

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 20

---

Volume 20 • Number 4 • October 1996

---

## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from  
publications worldwide for an international  
readership for the purpose of discerning the  
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by  
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

# Editorial Our Theological and Missiological Task

At the WEF Theological Commission consultation held in London, April 9–14 1996 on the theme, 'Faith and Hope for the Future: Towards a Vital and Coherent Evangelical Theology for the 21st Century' six regional perspectives were presented in plenary sessions. We are pleased to make these available to you in this issue of ERT. The two opening addresses by Bong Rin Ro and your Editor are also included. The consultation gave further priority to 12 working groups on crucial issues in our present and future global contexts. The reports of two of these groups are included. A full report will follow.

One of the participants, Guillermo Cook of Costa Rica noted, 'I was quite struck by the absence of "culture" among the 12 categories for small group discussion ... The four "Two Thirds World" world contributors were more culturally aware than the "One Third World" writers. This is quite natural because North Americans and Europeans take their culture as normative.' It is clear that as a global evangelical community we have still a long way to go to develop a living and coherent theology to respond to the crucial issues of the 21st century and to be relevant to the plurality of our national and regional contexts. But we are not alone. The President of the WCC at the last General Assembly (held in Canberra) confessed that the ecumenical movement has not yet found a vital and coherent theology to meet the needs of the future.

In the oft-repeated words of the Church historian, T.R. Glover, the early Church 'outthought, outlived and outdied the pagan world'.

This, too, is our theological and missiological task. [p. 292](#)

## Faith and Hope for the Future

Thomas Oden

*You have commanded us, O Lord, to watch and pray, that we enter not into temptation. If we could endow ourselves with this gift merely by willing it, we would not be asking it in prayer. If the will sufficed to prevent us from entering into temptation, we would not have to pray for it. But if we were not given a will at all, we would be unable to pray. So grant us then that we pray rightly that we enter not into temptation, and by willing it let us pray that we may be made able to do what we have willed, when by your grace we have attained to right discernment. Amen. (adapted from Augustine, Letters, 218 FC 32:98).*

I feel deeply honoured to be asked to speak to this distinguished evangelical colloquy on how the faith once delivered to the saints is to be rightly guarded, reasonably championed, and wisely advocated in our special historic situation. I find it useful to divide this broad assignment into several consequential, specific decisive apologetic issues:

1. Is the willingness to suffer for Truth intrinsic to the Christian understanding of Truth?
2. How is the concept of the non-Christian World best understood Evangelically?

3. What is happening in the Confessing Evangelical Movements within the North American Mainline?
4. Is the History of Exegesis recoverable after a century of Reductionist Historicism?
5. At what point will Evangelicals learn to kick the Post out of an Ultramodernity disguised as Postmodern?
6. Whither Postmodern Paleoorthodoxy: Where is the Holy Spirit leading Evangelical Apologetics?
7. Will the Church endure? Reappraising the question of Indefectibility
8. Have Evangelicals outlived the Dissolution of Modernity?
9. Why are the emerging authentically [p. 293](#) Postmodern Evangelicals called Young Fogeys?
10. Why is Paleo-orthodoxy so cross-culturally agile?
11. Can we retrieve the Canon?
12. What about those who choose to be liberated from Classic Christianity?

We are attempting to answer these questions within the framework of the *consensus fidelium*, attentive to two millennia of classic Christian exegesis, amid a great cloud of witnesses.

## 1. IS THE WILLINGNESS TO SUFFER FOR TRUTH INTRINSIC TO THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH?

Is the willingness to put one's body on the line for the truth an indispensable premise of the unadorned concept of truth in apostolic testimony? To speak of truth without willingness to suffer for the truth is backhandedly to debase the truth.

No Christian teacher is worth listening to who is not willing to suffer, if necessary, for the truth that is being taught ([1 Pet. 4:13–5:9](#); *The Martyrdom of Polycarp. Ante-Nicene Fathers*, hereafter ANF. [1:37–44](#)). The readiness to suffer for the sake of the truth is intrinsic to the whole fabric of Christian living, and hence teaching, and thus not an optional part of the equipping of the public teacher of Christianity ([Phil. 3:10](#); Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, ANF, V:437–47; Kierkegaard. *Attack on 'Christendom'*).

Paul's teaching was personally validated by his willingness to be 'exposed to hardship, even to the point of being shut up like a common criminal; but the word of God is not shut up' ([2 Tim. 2:9](#)). Some hearers will find in the truth of the one who was 'nailed to the cross' merely a 'stone of stumbling' and 'folly' ([1 Cor. 1:23](#); cf. [Rom. 8:17, 18](#)). Jesus did not hesitate to make it clear that his disciples must be prepared to 'be handed over for punishment and execution; and men of all nations will hate you for your allegiance to me' ([Matt. 24:9](#); Irenaeus, *Ag. Her. IV.33.9*, ANF 1:508).

The truth, Christianly understood, is an event in history, a birth, death, and resurrection, God's own personal coming to us in mercy and grace, a Word spoken through a personal life lived, a personal event in which we are called personally to participate. To tell the truth rightly is to follow the one who is truth.

The 'right method' for guarding Christian truth was deftly set forth in Luther's three concise instructions: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*—first by prayer, and by textual meditation, but decisively by suffering temptation and the experience of *Anfechtung* (by testing through affliction). Listen to him poignantly acknowledge how much he owed to his enemies. 'Through the raging of the devil they have so buffeted, distressed, and terrified me that they have made me a fairly good theologian, which I would not have become without them' (Luther, *What Luther Says*, III, pp. 1 1358–60\*; cf. preface to Wittenberg ed., *Luther's Works 34*, pp. 283–88). [p. 294](#)

## 2. HOW IS THE CONCEPT OF THE 'NON-CHRISTIAN WORLD' BEST UNDERSTOOD EVANGELICALLY?

The premise of much evangelical missiology is that we live in a post-Christian or non-Christian world. In what sense is the world in which we are privileged to attest grace rightly described as a 'non-Christian world'? 'Non-Christian world' cannot mean that the world which is God's gift now exists without God. It cannot mean that the work of the Spirit is totally eclipsed or dysfunctional within the estranged world, just because it has been wilfully spurned. It cannot mean that the world lacks the presence of the crucified and risen Son by the power of the Spirit, or the governance of the all-wise triune God.

It can mean only the world that has defiantly decided to proceed as if the Incarnate Lord had not come in our midst, and has no abiding relevance for the world. It can mean only, for Christian apologetic reasoning, that a world is falsely posited by unbelievers which lacks the justifying grace of the Son and from which the sanctifying fruits of the Spirit are spurned and rejected. It can only point to a world which lives in despair, not realizing the offer of redeeming love by the Incarnate living God. It lives already under the judgement of the Holy One whose judgement will be made complete on the last day.

'Post-Christian' cannot mean a world that is left when Christian testimony is permanently silenced. The actual fallen world, the ongoing cosmos that runs on twenty-four hour standard daylight time, is still in the process of being reconciled and its sin overcome by the crucified and risen Redeemer. 'Actual fallen world' refers to a situation in which a penultimate prodigal world has not yet come to itself in repentance and faith, an actual world that still despairs over its failure to come freely into the presence of God's mercy.

Missiology and apologetics within that sort of posited world must be careful not to take that world in its fallenness more seriously than it takes that world's decisive redemption. Christian mission within that sort of world which is hypothesized as if it were still unmet by the living God, as if it were still awaiting the Christ, must take care not to be swallowed up by the power of the unredeemed imagination as to its own finality.

To reify is to treat an abstraction as if it actually existed, to attribute reality to something. The reification of the concept, 'non-Christian world', or post-Christian culture' invites the critical qualifier that the world is and remains God's, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son that all who believe on him might have eternal life. This world is already the recipient of God's saving redemption in Jesus Christ, a gift given for all and appropriable by all who repent and believe. Christian apologetics in the heat of its temporal struggle amid the fallen world is forever tempted to overestimate the fleeting temporary power of that fallen world.

Christian apologetics has the privilege of speaking to the fallen world not merely in reference to fallen humanity's skewed assumptions [p. 295](#) about itself, but even more in reference to God's own assumption of humanity in the Incarnate Lord, the event of divine-human reconciliation and through the death and resurrection of the eternal Son. This communication always takes place within a particular Zeitgeist. But the Zeitgeist cannot itself dictate the terms of salvation, or redefine the vocabulary of the apostolic testimony, so that one concedes to the Zeitgeist the absolute truth of all its premises, many of which are false, and only then begins to seek despairingly to find some tiny opening for the light of Christian truth. That is not contextualization but abandonment of mission.

Christian apologetics, like Christian caregiving, has the task of reaching out for the fallen and hungry precisely where they are fallen and hungry, yet without encouraging the demonic pretence that this fallenness is the last word.

Because of its specific commission to communicate with the fallen world in its own language. Christian apologetics is continually tempted to be overly awed by the very power and vitality of the fallen world which the mercy of God is acting to redeem. When this happens the world is inordinately magnified, not God. With the best of intentions such efforts may tend to lead us to forget the incomparable power of the one who has acted decisively to save the world from its falseness. By giving excessive attention to the transient power of the fallen world, the fatigued apologist may be drawn into becoming inattentive to the majesty of that One from whom all things come and into whom all things return, in whose constant love there is no shadow of change or turning. Under the noble fantasy of taking the world absolutely seriously, grace becomes inadvertently trivialized.

Faith encounters that conjectured world with the real world as God's gift, a fallen world which has been redeemed. The apostolic testimony within that real world does better to offer its own gifts to the world than to borrow hungrily from the world's despairing self-understanding. This requires apologetics to attend to its own texts and share its own distinctive gifts. Faith need not be thrown off track by the presumed vitality of a dying world, the imagined power of an evanescent world.

Another aspect of my assignment in concluding this series of plenary sessions is to try to survey and describe the evangelical situation in North America. So I want to focus now upon a special vital part of that arena by asking:

### **3. WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE CONFESSING EVANGELICAL MOVEMENTS WITHIN THE NORTH AMERICAN 'OLDLINE' OR 'MAINLINE'?**

I speak as an evangelical apologist within North American mainline Protestantism. By mainline Protestantism I mean those communions whose leadership has for several decades been deeply entangled in cultural accommodations, doctrinal softening, hypertolerance in Christology, and in many cases political rnessianism, utopian social experimentalism, protomarxian economic P. 296 conjectures, absolute egalitarian sentimentalism, bureaucratic ecumenism, and the idealized fantasies of control-economies.

I speak particularly and penitently of my own United Methodist Church, but the same observations apply to evangelical witness within the Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Canada, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians and to some lesser degree the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. In each of these communions there has been a three-decade radical haemorrhaging of vitality, membership, and witness. But more promising in the longer view, within each there is an active movement of the Holy Spirit, and a growing renewal of classic Christian teaching, a confession movement, such as the Confessing Movement Within the United Methodist Church, Disciples for Renewal, Pro Ecclesia, Christians for Biblical Renewal, Presbyterians for Renewal, and the reform movement within the United Church of Canada.

These scripture-centred accountability movements are at this juncture of history relatively small but gaining rapid momentum. Their journals are thriving. The expectation is increasing that they may soon affect major theological and polity reforms within the oldline. Every event which attempts to re-imagine God in reductionist terms as a bland reflection of modernity's excesses serves only as an encouragement to these resistance movements and stimulates their determination to confess anew the Sonship and Lordship of Jesus Christ with nonsyncretistic clarity.

Hence these times call not merely for the generation of moral outrage and the repetition of negative grievances, but for asking how the Spirit is calling the faithful within

academic and church communities to work together constructively toward practically reclaiming stolen church properties, bureaucracies, and renegade ecclesial establishments.

The promising future of North American mainline Protestant evangelicals has potentially grace-laden repercussions for the future of both Catholic and Orthodox traditions the world over. And a deepened, chastened, penitent new conversation between Evangelicals who are inside the mainline churches and those Evangelicals in the dissenting traditions is being prepared by the Holy Spirit. Most promising is the potential dialogue between Reformed evangelicals and Anglican-Wesleyan tradition evangelicals, who are learning better to listen less defensively to each other.

Can classic Christians and evangelicals and confessors of apostolic faith within the mainline churches come together cooperatively to form a plausible accord which effectively resists the apostacizing temptations so endemic within the mainline? Can they unite with a credible and viable agenda for reclaiming the church and rescuing it from its slippery doctrinal slopes? Can a trajectory be set that will neither slide toward heterodoxy and imprudence nor become inwardly turned toward resentment and reactionary defensiveness? Can those who hold steadfastly to classic [p. 297](#) Christian teaching find a hopeful voice to challenge the long dominant hegemony of doctrinal latitudinarians, hypertolerantists, egalitarian activist, neopagan liturgists, and process pantheists? Can loyal stay-inners cope with ongoing temptations to walk away and abandon the struggle? These questions are being confronted at a thousand different levels.

A massive moral crisis is now facing the deteriorating liberal mainline church leadership, its academic institutions, bureaucracies and local churches. It is time to recover a common vision sharable by evangelicals, moderates and traditionalists for repossession of those church institutions that have been either abandoned or neglected or in some cases ideologically hijacked. It is time to set feasible goals for the rehabilitation of a tradition-deprived church.

I know that many of you are not connected in any way, even sentimentally, to the North American oldline-mainline. You feel yourselves spared these dilemmas. You have no obligation to fight these battles. But analogous battles are being fought in all Christian ministries.

I have no interest here in boasting of the achievements of the mainline, particularly at this juncture of history, which so radically calls us all to repentance. I do not speak in a triumphalist tone in the presence of those of evangelical traditions who do not relate to the mainline establishment or identify in any way with liberal church institutions. I wish only to communicate what a great work God the Spirit is doing among evangelicals within these churches, and hope it will hearten you wherever you serve.

#### **4. IS THE HISTORY OF EXEGESIS RECOVERABLE AFTER A CENTURY OF REDUCTIONIST HISTORICISM?**

The Holy Spirit has a history. When this history is systematically forgotten, it is incumbent upon evangelical guardianship to recover it by new rigorous historical effort. This is why the apologetic task for biblical studies in our time must focus in a deliberate way upon the early history of exegesis. We have a right to learn from the reasonings and arguments that have sustained Christian textual interpretations and spiritual formation through many previous modernities, especially in their earliest prototypical forms. The canonical text has a history of interpretation which has been systematically ignored in the last century of historicist investigation.

Evangelical scholarship is already assailed by the temptation to allow itself to be dominated by reductionist 19th century historicist models of interpretation which approach the text by denying that it could be the revealed Word of God. To overcome this, evangelicals are conspicuously taking the lead in recovering the history of exegesis among the guild of biblical scholars.

This is why most of the rest of my life will be primarily devoted to editing a twenty-seven volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Its goals are: the renewal of Christian preaching based on classical Christian exegesis, the intensified [p. 298](#) study of Scripture by lay persons who wish to think with the early church about the canonical text, and the stimulation of Christian historical, biblical, theological, and pastoral scholars toward further inquiry into the exegesis of the ancient Christian writers.

This verse by verse commentary will consist of carefully chosen selections in dynamic equivalent English translation from the ancient Christian writers of the first eight centuries. Texts are now being selected by an international team of experts out of the ancient Christian tradition from Clement of Rome to John of Damascus, ranging through the early centuries of Christian exegesis (100–750 AD). We are making accessible the most penetrating patristic passages on Scripture, pericope by pericope. Our selections will feature both the varieties of classic Christian exegetical argumentation and their overarching cohesion grounded in ecumenical consensual exegetical reasoning. In this way, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox audiences will be served and renewed by this commentary.

This work stands in the early medieval catena tradition of patristic exegesis, and will benefit by utilizing and adapting that tradition in appropriate ways. This after-modern effort has antecedents in Eastern Orthodox and in seventeenth century Lutheran and Reformed inheritors of the tradition of the *glossa ordinaria*. It will offer, for the first time in this century, the earliest Christian comments and reflections on all Old and New Testament texts to a modern pastoral and lay audience.

Translations will be made afresh where needed; insofar as current English translations are adequate, they will be used, and where adequate but archaic they will be modernized.

On each page the scripture text will be presented in the centre surrounded by well-referenced direct quotations of comments of key consensual early Christian exegetes. The most succinct way to visualize this is to picture the printed text of the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic arguments and comments of the same period as the patristic writers, surrounding and explicating the texts of the sacred tradition.

Modern preaching has remained largely bereft of easily accessible patristic exegetical resources. This series will provide the pastor, lay reader, exegete, and student with convenient means to see what Athanasius or John Chrysostom or Leo the Great said about a particular text for preaching, for study, or for meditation.

How are these early exegetes viewed in the early evangelical revivalist tradition? The Fathers are ‘the most authentic commentators on Scripture, as being both nearest the fountain, and eminently endued with the Spirit by whom all Scripture was given ... I speak chiefly of those who wrote before the Council of Nice. But who would not likewise desire to have some acquaintance with those that followed them? with St Chrysostom, Basil, Jerome, Austin [Augustine]; and above all, the man of a broken heart, Ephraim Syrus?’ (John Wesley, ‘Address to the Clergy’, *Works*, i.2, X.484; cf. *Journals of John Wesley*, hereafter [p. 299](#) *JW*, 3:390). The exegesis of the church fathers is especially helpful in ‘the *explication* of a doctrine that is not sufficiently explained, or for *confirmation* of a doctrine generally received’ (Wesley, *A Roman Catechism, with a Reply, Preface*, *Works*, X:87, italics added; cf. *JW* 1:367).

## 5. ON KICKING THE POST OUT OF ULTRAMODERNITY

This leads us to ask: When nostalgic ultramodernity poses as trendy postmodernity, what apologetic responses are fitting for evangelicals? At what point will evangelicals learn to kick the post out of a fatigued ultramodernity camouflaging as postmodernity?

The term post-modernity is still being used by ultramoderns as if the assumptions of modernity were going to continue forever. Post-modernity in their sense refers only to an intensification of the despairing messianism of modernity.

*Modernity* is the period, the ideology, and the malaise of the time from 1789 to 1989, from the Bastille to the Berlin Wall. The gawky, ungainly term *post-modern* points ironically to the course of actual hazardous history following the death of modernity. The period after modernity is a required course for evangelicals who attest the risen Lord amid a dying culture.

The evangelical response to postmodernity was well established long before 1980, well before anyone had heard of Derrida or Foucault. In 1979 the text of *Agenda for Theology* clearly documented an emergent, hopeful pre-eighties evangelical post-modern community of discourse. As early as the sixties some of us were trying to speak to the 'new breed of spirit questers' in the post-modern situation, amid 'the maturing twentieth century' (Oden, *Structure of Awareness*, 1968, 15, 275).

Already by the late seventies, before the post-modern fad of the eighties, I was attempting to differentiate sharply between modernity, later-stage modernity ('third quarter of the twentieth century'), and postmodernity, ('preparing to enter the third millennium'), as I looked toward the emergence of a 'Postmodern orthodoxy, having been immersed in the deteriorations of later stage modernity, now reawakened to the power and beauty of classical Christianity, seeking to incorporate the achievements of modernity into an ethos and intellectus that transcends modernity under the guidance of ancient ecumenical Christianity'. That was the 'agenda for theology', as I saw it, in 1979, and it remains so for many more today than in 1979. 'This is what I mean by postmodern orthodoxy. Its spirit is embodied in the student who has been through the rigours of university education, often through the hazards of the drug scene, through the ups and downs of political engagement, through the head shrinks and group thinks of popular therapies, and through a dozen sexual messianisms, only to become weary of the pretentious motions of frenetic change. Finally they have come on Christ's living presence in the world in an actual community of Christians and now have set out to understand what has p. 300 happened to them in the light of the classical texts of scripture and tradition' (Oden, *Agenda for Theology*, hereafter *AFT*, 1979, 5). 'The agenda for theology in the last quarter of the twentieth century following the steady deterioration of a hundred years and the disaster of the last two decades, is to begin to prepare the post-modern Christian community for its third millennium by returning again to the careful study and respectful following of the central tradition of classical Christianity' (*AFT*: 31).

Then belatedly, after 1980 came Foucault, Derrida, and Rorty with a weaker, thinner, chic definition of post-modernity, which caught the imagination of ultramodern academics in literary and hermeneutic theory. It was only then that the popular press caught sight of the concept of post-modernity according to this later despairing ultramodern definition. Since the media elites have controlled this definition since the early 1980s, it has intruded itself belatedly upon theological dialogue as if normative. I appeal to you to return to the pre-eighties definition of post-modernity which is evangelically more hopeful, culturally more realistic, and providentially more circumspect.

When evangelicals today hear talk of post-modernity by avant garde academics, there is no longer any reason to break out in a sweat. The cure is easy: just quietly strike out the *post* and mentally insert *ultra*. That is what I call kicking the post out of ultramodernity.

Where post-modern has become a euphemism for ultramodern, paleo-Christians do not mind making a little jest over the difference. Where the value assumptions of modernity are nostalgically idealized, and where ancient wisdoms are compulsively disparaged, you have only a thinly veneered ultra-modernity, even where it calls itself post-modernity. It is like a moth winging frantically and circling ever closer to the flame of instant death.

The ploy is to make modern value assumptions appear eternal by coopting them in what is called postmodernity. This post-modern toupee may look fetching and neat but underneath there is sparse growth with no powers of regeneration. The deconstructionist mask may look brave but it doesn't fit and the knees are quaking and there is a grimace in the smile. The nameplate may say post-modern but the intellectus was patented in the Enlightenment. The subterfuge is based on the deceit of trying to make the key values of corrupted modernity appear permanent by endowing them with the fake label post-modern. It is a cover up that the liberal investigative journalists have not even begun to grasp, and are too intimidated to investigate.

## **6. WHITHER POST-MODERN PALEO-ORTHOXY: WHERE IS THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADING EVANGELICAL APOLOGETICS?**

Post-modernity in its paleo-orthodox definition is simply that period that follows the time span from 1789 to 1989 which characteristically embraced an enlightenment world view that cast an ideological **P. 301** spell over our times, now in grave moral spinout.

The spinout phase of late modernity is epitomized by the reductive naturalism of Freud which is no longer marketable as an effective therapy, the idealistic historical utopianism of Marx which is now internally collapsing from St Petersburg to Havana, the narcissistic assertiveness of Nietzsche which is drastically cutting life expectancy on urban streets, and the modern chauvinism typified by Feuerbach, Dewey, and Bultmann that imagines the ethos of late modernity to be the unquestioned cultural norm that presumes to judge all premodern texts and ideas. Under the tutelage of these once brave modern ideologies so touted by the liberal media elites, sex has been reduced to orgasm, persons to bodies, psychology to stimuli, economics to planning mechanisms, and politics to machinery. These malfunctioning ideologies are today everywhere in crisis, even while still being fawned over by isolated church bureaucratic elitists.

These tired, fading modern illusions are woven together in an ideological temperament that still sentimentally shapes the oldline liberal Protestant ethos, especially its politicized bureaucracies and academies, who remain largely unprepared to grasp either their own vulnerability or their divine calling and possibility within this decisive historical opportunity.

The Marxist-Leninism of the Soviet era is now gone; the Freudian idealization of sexual liberation has found it easier to make babies than parent them morally; the children of the post-psychoanalytic culture are at peril; the truculence of Nietzschean nihilism has spread to the bloody banks of Bosnian and Cambodian and Rwandan and Ukrainian rivers with a trail of genocide along the way; the modern chauvinism of once-confident Bultmannians is now moribund since the modernity they expected never arrived.

These once-assured ideologies are now unmasked as having a dated vision of the human possibility; for none has succeeded in engendering a transmissible intergenerational culture. Since each of these ideological programmes has colluded with

the other, they are now falling synchronously down like tottering dominoes: the command economies, the backfiring therapeutic experiments, the patient-abusing therapists, the mythical fantasies of demythology, interpersonal fragments of drug experimentation, the exploding splinters of narcissism, and their wholly owned ecclesial subsidiaries, their theological hirelings and flunkies. If the Freudian project, the Bultmannian project, the Marxist project, and the Nietzschean project are all functionally moribund, then later stage modernity is dead in the regenerative sense. That is what is meant by the phrase 'terminal modernity'. In a despairing search for a social utopia, we have blundered our way into the black hole of a social counter-utopia.

Renewed classic Christians are now being awakened and energized by this dawning realization: the Holy Spirit is determined to continue making alive the body of Christ. It is only on the falsely-hypothesized premise of the default of the Holy Spirit that the called-out people [p. 302](#) might seem at times to be coming to nothing. The demise of the church is the least likely premise in the Christian understanding of history.

Those who willingly enslave themselves to passing idolatries should not be surprised when these gods are found to have clay feet. When beloved modern systems die, the idolaters understandably grieve and feel angry and frustrated. Meanwhile the grace-enabled community can celebrate the passage through and beyond modernity, and celebrate the intricate providences of history in which each dying formation is giving birth to new forms and refreshing occasions for living responsively in relation to grace.

What is happening today is a profound rediscovery of the texts, apologetic methods, and pastoral wisdom of the long-neglected patristic exegetical tradition. For many evangelicals this means especially the eastern church fathers of the first five Christian centuries, which never suffered as deeply as did western medieval Catholicism from the distortions of speculative scholasticism.

What is happening in this historical situation is a joyous return to the sacred texts of Christian Scripture and the consensual exegetical guides of the formative period of scriptural interpretation. Postmodern paleoorthodox disciples are those who, having entered in good faith into the disciplines of modernity, and having become disillusioned with the illusions of modernity, are again studying the word of God made known in history as attested by prophetic and apostolic witnesses whose testimonies have become perennial texts for this worldwide, multicultural, multigenerational remembering and celebrating and reconciling community of pardon.

## **7. WILL THE CHURCH ENDURE? REAPPRAISING THE QUESTION OF INDEFECTIBILITY**

The decisive theological issue is the durability and indefectibility of the true church amid proximate temporary apostasy. This is the doctrinal issue that most deeply affects our moral courage and our ability to relate to this cultural opportunity within what is sometimes mistakenly said to be a post-Christian world: the indefectibility of the church that lives by the power of the Spirit. This is a theme well articulated by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, and Cranmer, and now is a fitting time for orthodox Christians to rediscover it. Classic Christian apologetics is once again being called to reclaim the apostolic teaching of the perpetuity, imperishability and indefectibility of the church. The one, holy, apostolic church the world over is promised imperishable continuance, even if particular associations and groupings of apostate Christian ministries may languish, falter, or atrophy.

Although the church in some dissolute times and places appears virtually extinct, becoming 'so obscured and defaced that the Church seems almost quite razed out', 'yet, in

the meantime, the Lord has in this world, even in this darkness, his true worshippers] (Second Helvetic Confession; [1 Kings 19:18](#); [Rev. 7:4, 9](#)). The foundation is standing sure and the Lord knows [p. 303](#) who are his ([2 Tim. 2:9](#)). And there are seven thousand who have not bowed their knee to Baal. We are being offered a new opportunity to rediscover this remnant by observing the tenacious church in China following the Cultural Revolution the heroic church in Cuba amid the disintegration of Fidelismo, and the church in the former Soviet Union.

The church's future is finally left not to human willing or chance, but to the work of the Spirit and divine grace. Many branches of the seasonally changing vine may drop off in the varied storms and seasons of cultural histories. Once vital ideas and institutions may become dysfunctional and atrophy. But the church as the body of Christ will be preserved till the end of time. It is a Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, Wesleyan and Baptist tenet that the destiny of the believing church is eternally secure. Faith remains the crucial condition of participating in this secure promise, but is not to be asserted so as to deny the power of the Holy Spirit to prevail over disbelief in God's own time.

Though individual believers may come to shipwreck, and even centuries of deteriorating traditions may lose their bearings during particular periods of confusion and crisis, the church as the body of Christ is being guided by the Holy Spirit and sustained by grace until the end ([John 16:6, 13](#)). God will not be left without witnesses in the world ([Acts 14:17](#)). 'One holy Christian church will be and remain forever' (Augsburg Confession, Art. VII). According to my own church's traditional Order for Receiving Persons into the Church: 'the Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the promotion of his worship and the due administration of his Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies'—a phrase I learned by heart in the earliest days of my ministry.

Meanwhile the church that sails on the turbulent seas of history continues to be vulnerable to those hazards that accompany historical existence generally. The Holy Spirit does not abandon the ever-formative Christian tradition amid these earthly struggles. God supplies that grace of perseverance by which the church is enabled to remain Christ's living body even while being challenged by infirmities, forgetfulness, apostasy, persecution and schism. The believing community is being preserved to 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' ([1 Cor. 11:26](#)). Against the church 'the gates of hell shall not prevail', Jesus declared, according to Matthew's gospel ([16:18](#), KJV; cf. [Luke 1:33](#); [1 Tim. 3:15](#)). This means that the church will never decline into total forgetfulness, since it is guided by the Spirit who promises always to accompany the faithful ([John 14:16](#); [Matt. 23:20](#)), even when short term ecclesial accountancy procedures do not add up, and management techniques show poor yields. The church insofar as it is guided by the Spirit does not ever fall entirely away from the fundamental truth of faith or into irretrievable error. She is preserved by [p. 304](#) grace, not by human craft or numbers or political skill ([Matt. 7:25](#)).

Despite temporary real and devastating apostasies, it is unthinkable that God would allow the church finally to become absolutely and continuously apostate or to lose all touch with the righteousness which Christ has once for all bestowed upon her. 'For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For "All men are like grass", but "the word of the Lord stands forever". And this is the word that was preached to you' ([1 Pet. 1:24, 25](#); cf. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXII: 57–60). The promise of indefectibility is not given to a particular congregation or disciplinary approach or polity or denomination or generation or a

passing period of history, but rather to the whole church to preserve her from fundamental error in the long course of history—to the end ([Matt. 28:20](#); cf. Longer Catechism of the Eastern Orthodox Church).

Insofar as the faithful are sustained by pure Word and Sacrament, adhering to the ‘faith once delivered’, their eucharistic sacrifice, Christ’s own self-giving to redeem sin, is received by God as faultless (Ambrose, *Six Days of Creation*, IV.2,7; John Chrysostom, *On Eutropius; Confession of Dositheus*, 10–12). The Second Helvetic Confession saliently captured this affirmation for Reformed believers, that the church ‘does not err, so long as it relies upon the rock Christ, and upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles’. Insofar as ‘she lets herself be taught by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God’, Calvin argued ‘the church cannot err in things necessary for salvation’ (Inst. 4.8.13). Though particular assemblies may lapse, relapse, or collapse, the elect people of God will not fall away from salvation, because of the Spirit’s guidance.

All those called and elected will not be allowed to err at the same time. This is not a conclusion of an optimistic anthropology but a doctrine grounded in the work of the Spirit. While grace does not coerce belief, neither can it ever be defeated in any given era of the church. It is unthinkable that God would create the church at great cost, only to let it fall finally into permanent or irremediable error. Thus indefectibility is a teaching more of the power of the Holy Spirit than of the self-sufficiency of human imagination or of the strategic wisdom of the church as a sociological entity.

Jesus promised disciples of all times that the Holy Spirit will ‘teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you’ ([John 14:26](#)). Always some seed of faith remains buried in the ashes even of the most divided and corrupt ecclesial remnant. Sometimes such seeds may seem to survive marginally as semi-endangered species, as scattered all too thinly throughout a particular weed-infested culture, as relics of former vitalities of previous covenant communities. Yet wherever Word and Sacrament are being faithfully transmitted and delivered, they are never without effect, for ‘my word’ shall ‘not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire’ ([Is. 55:11](#)), says the Lord. p. 305

Classical Protestantism affirms that ‘the church does not err’ in the sense that the whole church does not at any given time err, and it does not err in the foundation, even if in temporary and non-essential ways it may (Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*). Classic Protestants argue that the church is ultimately sure or certain or indefectible (asphales) insofar as it clings to the revealed word. Yet this does not diminish the recognition that still amid the history of sinful mankind the visible church is ever prone to forgetfulness and fallibility. Nonetheless, that community which is being called into being by the Holy Spirit will not be found falling irretrievably into apostasy, so as to make it impossible for all subsequent generations to hear the gospel. Yet this does not imply that the church is secure from making mistakes or errors of judgement. The relative fallibility of the church in time is itself a stable Protestant dogma.

Since fallible persons are the recipients of God’s saving grace (for the healthy do not need a physician; [Mark 2:17](#)), as long as the church exists within the conditions of the history of sinful mankind, the church will be prone to becoming distorted and vulnerable to those who wish to use it for their own purposes. Until the consummation of salvation history when the incurably wicked will be cut off from the living vine, the community of called out people will be blemished and distorted.

To flee from the scene of human corruption would be to flee from the church’s own arena of mission and servant ministry. But in so far as it is truly the body of Christ living in faith, hope, and love under the lifegiving power of the Spirit, the church can never become absolutely or finally or fatally corrupted ([Matt. 16:18](#)).

Among the diseases of sin that continue to plague and restrict its full growth are: the partisan spirit that would divide it, the heretical spirit that would lead it to distort or forget apostolic teaching, the antinomian spirit that turns Christian liberty into libertinism, the legalistic spirit that would turn grace into law, the naturalistic spirit that would treat grace as a determinant of nature. Despite these infirmities and challenges, which are permitted by a kind Providence to strengthen the church and enable it to grow stronger, the body lives on, the vine sends forth new shoots, the Spirit enlivens and heals, the Head continues to guide and order the whole organism ([John 15:1-5](#); [Col. 1:18](#)).

The continuing renewal of ecclesial life never comes by avoiding sinners, for their redemption is the reason why the church exists. Clean-handed purists of all periods tend to flee the task of serving sinners, unlike Jesus who mixed with them, ate and drank with those most despicable and rejected, and profoundly identified with all sinners on the cross. The body of Christ continues to struggle against tendencies toward a Montanism that would exclude sinners based on their lack of Spirit, a Donatism which would exclude sinners based upon inauthentic ministry or regionalism, and a purist Novatian rigorism which would exclude sinners based upon their moral deficiencies.

The ecumenical councils and [p. 306](#) major consensual teachers attest the ultimate indefectibility of the church as a gift of grace (Council of Nicea, Basil, *Letter* 114; Gregory Nazianzen, *On the Great Athanasius*, *Orat.* XXI; Cyril, *Letter* 39). The patristic exegetes pointed to the councils as evidence of the assent of the whole church. It is this universal consent that is said to be reliable, and finally indefectible.

While the Holy Spirit is the actuating principle of this indefectibility, the consent of the general laity is given as an evidence of unity and the central criterion of ecumenicity. The Holy Spirit does not introduce new or post-apostolic doctrine through the conciliar process, but rather acts to illuminate and guard from error the original apostolic witness. This occurs not as if mechanically actuated by the Spirit, but working in a normal human manner through debate, inquiry, parliamentary deliberation, voting, and the apparatus of policy formation.

The history of the church is not one of uninterrupted progress of ekstasis, without challenge or chastisement. Pascal in *Pensées* pictured Christianity as a thousand times having appeared to be 'on the point of universal destruction, and every time that it has been in this condition, God has raised it up by some extraordinary stroke of his power'. Each seeming defeat prepares the community for a deeper level of understanding. Each apparent victory prepares the community for a deeper level of conflict.

The residual vitality of the church, even in periods in which it seems to have been totally undone, is an amazing story recounted in actual human history, featuring startling recoveries after long periods of malaise and apparent death. The worst periods of martyrdom are characteristically accompanied by the profoundest movements of the witness of the Spirit. The deepest sloughs of demoralization and libertinism are followed repeatedly by such correctives as those of Benedict of Nursia, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Luther, Calvin, Teresa of Avila, Edwards, Wesley, and Teresa of Lisieux. Up to this present time, the promise has held, even against great odds that the gates of hell have not prevailed against the *ekklesia*.

Our varied audiences (lay, pastoral, and student) are much broader than the highly technical field of academic patristic scholarship. They are not limited to the university scholar concentrating on the study of the history of the transmission of the text or to those with highly focused philological interests in textual morphology or historical critical issues. Though these are crucial issues for specialists, they are not paramount issues in this series.

## **8. HAVE EVANGELICALS OUTLIVED THE DISSOLUTION OF MODERNITY?**

The turning point we celebrate today is that the enduring called out community has in fact outlived the dissolution of modernity. It is a fact. Evangelical spirituality, scholarship, preaching, pastoral care, and institutional life have against all odds already weathered the waning winter of modernity. **P. 307**

We are witnessing an emerging resolve in worldwide Protestant, Catholic and Eastern orthodoxy to renew familiar, classic spiritual disciplines: daily scripture reading, prayer, mutual care of souls, and intensive primary group accountability which lives out of its baptism, and is constantly nurtured by the Eucharist. On the same recovery list is the special focus of these presentations: apologetics in a world that seems to have forgotten God.

Having been disillusioned by the illusions of modernity, the faithful are now engaged in a low-keyed, quiet determination to return unpretentiously to the spiritual disciplines that have profoundly shaped our history and common life together, and in fact enabled our survival.

In the midst of any cultural death, gracious gifts of providential guidance are being proffered to human imagination, along with precipitous risks. Human folly and sin are being curbed by the limits which God quietly uses in the process of history.

Those made alive by the Spirit, whose lives are hid in Christ, enter the post-modern ethos confidently. Those enlivened by the re-emergent vitality of classic Christian forms of pastoral care, preaching, worship, and spiritual formation are now living and breathing in a refreshing atmosphere, in a fecund, volatile, potentially pivotal period of apostolic opportunity and witness. Possibilities for the deepening of spiritual life which were set aside long ago are at last viable. Such possibilities have been repeatedly disdained by modernity. We need not be driven to despair by the pressures and melancholy which the modern visions of history seem to be thrusting upon us. They offer the witnessing community an unparalleled opportunity.

The faithful who are surviving modernity are each year less and less intimidated by its supposed potency. Many pilgrims in evangelical spirituality have already doubly paid their dues to modernity, and now search for forgotten wisdoms long ruled out by the narrowly fixated dogmas of enlightenment empiricism and idealism.

This does not prevent the faithful from appreciating the technological, economic, political, and social achievements of modernity. This can be done at the same time as recognizing that the ideological underpinnings of modernity now face radical crisis. Modernity lacks the power to regenerate itself intellectually and morally, and impose its genetic imprint on another generation. The gene pool is too thin for the reconception of modernity. That is the main effect of late-modern aspirations. It is impotent.

## **9. WHY ARE THE EMERGING AUTHENTICALLY POSTMODERN EVANGELICALS CALLED YOUNG FOGYES?**

To all who suffer in despair over decadent modernity I bring joyful greetings on behalf of young classicists within the post-liberal underground who abide patiently in the catacombs of our despairing modern culture. Despair is the least appropriate response of well-grounded culturally-aware believers to these times. Classic Christianity has in fact healthily survived the **P. 308** death of modernity and joyfully flourishes in this spirited after-modern environment.

Against all prognostications, disciplined Christian spirituality is spontaneously flourishing all over post-modernity. I speak of the impassioned commitment of an emerging group of young bornagain, classic Christian cultural renovators who, having analyzed the methods of analysis of modernity, are now applying an evangelical critique to those analyses. Having been disillusioned by the emptiness of those methods of modern inquiry (psychoanalytic, nihilistic, naturalistic, Marxist, and historicist), having turned in horror from their social consequences, they are now turning in earnest to the texts and ideas and liturgies of classical Christianity. They are young in spirit because they are not the least intimidated by modernity.

When I affectionately dubbed them ‘young fogeys’ I intended merely to point ironically to their youthful, impassioned vitality amid modern disillusionments and their energetic determination to ground themselves scripturally and classically.

They are young because they have not been made old by modernity’s skewed dreams. They are young because they are enlivened by the Holy Spirit. They are fogeys only in the comic sense of being freed to laugh heartily along with ancient wisdoms, especially with patristic forms of exegesis. They are sharply distinguished from the ‘old fogeys’ who remain ideologically bogged in liberal pietism. These young believers are wrongly imagined to be outdated fogeys by a hypermodern messianism which fantasize the continuing power of the assumptions of modernity. They are made youthful and energetic precisely by becoming firmly grounded in the apostolic tradition.

So I salute a whole school of emergent classicists who are discovering in the ancient Christian exegeses of the first eight centuries the most brilliant hermeneutics and doctrinal reflection. In the company of Eusebius, Athanasius and Jerome, they have found a surer basis for critiquing modern historicist pretences to hermeneutical superiority.

Any one who has discovered the dialectical joy and vitality of that critique is a young fogey. The young fogeys are grass-rooted, risk-capable, street-smart, populist, pragmatic renovators of the apostolic tradition. They are mostly recent graduates of celebrated universities, yet tough-minded critics of the ideological tilt of those universities. They understand that the surest form of cultural renovation begins one by one with personal religious conversion, the turning of the heart away from arrogance and folly and toward faith in God. They are the newest work of the Holy Spirit.

The emerging young classical Christians are astute critics of my generation’s modern assumption that so blithely assumed that newer is better, older is worse. As I behold this spiralling emergent generation of young classic Christian women and men, I find myself entering into a kind of resistance movement in relation to my own generation of moral relativists who have to such a large extent botched up our society. p. 309 These young believers know that time is on their side, and so far as time goes. God has plenty of it.

## **10. WHY IS PALEO-ORTHODOXY SO CROSS-CULTURALLY AGILE?**

The most salient feature of orthodoxy is not its rigidity but its flexibility centred in life in the Lord, its willingness to enter freely into this and that culture on behalf of its all-embracing redemptive mission. Apostolicity does not imply a rigid lack of adaptability to emergent culture formations. The glory of the apostolic tradition is precisely its readiness to reach out, meet, confront, and dialogue with different cultures, to become all things to all on behalf of Christ ([1 Cor. 9:19–22](#); Luther *LW* 27{202}). The Holy Spirit speaks all languages. Paleo-orthodoxy has not survived twenty centuries by being unresourceful or unable to make clever responses. Rather it is freed to variable cultural responsiveness by being centred in the eternal Word—the Incarnate and risen Lord. The living body of Christ

lives by penetrating and embracing each new culture and language and symbol system as God's special providential gift.

Because cultures and languages are constantly changing, and because the apostolic testimony must be attested in ever-new languages, it is a necessary feature of the apostolic tradition that it both guard the original testimony and also make it understandable in emergent formations. To fail at either is to default on the apostolic mission. Far from implying unbending immobility, apostolicity requires constant adaptation of the primitive apostolic testimony to new historical challenges and languages, yet without altering or diluting the primitive witness.

## **11. CAN WE RETRIEVE THE CANON?**

Contemporary witnesses are called to make every thought captive to Christ, to appraise every argument or explanation by its correspondence with the received testimony of the apostles. The working premise is that the Holy Spirit would not allow a truly debilitating or defective testimony to be transmitted permanently to the church. Like music the words of the apostles are savoured repeatedly by the remembering *ekklesia*, wrote John Chrysostom.

It is not we who creatively decide what is apostolic but the apostles. The contemporary apostate exists only because it had decided that the testimony of the apostles is true, and will always remain trustworthy. If the apostles' testimony is fundamentally flawed or defective, there is no way the church can begin to learn the truth, for the truth about God's own coming is attested only by original eyewitnesses, and these are called apostles.

Surely the Holy Spirit would not leave such an important matter as the intergenerational transmission of the truth to the jaded imagination of tired radicals speculating about form-criticism. The academic cartel of selected guild scholars who sat for decades on the Dead Sea Scrolls has only recently been broken up. Now it is time to say to the guild scholars who pretend to serve a guardianship p. 310 function with the New Testament text: Give us back our canon.

There is nothing to fear from solid historical inquiry into the tradition of transmission of apostolic testimony. There is only the task of improving historical inquiry and bringing it ever closer to the facts of the incarnate, risen Lord and his body the church.

## **12. WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO BE LIBERATED FROM CLASSIC CHRISTIANITY?**

The liberated form of ecclesial imagination that has attached itself to modernity is expiring as modernity expires. The church that weds itself to modernity is already a widow within post-modernity. Those who view themselves as most liberated think of themselves as most freed from traditional constraints of all sorts, all past oppressions, all old ideas. Yet they are often unaware of their own continuing debt to pre-modern wisdoms.

The fantasy of liberation is not a metaphor applied externally to accommodators from outside their own self-understanding, but a term they insist on applying to themselves. By liberated they usually imply: doctrinally imaginative, liturgically experimental, disciplinarily non-judgmental, politically correct, multi-culturally tolerant, morally broad-minded, ethically situationist, and above all, sexually lenient, permissive, uninhibited. I am not speaking merely of liberation theology in the best sense as argued by Gustavo Guitierrez or Jürgen Moltmann or Theodore Runyon, but rather an engulfing attitude that we have been liberated from our classic Christian past, from the

patriarchalism of Christian Scriptures, from benighted Jewish and Christian traditions. As a former full-time liberator, I know from experience how mesmerizing this enchantment can be.

When the liberated have virtually no immune system against heresy, no defence whatever against perfidious teaching, no criteria for testing out the legitimacy of counterfeit theological currency, it is time for feet-on-the-ground laity to enter the arena of bureaucratic church reform, and reinvent church governance, polity, and theological education. Laity are beginning to grasp that they have a decisive interest in the apostolicity of the ministries they are asked to trust.

It is now clear that a worldview is ebbing, perhaps not yet wholly extinct, but lacking all vitality, and awaiting only the lingering death process of these failed ideologies: autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism, and absolute moral relativism. Others may call that world something other than terminal modernity, but I have no better way of naming it. What is happening amid this historical situation is a joyous return to the sacred texts of Christian Scripture and the consensual exegetical guides of the formative period of its canonization and interpretation. Young fogeys, the mod-surviving paleo-orthodox, are those who, having entered in good faith into the disciplines of the modern university, and having become disillusioned with its illusions, are again studying the texts of the ancient Christian [p. 311](#) tradition which point to the word of God revealed in history as attested by prophetic and apostolic witnesses whose testimonies have become perennial authoritative scripture for this worldwide, multicultural, multigenerational remembering and celebrating community.

---

**Dr Thomas C. Oden is a Senior Professor at the Graduate School and Theological School at Drew University, Madison N.J., USA [p. 312](#)**

# **Mañana: Discerning the Spirit in Latin America**

**Samuel Escobar**

## **DISCERNING THE SPIRIT**

The end of the century finds Latin American societies in the throes of yet another painful transition. Gone are the dreams of revolutions that were going to engender social utopias. The libertarian rhetoric of liberation theologies has become empty. Instead of lawyers and *literati*, pragmatic economists and engineers now lead these countries through the hard road of accommodation for survival within the strictures of global Market Economies in a unipolar world. Military dictatorships and four digit inflation are gone, and many state enterprises have been privatized, but there is more unemployment, the cities look more crowded and there are more children begging in the streets. In some countries the ideological terror of the guerrillas and the armed forces has been replaced