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Theological Commission p. 3

The Future of Evangelical Theology

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Christian theology has a very impressive *history* of nearly two thousand years. But we are living in a secular world with a plurality of ideologies, philosophies and powerful religions; and so we need to ask: has Christian theology also an impressive *future*? Since the century of Enlightenment, and especially the religious criticism of the influential philosophers of the nineteenth century, the future of Christianity has been denied. The spectacular success of the modern sciences and the Industrial Revolution put the Christian faith, and the old privileges of Christian churches, aside.

Therefore it is no wonder that Christians were concerned to emphasize their unity, beyond all historical confessions and denominations, at the beginning of the twentieth century. When John Mott sent invitations for the first Conference on World Missions, in 1910 in Edinburgh, his main argument was that the Christian churches could have a future only if they were united in confessing their faith. At that time the mainline churches and the different denominations were willing to look forward to confirm the common ground of all Christian theology and to stand together in order to win the future for Christian theology and the Christian Church.

And so we have to ask today if it makes sense to proclaim one specific; and relatively new, form of Christian theology at the end of the twentieth century, with all its challenges to the Christian Church and its thinking. If we claim a future for evangelical theology, we have to clarify the way in which evangelical theology is rooted in Christian theology at all, and ask where the differences are that make it necessary to distinguish evangelical theology from (for example) Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran or Methodist, theology. What is the specific shape of *evangelical* theology?

THE MISSIOLOGICAL SHAPE OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Evangelical theology is inextricably involved with the fortunes of the evangelical movement as a whole. Theology both influences the development of the evangelical movement, and is also dependent on the development of evangelicalism at the same time.

Evangelicalism is primarily an *evangelistic* and *missionary movement* within the worldwide Christian Church. It is a gathering of Christians who are committed to Christ and his mission throughout the p. 4 world, transcending all orders of Protestant denominations. Evangelicalism unites Christians from different theological backgrounds and traditions and, to some degree, emphasizes by its missionary engagement new theological profiles within the diversity of historic Christian faiths. The fundamental factor of integration of those different Christian traditions which unite in the evangelical movement is their commitment to *world evangelization*, as expressed for example in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974.

Here I would like to examine how this fundamental commitment to missions is shaping evangelical theology, and why it is important that we should reaffirm the evangelical movement in its evangelistic task by assembling a biblical basis for a missionary theology. I think evangelical theology has a future *only in as far as it serves its missionary task*. One can have a future only if one has a real presence. And evangelical theology has a presence because mission is in God's time. Within the framework of biblical salvation, mission history is on God's agenda for this period of time. The Christian Church is created by the Holy Spirit through the word of the risen Lord. He, in his authority, has

put mission at the top of his agenda; and the only thing that we as Christians have to do is to remain in step with the Spirit and God's own purpose. The future of evangelical theology is not guaranteed by any academic standard or by any human thinkers, but only by the promises of the Lord himself. And so I propose to try, in what follows, to outline at least in part what it really means to define theology as a function of the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. In order to accomplish this theological programme, I will give a systematic commentary on the Great Commission from the perspective of our question; what should evangelical theology be in order to have a future guaranteed by Christ?

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL AUTHORITY OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Immediately before his ascension, Jesus proclaimed his lordship in the presence of his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me". By this, the Lord underlined within the Great Commission itself the fact that all theological truth is *personal* truth. This makes him tremendously different to all founders of religions or great philosophers of the past. Their mandate has indubitably ended with their deaths. Their words have to be gathered in literature and must be restored. The only influence they have in history is through the efficiency of the finalized traditions which have been restored. Those who follow them have to deal only with historical facts and figures. **P. 5** There is a significant contrast between such a closed situation, and the living process which pertains between persons who act and react.

Therefore evangelical theology must be aware that it has to deal not only with a great historical past, but with the living God who is present in the spirit of the risen Christ. Because Christ is given all power, theologians cannot confront his words only in terms of literature, but in interaction with the real Christ who reveals himself by his living Word. I think that is one of the deepest cleavages between evangelical theology and the so-called historical critical theologians who deal with the Bible only on the level of historical interest. There is a great difference between trying to restore a former teaching of a prophet or philosopher who has already died, and hearing the Word of the almighty powerful Lord who speaks and works his miracles throughout history. The words spoken two thousand years ago have the same relevance and dynamic power today because Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Christ is the one who builds the bridges between transcendence and immanence, heaven and earth. By his incarnation, he sustains the ongoing relationship between God and men among his disciples and within his church. Because of this, evangelical theologians can never follow the atheistic statement of some modern science which claims that we should think *etsi deus non daretur*, as if God were not there; on the contrary, all real theology flows forth out of this powerful dynamic relationship between the teaching Christ and the learning disciple, between the revealing God and the reflecting theologian. This reality of interaction between Christ and the theologian, in all theological thinking and writing, demands as one consequence that the theologian respects the glorious presence of his Lord. Theological reflection can be done only in the attitude of a humble servant who hears his Lord's voice and bows before him.

Paradoxically, this attitude of servanthood is the foundation of every theological self-conscious and authoritative statement. The authority of the sending Lord is given to the apostles, and on the basis of their written testimony to all missionaries following in church history. Therefore theology has the supreme authority to defeat every ideology, religion, and philosophy that dares to direct opposition against Christ's word. Theology does not take place in the sense of a platonic dialogue in which nobody knows the truth but where the partners will find truth as they gather to answer one another and enlighten

one another by their questions. Instead of such an understanding of dialogue, Christian theology has a prophetic mandate. The Christian teacher or theologian has to proclaim the truth in a prophetic sense of the Old [p. 6](#) Testament prophets who spoke *ko amar Jahwe*, that is, 'So speaks the Lord Almighty'. And as long as theologians stay in this humble attitude before the Lord and proclaim his word, He reveals his power today through the words spoken in human weakness. The future of evangelical theology depends exclusively on the authority of the sending Christ who proclaims his gospel by his disciples.

THE EVANGELISTIC PURPOSES OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

The Great Commission commands us to disciple all people. This should be done by two instruments of grace: by *baptising* and by *teaching*. Baptism underlines the objective dimension in the process of christianizing a heathen, and teaching is a subjective application to this powerful sign of grace given in baptism. In the context of our theme, I do not want to emphasize here the objective side in terms of sacraments and teaching about baptism, but to ask the question: 'What is meant by Christian *teaching*'?

First we have to recognize and reflect upon the fact that the foundation of all theology lies exclusively in the mandate to teach which the risen Lord has given to his apostles. So Christian theology is implicated as one function of the overall missionary task of the Church. By teaching the gospel, people will recognize who God is in his Trinity and learn that they are to become aware of their sin and lostness. They hear the word of redemption, and the Spirit moves their hearts to repent and makes them into disciples of Christ. The Word of God proclaimed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is, in itself, the effective means of making a sinner into a child of God and an heir of the coming blessings. By the Word, the reality of heaven is brought to mankind, and *vice versa*: people are brought to Christ in order to become heirs of the heavenly kingdom.

Whoever denies that Christian theology is only a function within the process of discipling cannot be a theologian in the sense of the New Testament. Whenever theology becomes a *master* of Scripture, and separates from the church and its evangelistic tasks, it perverts itself.

The liberal understanding of theology cannot therefore be called Christian or evangelical, by definition; because the emphasis of liberal theology is to *liberate* human thinking from the authority of a given authentic revelation. Instead of leading people in the obedience of faith, it longs for liberation from any authority outside the rational dignity of the person. I do not wonder that the modern rationalism of the West tends to uproot the churches from their biblical foundation and ends in alienation from the historic Christian faith. One of its [p. 7](#) consequences is declining churches. Liberalism, in its depths, will not agree to use the intellectual potential of man simply as a tool in the possession of a servant who is concerned to minister only his Lord's teaching. There is a fleshly fascination in leading people into the abandonment of heteronomic influences. And so every theologian has to decide whether he is willing to serve Christ in teaching others and to bring them, by his teaching, to Christian maturity; or whether he is to liberate them, in the name of the human capability of rational thinking, from God's revealed truth.

Last but not least, evangelical theology has its source in repentance of mind and intellectual behaviour. It comes *from* conversion and leads *to* conversion. The criteria for all theology that claims to be evangelical must be formed by biblical thinking and must be empowered by the Holy Spirit to make disciples and to build them up in maturity on the way of sanctification. It is not any particular academic standard that makes theology worthwhile and relevant, but only the biblical foundation of its content and the missionary purpose in which it is spoken. Evangelical theology cannot strive for the

scientific ideal of *sine ira et studio* (without deep personal engagement and commitment). Theology is no science in the modern sense of a purposeless enterprise on the intellectual level. Spiritual ambition makes not only the difference between evangelical and liberal theology, but also between evangelical and *Orthodox* theology. There is unity between Orthodox theologians and evangelical theologians in terms of the objective contents of Christian theology, which must be based on a biblical foundation. But there is an important difference between them, for evangelical theology is longing and praying instantly to promote revival. It is, in all its aspects of thinking and depths of reflection, longing for the repentance of non-Christians and the christianizing of the Christians by increasing sanctification of life. A good evangelical theologian looks forward to bearing eternal fruit by a humble ministry of the Word of God.

THE BIBLICAL CONTENTS AND THE PRACTICAL PROFILE OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

The Lord commands his disciples to teach all nations to obey everything he has told the apostles. The word 'everything' implies two principles for our understanding of the Scriptures. The Reformers of the sixteenth century emphasized their theological position in two fundamental hermeneutical tags: *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*. They were convinced that Christ has bound himself to the written word **P.8** of Scripture. In Scripture, and only there, can his will be found. There is no other source of divine revelation where man can find true knowledge of God and his eternal will and the way of redemption. This entire godly truth is what is meant by the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone). This principle has to be maintained in evangelical theology today, not only against the Roman Catholic doctrine of a combination between ecclesiastical tradition and Scripture, but also against the modern ecumenical approach to interreligious dialogue with non-Christian faiths.

It is indeed very humbling for the human wisdom that likes to put its confidence in the so-called 'eternal truth of reason' rather than in the contingent events of salvation history. But there is no true knowledge of redemption aside from the biblical revelation. Jesus is the only way to truth and life for every man on earth throughout history.

On the other hand, evangelical theology also has to defend the hermeneutical principle of *tota scriptura* against every form of liberalism that searches to find a new canon within the biblical canon. Every attempt to select within the Bible, between an everlasting authentic word of God and mere words of human writers, will be a failure. The history of Protestant theology throughout the last 250 years has demonstrated the chaos of theological opinions. Theologians who tried to build up theology on the basis of a selected or restricted Bible could not find a common basis for confessing Christ today. All attempts to develop theology by selecting between divine and human statements in the Bible, end earlier or later in a pure relativism. There is no convincing argument—even on the intellectual level—as to how a theologian possibly could, after a period of more than two thousand years, distinguish between those events of salvation history that really happened and those phrases in the Bible that were spoken by the 'historical Jesus'.

Evangelical theology has to refer to the whole of the Scriptures without any amendment to the Bible. This is a basis for evangelical theologians to become good stewards who can be trusted to serve in God's house and to make known all mysteries of God's revealed truth. They are not allowed to let any Christian untaught or ignorant into any aspect of the biblical revelation, beginning with predestination, creation, sin, redemption, and sanctification, and ending with the eternal consummation of God's kingdom. And if theologians teach and provide God's people with eternal truth, this

teaching is nevertheless a theoretical affair. For ‘all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for all good work’ [p. 9 \(2 Tim. 3:16f\)](#). Therefore, it is not the strength, but the *weakness* of the academic tradition of Western theology that it strives for the ideal of mere theoretical knowledge in terms of philosophy or even traditional theology. Biblical truth is very practical and every theological research must be validated by the spiritual relevance it has for the practice of godly living. The theoretical approach to theology leads to dangerous pitfalls. This is clear from the story of the early Church with its Hellenistic background, throughout scholastic theology in the Middle Ages and the period of the so—called ‘Protestant orthodoxy’ of the sixteenth and seventeenth century up to today’s scholars with their high academic standards.

Every intellectual decision insulated from the grassroot problems of the church, is at best inefficient and at worst positively dangerous for God’s people. A good theologian is one who struggles in a responsible position as teacher with all the temptations of his age, and searches in close connection with his fellow disciples for actual answers to be found in the Bible. Those scholars who hide themselves behind the walls of monasteries or modern universities are often incompetent in relevant questions of everyday life in the church. The opposite state of affairs is evident in the lives of those theologians who have shared as vital members of the Church the needs and the problems of a congregation. They have a fruitful public ministry in teaching and writing. Paul was an excellent theologian because he was such a dedicated missionary. Or one could cite the bishop of Hippo, Augustine; or the enormous outreach of the Reformers; or the ministry of John Wesley; or our brothers such as John Stott who have a fruitful ministry today.

The future of evangelical theology lies in this indispensable combination of solid biblical thinking, regarding and understanding the meaning of salvation history, and the capacity to apply this biblical knowledge to different situations in the church in a practical manner. For it is the practice of biblical truth that convinces the non-Christian world and makes our teaching and preaching effective for the hearer. The message will be heard when love is seen. Evangelical theology looks forward not to winning academic debates, but to winning for Christ those who are lost in their sins.

THE ECUMENICAL OUTREACH AND ESCHATOLOGICAL DRIVE OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

The Greek word *oikumene* means the totality of mankind living worldwide in a colourful diversity of nations, tribes and tongues within [P. 10](#) different societies, political systems, and cultures. This diversity is implied in our Lord’s own words when he compels us to invite nations to his kingdom, insisting that the apostles should ‘make disciples of all nations’ (compare for example the parable of the great banquet, in [Luke 14:15–24](#)). The different ministries of proclaiming, preaching, and teaching the gospel are spiritually one in their foundation in scriptural truth and its missionary purpose. But the ecumenical outreach of missions leads us to the point where we have to study sincerely the abundant variety of different gifts given by the Holy Spirit and the variety of ministries in the Church. Because of the very different situations of the peoples to be reached with the gospel, there is a need for different missiological applications in teaching the gospel. It is an ongoing process of Christian teaching, starting with the elementary truth of redemption to promote every Christian into the full potential of knowledge God has prepared for us. So the proclamation of the gospel leads to the necessity to distinguish between the specific input that has to be contributed by evangelists, pastors, and teachers in different ways. Evangelists and pastors are also teachers and must teach what the

gospel implies, what is the distinctive context of revealed truth that should be known and understood in order to be believed. In that sense, the Great Commission '*teach them*' is an unlimited request.

But an evangelist or pastor can teach others only after he has been taught and disciplined himself. And there is one of the main tasks of teachers, in the deeper sense of theologians. Theologians first should aim their research and teaching towards a solid Christian doctrine to provide for the next generation of evangelists and pastors.

I stress this because there is an ongoing temptation in all theological education not to train and teach evangelists and pastors, but only to reproduce theologians for an academic career. Let me say clearly that I am not denying the importance of intellectual training for every Christian worker, to enable him to fulfil potentially the apologetic task of [1 Peter 3:15](#) ('Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have'). But this intellectual apologetic task is that of defending the faith and sustaining the proclamation of the gospel by solid argumentation in different changing situations. The need for contextualizing the gospel in very different cultural situation requires a solid intellectual education in theology. And this apologetic outreach, which arises from an urgent search for those who are lost in sin and error, must be rooted in a basic and profound understanding of the Scriptures. Biblical thinking therefore must not only be planted in the consciousness of a [p. 11](#) theologian, but must become his second nature and must shape his thinking and his attitudes very deeply, penetrating his unconscious personality. This is a life-long process and implies a deep commitment from every disciple to learning from his Master.

Anyone who is sent to teach what Jesus taught must carefully study the Scripture in order to become able to handle spiritual questions properly. This includes the capacity to connect biblical lines between the Old and New Testaments, and to recognize how the meaning of the revelation is to apply to a particular situation today. Furthermore, it is a matter of wisdom to study industriously the history of the Church and its mission to find spiritual wisdom. It is one of the characteristics of evangelical theology that it is not bound to any particular systematized forms of Christianity or theology, but includes knowledge and experience from different Christian traditions and tests them out in the light of the Scriptures. In this sense, evangelical theology is ecumenical theology with a broad aspect of freedom to prove everything and to retain the best. By such wisdom that arises from the study of history, evangelical theologians will be sensitive to problems that come up in similar situations in the Church today; and will become capable of avoiding the mistakes of recent generations. We should not repeat unvaryingly all the practices of former generations. Last but not least, there is a necessity to use all the tools of the practical sciences in terms of education, mass communication, theory of communication, sociology and so on.

But all these treasures of knowledge should be integrated into a clear perspective of discipling nations for Christ's sake. No theological knowledge and education should replace this eschatological awareness of the coming Christ, and the sense of responsibility to save the lost, and lead Christ's flock to maturity and into the likeness of Christ through sanctification.

The missionary outreach of theology can be threatened by a tendency for our teaching to become pure specialization. It has been said, harshly but with some truth, that 'a specialist in the area of theology is someone who knows everything about nothing'. If a theologian reflects for many years on the same subjects, and is doing research in only one area of one theological discipline, there arises a temptation to confuse one's own specific research subject with the mandate and needs of the whole Church. To stay firm against

temptation, every scholar should challenge himself every day by this provoking question: 'Why should anyone hear the gospel twice before everyone has heard the gospel once?'

Theologians have a tendency to sit down and remain seated, as the [p. 12](#) rabbis did in Jesus' time. But it was while Jesus was walking throughout Palestine that he taught and disciplined the apostles. Evangelical theology has to be *mobile*. It is the eschatological restlessness and the challenge of the unfinished task of reaching and penetrating every culture for Jesus Christ that gives theology a dynamic power. The urgent need of going into depth in different areas, and doing specific research programmes and projects to supply evangelists and teachers with profound background knowledge, must be balanced with the passion to reach everyone on earth for Christ.

It seems to me then, that evangelical theology should be shaped by these two dynamic dimensions: first, to go into biblical depth in order to be able to 'demolish arguments and every present pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ' ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)); then to be characterized by the restlessness of ambassadors with an urgent message to communicate. It is a pneumatical fact that every real Christian theology must lead to mission; for it is the Holy Spirit who has continually to guide and enlighten the theologian in his work of research and teaching, and it is the very same Spirit who involves himself in mission to accomplish the unfinished task of world evangelization.

In this context, I want to add one remarkable fact of which as theologians we should be especially aware. Since the period of romanticism, with its emphasis on originality and individual development, everyone who works as a scholar feels himself compelled to pioneer and publish something *new*. In many cases, the drive for originality leads theologians to heretical statements and sometimes even to heretical concepts of theology. In the Great Commission the Lord commands us to teach only what he has taught, not our own modern individual ideas. For this reason, evangelical theology has to remain conservative to be alert to protect the original Christian faith. But, as fallen beings, we evangelical theologians also feel sometimes the fleshly impulse to oppose the historical Christian doctrine in order to find our own profile in provoking the Church by strange and contested ideas. This should not be so.

What then is the answer to the temptation of becoming *stagnant* in a conservative and orthodox theology? Many theologians search for the answers in terms of liberal or syncretistic concepts. But the right biblical answer to this problem is not liberalism or syncretism, but mission. If he keeps in step with the Spirit who goes forth to reach the unreached, the theologian is compelled to think new thoughts, contextualizing the gospel to different nations in order to meet within [p. 13](#) the apologetic confrontations with new ideologies, religions, and philosophies the heights and depths of scriptural truth.

And so evangelists, pastors and theologians should not be at loggerheads, but have a mutual exchange. Evangelists and pastors need from time to time some fresh input of deepening doctrine and renewed knowledge for their ministry. Otherwise, theologians should occasionally cooperate with evangelists and pastors in grass roots experience of fulfilling the Great Commission. In this way, they ought to serve one another by performing a mutual service to build up the whole Church. Permanent contact between theologians and evangelists and pastors will help the theologians in theological education to distinguish between specific projects of research and things that are necessary to teach to every student of theology. They will recognize what research projects are useful and will have the promise of bearing fruit in the ministry of evangelists and pastors.

Evangelical theology has a future if it is moved by the Spirit to go forth and to recognize what we should say in this eschatological period of salvation history. That is to proclaim Christ until he comes. The future of evangelical theology is the coming Lord himself, who

will charge, prove and reward every theology; as Paul put it in [1 Cor. 3:12-14](#), 'If any man builds on this foundation [Jesus Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.' To this climax of history, evangelical theologians may look forward with joy and comfort because the living Lord gives his promise also for their task of researching and teaching. 'And surely I am with you always,' he says, 'to the very end of the age.'

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The Future of Evangelical Theological Education

James E. Plueddemann

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Who is worried about the future of evangelical theological education? Theologians are usually enamoured of the ideas of the *past* and scarcely take time to reflect on the future. School principals are overwhelmed with *present* needs for funds, faculty, and facilities and don't want to be overwhelmed by hypothetical burdens of the future. Those interested in the future are professors of eschatology, arguing about whether the beast with the ten horns is the European Common Market, the Roman Catholic Church, or communist world domination.

Modern prophets seem strangely isolated from the pressing practical needs of theological educators. While futurologists prophesy catastrophic gloom and doom awaiting the world from the depleted ozone layer, drought, AIDS, and inflation, educators worry more about the future of the school mimeograph machine and whether the textbook order will arrive on time. Most people who study the future tell us how bad things are going to be, prescribing the drastic action we must take in order to survive the future.

Christians should have peace about the future because of their sure hope! From God's perspective the future is not out of control. But we must be reminded that the Lord of Creation uses his children to make a difference in the world. We are called by the power of God to change the world, not merely to adapt to changing gloomy future predictions. As theological educators, we must not merely react to the dire predictions of the future. We must, by the grace of God, *change* the future.

Theological educators can contemplate the future with three possible outlooks. They can actively continue as they are; they can react to problems as they arise; or they can take initiatives so that from a human perspective, the future will be *different* because of