶ in matters of unity and peaceful co-existence. There are national Evangelical Alliances in literally all European nations, so the coverage is like that of very few other organisations. The Evangelical Alliances in the West, South, North and East seem to be perfectly placed to become a powerful movement of peace. Some of these Alliances are relatively small, some are still in process of being set up, yet the Evangelicals are there, placed by God in between the Orthodox, Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants and even Muslims and atheists. Would it not be an appropriate missionary task for Evangelicals to work for more unity in Europe? Is it too optimistic to expect the Evangelicals to embrace convivence, that is, peaceful co-existence as a central idea for our mission, as the German missiologist Theo Sundermeier suggests?⁷

2. Convivence

The term convivence comes from the Latin *con* (together) and *vivere* (to live, to exist) and stands for co-existence. The word suggests a peaceful togetherness, a life in a shalomic state, where people respect and support each other regardless of their cultures, languages or even religions. Convivence creates a culture of welcome and love for foreigners, which in the New Testament is a

marker of the Christian faith. The term *filoxenia* is used in Romans 12:13 and Hebrews 13:2 for the hospitality of the Christian church and as an encouragement to live in her God-given calling. My thesis is that true evangelical faith will regard care of the foreigner as a vital part of the Christian mission in the world.⁸ Evangelicals might indeed be perfectly predestined to become agents of convivence and unity in the midst of all European diversity. What would this entail in practice? I envision at least three basic steps: Evangelicals will have to overcome their exclusivist stands on issues of unity; they will have to return to the very meaning of being evangel-centred; and they will have to become proactive in their convivial mission. These three points are developed in the three following sections of this article.

3. Overcoming exclusivist stands on issues of unity

Nothing is as typical for Evangelicals as boundaries. Religiously exclusivist in issues of salvation,⁹ they seem to define themselves by drawing dogmatic and organisational lines between themselves and all others both in society and religion.¹⁰ Evangelicals draw clear lines to mark their identity off from the world around them, from other faiths and other ideological communities.¹¹ Yet even among themselves boundaries as markers of identity are important. Churches distinguish themselves according to their own confessional status and denominational structure: Baptists are clearly not Lutherans, and Reformed believers are not Pentecostals, even though all of them may belong to the Evangelical Alliance and confess the same basic evangelical beliefs. Other churches stress their structural differences: house churches claim to be radically different from traditional church organisations. Other churches again are proud of their ethno-confessional identity: an Estonian church is clearly something different than a Russian church in Estonia, and an international church is clearly neither Estonian nor Russian.¹²

We could go on. Evangelical Christians are great at drawing boundaries even where you might not expect them, as markers of identity. As a result, the evangelical world has become a divided and dividing body, constantly defining new and newer identities.

Admittedly, there are also movements towards unity, such as the Evangelical Alliance, which stress the crucial importance of unity in the body

of Christ. They point to Jesus himself, who prayed for unity among his disciples, a unity which is modelled on the unity between the Son of God and the heavenly Father (Jn 17:21).¹³

But even here Evangelicals are creative enough to place new movements of unity right across those which already exist. Just think of the Evangelical Alliance on the one hand and the Lausanne Movement on the other. It is truly not easy to explain to a secular businessperson, for example, the real difference between the Network for Business as Mission of the Lausanne Movement¹⁴ and the Business Coalition of the World Evangelical Alliance.¹⁵ Is there any? Why in the world do Evangelicals need two business networks, pay two structures, run two parallel organisations? Is this somehow more effective in the end?

Are dividing and then reuniting Evangelicals more missional and more effective in their mission in the world? Does the world need these evangelical boundaries? Is the church defined by boundaries? And if so, what contribution could we ever hope to make to a better life in Europe? If ever Evangelicals want to become a convivial force in Europe, they will have to reconsider their own divisions on biblical grounds, overcoming exclusivist stands where they hinder evangelical unity. Such a witness to the world is necessary according to Jesus (Jn 17:21).

4. Evangel-centred Evangelicals and unity

Evangelicals derive their name from the evangel, the gospel. They claim to believe and live according to the gospel. And they do agree that the gospel is what Jesus was, did and said, not what theological scholars made of it. Leading Evangelicals have formulated the gospel accordingly: 'The gospel or good news is a person: Jesus of Nazareth, who walked on this earth to offer an alternative to a humanity devoid of real hope. This Jesus of Nazareth, who died on a cross in order to redeem humanity, announced himself as coming "to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Lk 4:18, NRSV).'¹⁶

The good news for the Evangelicals is Jesus. They all agree that the Church of Christ must be built in the way Jesus wants her to be. And her mission is to imitate his mission (Jn 20:21). Jesus himself expressed his view in Matthew 16:18, when he said to Peter: '... I will build my church and

the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.' The church named after him is also called 'the body of Christ' and as such, says the apostle Paul, she is 'the fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (Eph 1:23). An evangelical church is first of all marked by her *Jesusness*, by her Jesus-like quality.¹⁷

What are the boundaries of such a church? Are there any? Are there any cultural, national, structural, social or age boundaries? Not according to the New Testament! The surprising discovery of New Testament scholars is that there are few, and the ones that exist are different from what Evangelicals may claim to be markers of identity. The original church was in principle already multicultural and all-inclusive. The differences between men and women, slaves and free people, rich and poor had been removed. The apostle Paul states in Galatians 3:26-28:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The local church in Antioch on the Orontes, just to name one of these churches, was led by an impressive multicultural leadership team of five (Acts 13:1). It comprised a black slave, someone from the north of Africa, the companion of a king, a Jewish Levite and a famous philosopher. They were worshipping and serving together because in Christ their differences were irrelevant; the new identity completely dominated the old.

Sure, their new identity was clearly marked, but not by culture, structure or religious convictions. This new identity was marked by a relationship with Jesus himself, as Paul postulates in 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV): 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.' That is to say, not outer boundaries define the new identity of the believer, but a new centre. The disciples were not called to name differences with the people around them, but rather to invite people to come to Christ. As a matter of fact, Paul even encourages the Corinthians to contextualise and to become a Jew for the Jews and a Greek for the Greeks in order to lead at least some of them to Jesus (1 Cor 9:19-22). It is Jesusness which forms the true marker of what an evangelical identity is and nothing else. Gathered around Jesus the Church will never

divide, even if her outward expressions may vary widely.

But what does Jesusness mean in practice? First, it defines the reason for being. Called by Jesus to be and do what he was and did (Jn 20:21), the Church will accept her missional calling into the world. Jesus himself uses the word *ekklēsia* to underline the missional role of the Church. 'I will build my *ekklēsia*', he said to Peter (Mt 16:18), as we already saw. *Ekklēsia* was the technical term for the local political gathering of all citizens of a given Greek *polis*, a city republic. From time to time local magistrates would call the citizens of their city to gather for decisions to be made for the wellbeing of their city – or the citizens would decide to meet of their own accord. The Greek *polis* was thus ruled semi-democratically by her citizens.¹⁸ Jesus does not use the term by accident because in the Septuagint (LXX), the translation of the Old Testament into the Greek language, this is the term which translates *kahal Yahweh*, a Hebrew expression describing God's people gathered to decide for their common good, for instance when the king was calling the people to build an army and fight against the enemy.¹⁹

By calling his Church *ekklēsia* Jesus defines her reason for being. She has responsibility for the world. His disciples are called to be salt of the earth and light for the world (Mt 5:13-15). They are sent to the nations of the world to disciple them and to change their culture and lifestyle (Mt 28:18).²⁰ The word they have received is a word of reconciliation and as Christ's ambassadors they are challenged to bring peace and reconciliation to the world. The Church of Christ has no other reason to exist in the world than his mission. She is missionary by her very nature or she is no church at all!²¹

An *ekklēsia* is a fellowship responsible for the wellbeing of the city. Where the Church is such a body, Jesus continues, the powers of Hades, in other words, the powers of destruction, will not prevail. The Greek word used for 'powers' here is more literally 'gates' (Greek *pulai*) and it stands for city doors. Jesus seems to say that when he builds his Church no power of demonic destruction will be able to enter the gates of that city. In ancient cities the city gate was a central place where the rulers judged. Jesus is suggesting that where his *ekklēsia* is built, the parliament of the local community will not be invaded by hell.

The mark of an evangelical church as Jesus meant it is not to be boundary-driven but rather to be missionally responsible for community trans-

formation. This will bring peace and reconciliation to the community, creating a meaningful social space of coexistence or convivence. Evangelicals who proudly call themselves evangel-minded should first of all discover and accept their calling to bring peace to the communities of the world. They are shaped into the one body of Christ to witness of God's power in order to create unity among all creation (Phil 2:11).

5. An agent of convivence

Evangelicals are called out of a world which is itself full of boundaries to establish a place of good living for all. In Europe more and more states and nations are defining and defending their wellbeing by putting up protective boundaries. We have to protect our own good life by keeping all foreigners out, they argue. In many of our nations right-wing nationalists are becoming a treat to democracy.²² President Trump's motto, 'America first. Let's make America great again', is replicated in many nations of Europe. In the Baltics the Russians are marginalised wherever possible, like in many post-soviet countries.²³ In Rumania, Bulgaria and Hungary the Roma are under pressure.²⁴ In Germany it is the Turks and in Great Britain the Poles and other European foreigners. And millions of refugees all over the continent are classed down as problematic invaders.

What is the role of Evangelicals in all of this? Will they join those who put up walls of hostility? Will they join those who applaud the 'us first' propaganda parties? Will they separate themselves once more into their homogeneous groups, justifying such a move by an appeal to the dubious 'homogenous unit principle' formulated by the American Donald McGavran, hoping for extraordinary church growth?²⁵ Or will they form *ekklēsiai* in their respective communities, voting and working for a good life and the reality of the kingdom of God for all? Will they work for convivence or rather boost xenophobia?

It is easy to see where the gospel they preach should put them. Gospel-centredness, Jesusness leaves them no choice but the side of the neglected, the poor and the marginalised. Here they will find those behind fences and boundaries in need of assistance. Here they will find Jesus at work and joining him they will be blessed with all the presence of God's Spirit.

A couple of years ago, my wife and I, together with our good friend Sheryl Haw, the global direc-

tor of Micah Global, walked Hadrian's Wall. This huge structure was built by the Roman emperor Hadrian on the border between England and Scotland as a protection from the invading Scots. Many cruel events happened at this border as centuries went by; Sheryl told us some of them. The English even put up a cursing stone in the neighbouring city of Carlisle, cursing the Scots for what they did to them.²⁶ The hurts seem still to fill the memories of the two ethnic groups that are living today in one country under the same British flag. And the attempts of the Scots to gain political independence may indicate how deep the memory goes. On our way we entered a pub for a drink and I asked the owner with whom he identified, the Scots or the English. 'Neither,' said the man, 'I am a borderer.' How beautiful, I thought. Here was a man who had overcome the past and refused to identify with either of the conflicting parties.

This, I think, is the proper position of the Church of Christ in general and the Evangelicals in particular: to be a bridge between those in conflict. We are borderers in the best sense of the word, God's *ekklēsia*, with Jesus as our Lord in the centre and God's mission as our reason for being. Jesusness is our identity marker. Once we accept this, we will get rid of our divisive DNA without losing God's truth as the only foundation for life and culture. *Solus Christus* will guarantee the *sola Scriptura* in the spirit of grace and faith.

Dr Johannes Reimer is professor of mission studies and intercultural theology at the Ewersbach University of Applied Science, Germany, and professor extra-ordinarius of missiology at the University of South Africa. He is director of the Peace and Reconciliation Network of the World Evangelical Alliance. His address is Aehlenberg 2, D-51702 Bergeunstadt, Germany.

Endnotes

- 1 See for instance the European diversity survey at <http://www.european-diversity.com/not4profit/> (accessed 22/10/2018).
- 2 Diarmaid MacCulloch gives an account of its divisive power on the European continent in *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (München: Penguin, 2004).
- 3 See https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto_en (accessed 12/12/2018).
- 4 Christina Pazzanese, 'In Europe, nationalism rising', *The Harvard Gazette* 27 February 2017, at <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/>

- story/2017/02/in-europe-nationalisms-rising (accessed 15/03/2019).
- 5 Evangelicals in Europe are a broad movement of different orientations. See the definition in Erich Geldbach, „Evangelikale Bewegung“, *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* Vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986) 1186.
- 6 For the history of the Evangelical Alliances, see Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate. The story of the World Evangelical Fellowship* (Carlisle: Paternoster / Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).
- 7 Theo Sundermeier, „Konvivenz als Grundstruktur ökumenischer Existenz heute“ in Wolfgang Huber, Dietrich Ritschl und Theo Sundermeier, *Ökumenische Existenz heute 1* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1986) 49-100; Theo Sundermeier (Hrsg.), *Den Fremden wahrnehmen. Bausteine für eine Xenologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1992); Theo Sundermeier, *Konvivenz und Differenz. Studien zu einer verstehenden Missionswissenschaft* (Erlangen: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2001).
- 8 See John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 86-87, 103.
- 9 Robert Boyd, *Approaching the World Religions Vol. 2: An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017) 37.
- 10 See the good overview in Brian Stiller, *Evangelicals Around the World: A Global Handbook for the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Harper & Collins, 2015). In 2011 Pew Research Center conducted a survey among evangelical leaders worldwide which clearly revealed the defensive character of Evangelicals in many respects; see more in <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/06/22/global-survey-beliefs/> (accessed 14/12/2018).
- 11 Boyd, *Approaching the World Religions*, 9-10.
- 12 This article is based on a paper delivered in Tallinn, Estonia, at the 'Hope of Europe Conference' of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) in October 2018.
- 13 See for instance the statement of the British EA, written by Steve Clifford, at <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/steve-clifford-unity-for-the-sake-of-the-gospel> (accessed 15/03/2019).
- 14 See <https://www.lausanne.org/networks/issues/business-as-mission> (accessed 21/10/2018).
- 15 See <http://business.worldidea.org> (accessed 21/10/2018).
- 16 See 'What's the Good News? Nine evangelical leaders define the gospel', *Christianity Today* 7 February 2000, Vol. 44.2, 51.
- 17 See a definition of Jesusness at <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Jesusness> (accessed 14/12/2018).
- 18 Gerhard Schrot, „Ekklesia“ in *Der Kleine Pauly 2* (Stuttgart: Druckenmüller, 1967) 222-224.
- 19 See Johannes Reimer, *Missio Politica: The Mission*

- of Church and Politics* (Carlisle: Langham, 2017) 47-52.
- 20 Reimer, *Missio Politica*, 49-50.
- 21 See the decree of the Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* 1,2 at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html (accessed 21/10/2018).
- 22 BBC, 'Europe and nationalism - a country-by-country guide' at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006> (accessed 21/10/2018).
- 23 Alistair Scrutton and David Mardiste, 'Wary of divided loyalties, a Baltic state reaches out to its Russians' at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-baltics-russia/wary-of-divided-loyalties-a-baltic-state-reaches-out-to-its-russians-idUSKBN1630W2> (accessed 10/12/2018).
- 24 See for instance Valeriu Nicolae and Hannah Slavik, 'Being a „Gypsy“: The worst social stigma in Romania' at <http://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/being-a-gypsy-the-worst-social-stigma-in-romania> (accessed 10/12/2018).
- 25 Donald McGavran suggested that churches should concentrate on likeminded people for more effective evangelism and church growth; see Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); German: *Gemeindewachstum verstehen: Eine grundlegende Einführung in die Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus* (Lörrach: Simson, 1990).
- 26 See more at http://www.heritageandhistory.com/contents1a/2010/01/the-cursing-stone-carlisle/?doing_wp_cron=1545036039.4263250827789306640625 (accessed 10/12/2018).