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respect and honour which the people of God in the Old Testament rendered to their priests and prophets and by which the early Christians in the New Testament time paid tribute to the apostles have disappeared; consequently, there is a crisis in Christian ministry today. We must recover the 'biblical concept of Christian ministry' from the Scripture. This is one of the tasks of the Theological Commission in the future.

CONCLUSION

We are living in the midst of materialism, secularism, humanism, pluralism, and theological confusion. There are amazing similarities of challenge to the Christian church during the time of Martin Luther and our time. As Luther wanted to recover biblical Christianity with sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, we also need to emphasize Luther's slogan for our days in order to go back to the biblical teaching for the problems which we face today. We have faith in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord; therefore, we have hope for eternal salvation and for the establishment of his kingdom in this world.

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Our Theological Task: Preparing for Mission in the 21st Century

Bruce J. Nicholls

As we prepare to enter the 21st century the present trend of world events suggests that we will face situations for good and evil whose magnitude will eclipse anything known in human history. The rapidity of cultural change, the expansion of human knowledge, economic development and prosperity, the development of the information highway and global travel are some of the positive benefits that await us. But alas, they will be matched by racial and communal violence, the widening of the gap between rich and poor, diseases with no known cure, the continuing breakdown of marriage and family life, amoral sexual behaviour and an expanding network of bribery, corruption and terrorism. In the midst of religious pluralism, secular humanism will give way to old and new forms of paganism in desperate attempts to save the world from ecological disaster. The conflict between the City of God and the City of Man so dramatically portrayed in the visions in the book of Revelation is becoming as relevant now as it will be in the last days.

We gather for this consultation in the faith and expectant hope that the Living Creator-Redeemer God of biblical revelation will triumph in the cosmic battle between good and evil. The victory won on the cross and demonstrated in the resurrection will be fully revealed when Christ returns to inaugurate the descent of the New Jerusalem ([Rev. 21](#)) and the creation of the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness ([2 Pet. 3:13](#)). God's kingly reign is now visible in his church in-so-far as the church lives under

the Lordship of Christ, the King. As evangelicals we believe in the church because it is born of God in Christ and is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. As the Body of Christ, the church is one, holy, apostolic and universal. It is the community of believers, justified by faith in Christ's atoning work on the cross, participating in Christ's resurrection from the dead and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Its authority is the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God, written.

As the people of God, we are ashamed of our disunity and our failure to stand together for holiness and purity in our worship and our daily living. We are guilty of theological apostasies and failure to take the gospel to our neighbour and to the peoples who have never clearly [p. 374](#) heard the gospel. Yet despite our failures, we rejoice to see God at work in new and unexpected ways. There are signs of church growth in many two-thirds world countries, new missionary movements with God-given vision, maturing leadership among church and laity, and countless men and women coming forward for theological training in residential schools and extension lay-training programmes. Above all we marvel at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in new and miraculous ways, the mañana vision of a new reality unlike today (Samuel Escobar).

It is upon Peter, the rock, his confession and all who follow his path, that Jesus promises to build his church and that the gates of Hell will never overcome it ([Matt. 16:18](#)). We echo Paul's benediction 'Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen' ([Eph. 3:20f](#)).

We have gathered here for this historic week to analyze in small groups the crucial theological issues of our time, bringing each under the penetrating light of Scripture, and to catch a vision of the needs of the whole world through our regional plenary presentations. At the same time we will declare our willingness to listen to each other and be open to the Spirit's guidance that together we may, with growing clarity, move towards a vital and coherent theology in order to meet the issues of our time, so that all things may be brought together under the Lordship of Christ ([Eph. 1:10](#)).

Our theological task is a hermeneutical one, in which we seek to distance ourselves from the Word of God, in our study of it, and yet fully identify with it and let it speak to us. At the same time we will analyze the plurality of our cultural contexts with all the sociological tools available to us, so that we might identify with our culture's hopes and fears and with those who are lost and without Christ.

Our task this week is to enter into a serious dialogue between this unchanging Word of God and the ever-changing context in order that we may discern God's word and priorities for our world. We do this by faith in Christ and the certain hope that he will triumph and establish his reign on earth.

We take up this task recognizing that it is a costly one. In submission to Christ and in recognition that together we constitute the body of Christ in this moment of time we declare our willingness to change or modify our theological perspectives and lifestyles where they are shown to be contrary to the fullness of Scriptural revelation. We will accept new responsibilities which seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us gathered here together. We recognize God's call to faithfulness in the exercise of the gifts given to each of us and we acknowledge our mutual accountability in the exercise of these gifts.

We rejoice that this is God's *kairos* time for us and we covenant together to be faithful stewards of this time and of our corporate knowledge and experience. [p. 375](#)

We join in praying together: 'Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'
So Lord by your grace help us to fulfil our calling.

In order to facilitate the process of the integration of our theological understanding, I suggest three loci for your consideration, drawing together some of the many insights and priorities given to us in the six plenary papers. From the papers given one thing is clear: the issues raised in regional contexts are in practice common to all the regions. Their specifics may differ from region to region but their universality gives us hope that we can work towards a coherent whole, for Christ is 'the same yesterday, today and forever'. The contextualizing of theology is the penultimate task, pointing to the unchanging gospel revealed in and through Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

I

The first focus of our theology is:

We affirm the triumph of the Creator-Redeemer God who speaks and acts for the salvation of all and for the re-creation of societies in which peace and justice reign.

We believe that the integration of all truth begins with understanding who God is, what he says and in knowing how he acts. We observe that all heresies begin with an imbalance of the biblical doctrine of God and with human speculation. Understanding and knowing God is the foundation of all our theologizing.

We affirm that God is eternally personal, acting through three centres of personhood revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is holy and just, loving and compassionate, and consistent in his moral acts. His knowledge and wisdom transcending all human understanding are hidden from us but revealed in Christ Jesus. Created in his image and likeness all humans, male and female, bear a unique relationship to the Creator not shared with the rest of God's creation. Contrary to New Age thinking, the Creator-God's relationship to human beings is not only unique but eternal. Those who reject God will suffer eternal separation from his presence.

God in Christ is uniquely the source of the life of the world. His incarnation was unique and unrepeatable. His saving death on the cross was a once-for-all saving act and his resurrection from the dead was God's justifying act and the beginning of a new humanity. In Christ's resurrection, heaven and earth became eternally one, a foretaste of the final integration of all things in Christ. Our faith is built on this hope. From my own cross-cultural missionary experience I have come to understand the uniqueness of this resurrection hope and to understand why it was so central to the sermons recorded in the Acts. In our secular and humanistic age people are turning in increasing numbers to eastern and pagan understanding of reincarnation. This is the abuse of divine law and is central in the immortalizing of the self. It is contrary to the new creation that Christ offers. It is a [p. 376](#) denial of the Creator-Redeemer God.

God the Holy Spirit is the giver and sustainer of life. He convicts us of sin and judgement to come, reveals Christ to us, and leads us in the path of truth. He turns us from the way of idolatry, to the way of holiness and love. He transforms us into the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit is God's missionary enlightening the minds and quickening the conscience of people following other religious or secular paths. He prepares them to hear and receive the gospel when it is proclaimed to them. We grieve him when we refuse to follow Christ's call to take the gospel to all the world. We are missionaries only because the Holy Spirit, God's Sent-One, has gone ahead of us to the frontiers of human life and relationships. Further, it is the Holy Spirit who is the mediator of the Word of God, inspiring the biblical writers and illuminating our understanding so that the Word written is truly trustworthy and sufficient for our salvation. The Bible coheres because the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is its author.

It is the Holy Spirit who ensures the continuity of the message through all ages so that the creeds and confessions of the church universally point, however, imperfectly, to the faith delivered to the saints. We are not fundamentalists who reject all traditions and deny that God speaks or saves beyond the bounds of the visible church. We confess that the historic evangelical faith has been central to the church throughout its history. We welcome Thomas Oden's call to evangelicals to rediscover the texts, apologetic methods and pastoral wisdom of the patristic Fathers.

We affirm that it is the Holy Spirit that empowers God's people to be salt and light in corrupt societies and to transform every culture to the glory of God. We rejoice in every evidence of the Holy Spirit's supernatural power to reverse the process of decay and death, to give visions of Christ and his work to persons seeking him (as is evident in a majority of converts from Islam) and to cast out demonic spirits.

It has been a disappointment to me that only three of the participants of this consultation asked to join the working group 'Experiencing the convicting and transforming ministry of the Holy Spirit in a sinful and oppressed world'. Does this mean that evangelical theology is missing an essential component in the search for our integrated theology?

II

I suggest that the second focus of our integrated theology is:

Understanding and identifying with the contextual realism of the market place.

All too often evangelicals are quick to give theological answers to contextual and contemporary issues they barely understand. Our more liberal brethren often have a clearer grasp of the issues of our time while their theological responses may be inadequate. I have observed that evangelical movements are often 10–20 years behind those of the WCC ecumenical movement. A [p.377](#) classic example is in regard to apartheid in South Africa.

The dynamic centre of the 21st century will be the market place—that centre in every village, town and city where people meet to buy and sell, to exercise political, economic and racial power—the centre where world views and values are debated and where religions and ideologies battle for the souls of the people. The movement of the people to the cities for employment and pleasure, the growth of centres for education, medical and legal services, rapid industrialization and the control of the media are increasingly reflected in the growth of the market place. The development of the computerized information highway is going to change radically national cultures more quickly than any other factor in the whole of human history.

The market place is the arena of the future. It is the testing place for the gospel in the midst of the plurality of religions. It will change the shape of the church of tomorrow. The market place will be the nerve centre for every creative expression of the goodness of human nature and societal behaviour, but at the same time it will be the centre of the concentration of all the evils of society—violence, terrorism, poverty and disease, political and religious oppression, racism, sexual perversion, economic corruption and manipulation of the powerless. One third of the people living in the 4 main cities of India are now slum dwellers. The market places in rural Rwanda, in urban Bosnia, in the streets of Bangkok, in the inner cities of New York and Los Angeles are but examples of centres of enormous human suffering and the fear of death. Human failure in the Chernobyl melt-down has left 1/3 of the arable land of Belarus radioactive and uninhabitable for the next 25,000 years. What happens to its displaced population?

We need a living and integrated theology that prophetically speaks to the micro issues of personal sin and the macro issues of societal evil. It is significant that the two plenary presentations from the First World have given priority to personal evil and the four presentations from the Third World have given priority to the macro issues. The challenge before us is to hold together in creative tension these two horizons of mission. We will face this challenge in each of our smaller working groups.

Our theological task is to enter into dynamic interaction and dialogue between biblical revelation, theologically understood, and the cultural realism of the world's market place. This is more than just communicating the biblical message to the encultured world; it is incarnating the biblical Word in a fallen world. Jesus Christ's own incarnation is our supreme model, while the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament demonstrate what this can mean for us. We are called to the hermeneutical task of developing contextual theologies in which the unchanging biblical Word confronts the ever-changing market place with the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ and his gospel. Although many of the issues of today's market place did not exist in biblical times [p. 378](#) the message of the Good News is always relevant to every cultural context.

Our first task is to redeem from every culture that which is in harmony with God's self-revelation in nature, conscience and history. Culture is never neutral, because human behaviour is never neutral. We are committed to accept and change those elements of culture which are redeemable and can be transformed into conformity with the will of God. How rich and beautiful the market place can become where God's rule of peace and justice is actualized!

Our second task is to rebuke and destroy all manifestations of idolatry, immorality, oppression and demonic power that are contrary to God's revelation in Scripture. Our weapons are those of prophetic and moral rebuke rather than the power of mass protest so common today. All personal and social sin is anathema to a holy but loving God.

In every attempt to contextualize our theology the danger of synthesizing truth and untruth must be avoided. Truth and error, good and evil can never be harmonized. Syncretism is normative in the human religious search for meaning. It is normative to all forms of natural religions, be they Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Modernity or New Age movements. Syncretistic tendencies in the dialogue between the gospel and culture need to be evaluated and rejected. While every effort to contextualize the faith carries its own dangers, we must not turn back through fear. Clarity in our missiological goal and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit will keep us from falling. Paul's mission to the Gentile world is a working model for us to follow.

Our third task will be to bring the saving revelation in Christ to every culture, giving new meaning to the values of faith, hope and love, bringing a new depth of maturation into every act, revealing divine law and the grace to live victoriously. In the context of society, the church functions as salt and light. Where the church is faithful to this calling it is uniquely God's chosen agent to change and transform society, restrain evil, model the new society and to inspire hope and confidence in the future. Peace and joy are its characteristics, holiness and love its moral virtues. The renewal of the church is the prior task of God's people in every cultural context.

III

The third focus of our vital and coherent theology follows directly from the first two:

Word and deed demand an authentic and accountable life-style of the people of God, individually and in their communal life in the church.

A theology for the market place must be a theology lived out in the daily life of God's people. The constant theme of all of Scripture is that life, word and deed are inseparable. God's dealing with his covenant people Israel bears witness to this throughout Old Testament history. Jesus taught his disciples to pray—'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'. From the gospel records to the Epistle of James, Scripture teaches that the proof that we love God is in our love [p. 379](#) for our neighbour. Liberation theologies have taught us the importance of 'doing theology' in context—though we deny that our theology begins with reflection on praxis.

The church is preeminently the place where this integration must be visible if we are to have a credible witness before a watching world. Jesus' own life style is our model. He 'went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease and sickness' ([Matt. 9:35](#)). Jesus prepared himself for every crisis in his life with solitude and prayer. It ought to be no different with his disciples. A major factor in the spread of Islam across Asia was the life style of the Sufi holy men. No Christian minister can lead his congregation higher than he has gone himself. Successful warfare against principalities and powers demands putting on the whole armour of God, bearing the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and continuing in prayer.

If we are going to develop the theology that is needed to take the church into the 21st century, we need to be obedient to the Holy Spirit's call for unity. The fragmentation and competition between evangelical leaders and their institutionalized agencies is a denial of the gospel they proclaim. Scripture warns us that a day of accountability is coming in which there will be no place to hide. Our very thoughts and motives will accuse us on that day when Jesus Christ returns as Judge and King. Let us pray for one another that we might have the same mind that Christ had as he prepared for the cross—the way of servanthood and of giving all glory to the Father.

Further, fresh initiatives in theological understanding call for better integration in our theological education, in the training of future pastors, missionaries and theological teachers. With worship symbolized by the chapel as the centre of all our learning let us work towards the integration of the chapel with the classroom and the library, with listening and participating in the fellowship of Christ's church, and with witnessing and serving in the market place, the symbol of the world. For example, we will understand the pain and humiliation of poverty only when we have shared our lives with the poor. The Holy Spirit may not call all God's servants to a ministry to the poor but he does call all to recognize that his gifting is plural and each partner needs the support of the others.

May the Lord unite us with one heart and voice enabling us to put ourselves under the authority of Christ and his word, so that we may be empowered by the Spirit to articulate a living theology for the market place of the 21st century.

In the words of the historian T.R. Glover, the early church 'out-thought, out-lived and out-died the pagan world'. This too is our theological task. [p. 380](#)