Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 26 • Number 1 • January 2002

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

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

0144-8153 ERT (2002) **26:1**, 23–44

Truth, Collegiality and Consensus: The Dynamics of an Evangelical Theological Commission

David Hilborn

Keywords: Evangelicalism, truth, unity, diversity, dialogue, tradition, hell, annihilationism, conditionalism, methodology, collaboration

Introduction

Since its inauguration in 1974-5, the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission (TC) has achieved much in the areas of research, consultation, advocacy and publication. The extent and value of its work are well attested in the two key histories of WEF written by David Howard and Howard Fuller.[1] In this paper, I shall reflect on how the founding principles of the Theological Commission, as defined by Bruce Nicholls, John Langlois, Byang Kato and their colleagues 27 years ago,[2] have found expression at the national level in the United Kingdom, through the recent formation and development of ACUTE—the UK Alliance's Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals.

Specifically, the following study has two aspects. First, from my position as Theological Adviser to the UK Alliance and Co-ordinator of

Dr David Hilborn is Theological Adviser to the Evangelical Alliance UK and Coordinator of ACUTE (The Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals). He read English at Nottingham University and Theology at Mansfield College, Oxford, where his doctoral thesis was on the language of worship. He is a minister of the United Reformed Church and previously ministered with his wife Mia at the City Temple, London. His book, *Picking Up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?*, was published in November 1997. This paper was presented to the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission Consultation on Ecclesiology, Kuala Lumpur, West Malaysia, 1-4 May 2001.

[1] David M. Howard, *The Dream that Would Not Die: The Birth and Growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1846-1986*, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), Chs. 20-21; W. Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate: The History of the World Evangelical Fellowship*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), Ch. 10.

[2] Bruce Nicholls was the first Coordinator of the WEF Theological Commission, John Langlois its first Administrator, and Byang Kato its first Chairman. Nicholls and Langlois had been active for a number of years previously in WEF's Theological Assistance Programmme (TAP), which transmuted in 1974-5 into the Theological Commission.

ACUTE, I shall recount the genesis, raison d'être and growth of the UK Commission, as well as outlining its strategy for the future. In doing so, I trust that helpful lessons will emerge for both the WEF Theological Commission and for other national theological bodies. Secondly, I shall address core issues of theological methodology and hermeneutics which arise from seeking to do evangelical theology on the 'commission' model—that is, in a self-consciously collegial and consensual milieu. I do not pretend that every aspect of our experience in Britain is transferable to other cultural settings, or to the global pan-Evangelical context. Nor do I suppose that the epistemology which I take to be implicit in ACUTE's work will meet with universal assent. Overall, however, I do believe that ACUTE's decidedly collaborative modus operandi offers salutary challenges and opportunities—not least in relation to the prevailing individualism and compartmentalisation of western academic theology.

ACUTE's Genesis and Raison d'être

In late 1992, the then General Director of the Evangelical Alliance UK, Clive Calver, paid a visit to Jerusalem. Under Calver's leadership, the Alliance had grown phenomenally in the previous decade, from a little-known association of a few thousand members, to a mass movement which could plausibly claim to represent a million Christians in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Alliance had co-sponsored what was now the largest Christian festival in Europe, Spring Harvest; its media profile had risen year on year; it had successfully brokered Billy Graham's Mission England campaign, and had earned a serious hearing from politicians of all parties.[3] From looking admiringly across the Atlantic at the social impact made by Evangelicals in the United States, the Alliance now found itself increasingly lauded as an exemplar of unity, balance and effectiveness by North American Evangelicals who recognized that despite their own numerical strength, they could not match the dynamic cohesion which had now been achieved by their British counterparts.[4]

Despite all this, while in Jerusalem, Calver realised that something was missing. Moreover, he was sufficiently well versed in the formation of the Evangelical worldview to appreciate that this deficit was not new. On arriving back in Britain, he articulated it thus, in a report entitled 'The Jerusalem Paper':

> The last decade has witnessed transformation and growth within the Alliance. [But] the emphasis [of this paper] is on an [outstanding] strategic area of weakness, viz., EA's lack of proper theological undergirding for what it is attempting to do. In 1846, our forefathers began by establishing a clear theological foundation. They then proceeded to

[3] For an account of this period in the life of the Alliance, see Lewis, 'Renewal, Recovery and Growth: 1966 Onwards', in Steve Brady & Harold Rowdon (eds.), *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future*, (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 1996), pp. 178-91.

[4] See, for example, Tom Sine, *Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in America's Culture War*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

establish a vehicle for evangelical unity and enquired as to what its prime functions and practical outworkings should be. The great Scottish secessionist Thomas Chalmers raised the objection that the Alliance could become a 'do nothing' society. He would not retain that fear today. However, the opposite objection is sometimes raised—'EA does a great deal, but what is its undergirding raison d'être? Has it thought through the correct theological basis for its attitudes and activities?'

Calver went on to suggest reasons why such issues were arising:

> Much of the ground for this concern emanates from the fact that the majority of EA's present leadership are activists at heart. Their desire is to build on the basis of evangelical unity those achievements which can be viewed as measurable gains. This pragmatic approach has much to commend it. It can be argued that the current membership growth indicates popular estimation of the value of what is being achieved by EA's coalitions, staff and specific initiatives. It is readily recognised that the Alliance has not deserted its theological roots. However, it is also observable that little emphasis is placed on relating these doctrinal perspectives to our current cultural and theological situation.[5]

Calver's recognition of the detrimental effects of Evangelical activism on serious theological reflection echoed a prominent theme of David Bebbington's seminal 1989 study, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*. In the wake of the Wesley-Whitefield Revival, with its characteristically 'utilitarian' approach to mission and ministry, Bebbington notes that for many Evangelicals, 'Learning [came to be] regarded as a dispensable luxury.' Hence, 'At the beginning of the nineteenth century Independent ministers were trained not in theology or Greek, but simply in preaching. It would have been 'highly improper', according to a contributor to their magazine, 'to spend, in literary acquisitions, the time and talents which were so imperiously demanded in the harvest field'.'[6] Such pragmatism, notes Bebbington, fuelled the flexible, ad hoc ecclesiology of early Methodism and the contingency of most Nonconformist approaches to liturgy and worship during this period.[7] As Os Guinness has observed, it also chimed in with the wider economic and social changes which were afoot in Britain during the same era:

> Evangelicalism was new and different. Plainly the Established Church had no answers to the problems of the Industrial Revolution, nor the initiative to exploit the opportunities offered by the new conditions. Evangelicalism had both. Through hard work, common sense and ingenuity, evangelicals prospered and dotted the countryside and towns not only with mills, but also with church buildings. The Protestant work ethic took hold. A by-product, however, was an indifference to ideas in general and theology in particular. If God had blessed the industrial enterprise with success, what need was there of theological sophistication? Pragmatism became a pronounced characteristic of evangelicalism, and has remained so ever since.[8]

This entrepreneurial, consequentialist perspective has also been identified as a key feature of North American Evangelicalism by, among oth-

---

[5] Clive Calver, 'The Jerusalem Paper', Evangelical Alliance archive, London, dated 28.11.92, pp. 1-2.

[6] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 12.

[7] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 65-6.

[8] Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies: Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), p. 58.

ers, David Wells and Mark Noll. For Wells, its threat to the life of the Evangelical mind has been clear:

> [Evangelicalism's] strength has always been its identification with people … [W]hile others in America were giving their attention to building impressive religious institutions, and while many of the graduates of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the early part of the nineteenth century continued to reflect in their ministries the older world of privilege, deference, and learning, the Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ were out on the highways and byways winning the soul of America. They profoundly affected the nation. There was, however, a cost to be paid in the upheavals that accompanied these ministries. This ambitious drive produced some savage anti-clericalism, for example, not just because of undercurrents of anti-intellectualism but also because the insurgent leaders were 'intent on destroying the monopoly of classically educated and university trained clergymen'.[9]

This vigorous populist legacy is now seen, suggests Wells, in the proliferation of the Evangelical 'religious marketplace', with an increasing numbers of parachurch ministries and agencies competing for support and money, most of them too preoccupied with their own 'bottom line' to engage in serious collaborative theological reflection. He also sees the same legacy realized in the ever-expanding 'church growth' sector, much of which privileges results over theology, and assumes competition before cooperation.[10] This fragmented picture more generally bears out what Ken Hylson-Smith has called Evangelicalism's 'built-in tendency to be centrifugal rather than centripetal'. By its very nature, Hylson-Smith remarks, Evangelicalism 'encourages individuality, stresses personal faith and promotes distinctive individual or group expressions of faith and practice'. No doubt, such characteristics ensure a large measure of personal and corporate creativity; but, warns Hylson-Smith, they also 'almost guarantee divisiveness'.[11] To Noll, the roots and fruits of Evangelical anti-intellectualism appear somewhat more complex, but alongside the obscurantism engendered by such pragmatic approaches, he notes that the ardent experientialism of early Pentecostalism and dispensationalism also often militated against sustained intellectual enquiry.[12]

As a keen student of Evangelical history, Clive Calver no doubt had all these forces in mind when he wrote of pragmatism as a decidedly mixed blessing, and of the theological dangers which could befall an Alliance whose activist leadership had achieved such impressive numerical gains in so short a time. His 'Jerusalem Paper' also resonated with the concerns expressed by John Langlois and Bruce Nicholls when they had helped to form the WEF Theological Commission eighteen years before—namely, that too

[9] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*. (Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 65.

[10] Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, pp. 65-87.

[11] Ken Hylson-Smith, 'Roots of Pan-Evangelicalism, 1735-1835', in Steve Brady & Harold Rowdon (eds.), *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future*, (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 1996), p. 137.

[12] Mark. A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 123-4.

many practical Evangelical initiatives turn out to be 'shallow, resulting in a ripple lasting only a generation'.[13] Calver's solution to all this was to propose what would eventually become ACUTE.

The Jerusalem Paper recommended the appointment by the Alliance of a part-time theological adviser who would be chiefly responsible for servicing an 'Evangelical Unity Commission' comprised of both Alliance staff, Council members and specialist academics. Although the key issues outlined for consideration by this group were largely 'intra-ecclesial'—ranging from reassessment of the Alliance Basis of Faith, through Ecumenism and Charismata to Seventh Day Adventism and Separatism—Calver did also note that 'theology is not merely internal, but external in its application'. Concentration, he urged, 'must also be given to EA's role in representing evangelical theology to secular society'.[14] As we shall see, this tension between internal 'peacemaking' and wider prophetic witness would become more apparent as the Commission developed.

On December 2nd 1993, almost a year to the day after 'The Jerusalem Paper' had been presented to senior staff and members of the Alliance, the inaugural meeting of the 'Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals' (CUTE) took place at the Alliance's headquarters in London. The Commission was to be co-ordinated by Dave Cave—a Baptist minister well known for his work in urban theology and mission. By the end of the meeting, it had been agreed to replace the rather unfortunate acronym CUTE with ACUTE—the Active Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals. 'Active' was subsequently dropped in favour of 'Alliance'.

Before tracking the subsequent agenda of ACUTE, it is worth noting that even the very act of its formation set the Alliance apart from most other non-ecclesiastical Christian organizations in the UK and, one presumes, the world. In a report presented to the British office of the Bible Society in January 1997, Dr Mark Bonnington analysed the structures and processes of theological reflection in a number of Christian agencies, most of which were evangelical in outlook. While the majority of groups surveyed expressed a strong commitment to biblical and theological reflection on their work, Bonnington found that only 14% actually had a leading committee charged with offering such reflection, and only 17% a nominated individual who had been allocated this task.[15] ACUTE's was thus a rare birth, even while it apparently embodied the aspirations of many within the Christian community. The 'Jerusalem Paper' had clearly envisaged it as providing much-needed scriptural and doctrinal reflection at

[13] Langlois quoted in Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, Ch. 10.

[14] Clive Calver, 'The Jerusalem Paper', Evangelical Alliance archive, 28.11.1992, pp. 9-12.

[15] Mark Bonnington, 'The Bible and Christian Organisations', A Report Presented to the Bible Society Comprising the Results of the Salt and Light Research Project, January 1997, Summarised by Roy McCloughry, October 1999.

the nexus of the academic world, the church and the mission field, and in doing so saw it as speaking for many who are otherwise too busy, or too under-resourced to generate such reflection for themselves. Indeed, as Bonnington puts it in his report,

> [Christian] organisations are large, complex and action-orientated and are only too well aware of pragmatism and lack of theological principle … Usually there is no consistent hermeneutical strategy and when occasions for interpretation do occur, their relationship to the 'organisation' is not clear. Most organisations engage in too little discussion to provide a starting point for this process … Even so, organisations should not hope to agree in advance a 'correct' and agreed hermeneutical stance as a way of finessing all the problems and disagreements involved in theological dialogue and biblical interpretation. To do so would stifle creativity and be impractical, since openness to the problems being faced at any one time is essential. Interpretation is a continual dialogue with the real world as well as with scripture, and that world is fast changing.[16]

While from the outset ACUTE was to be tied firmly to the Alliance's Basis of Faith, it was recognized by Clive Calver and others that the application of that Basis in particular cases could not always be straightforward, and would require very much the sort of organic hermeneutical endeavour defined by Bonnington.

The Development and Work of ACUTE

In his introductory remarks to the first Commission meeting, Calver stressed that the group had been mandated to 'work through' issues 'which divide evangelicals', and to report directly to the Executive. In order to do this effectively, it had been composed, he said, to reflect the denominational and doctrinal diversity of the Alliance's membership. In this sense, it mirrored the existing ethos of the TC, which from the outset had sought to represent the widest possible range of international evangelical scholarship.[17] Calver then added the startling comment that the Commission would constitute 'the single greatest influence on Alliance policy'.[18]

In the seven and a half years since its inception, it must be said that this bold vision of ACUTE's spearheading general Alliance strategy and forward planning still has some way to go! Even so, I would submit that ACUTE, and the wider theological work it has spawned, has made a valuable contribution, not only to the output of the Alliance as a whole, but to its essential self-understanding as an organization. This has been borne out by the fact that the original half-time appointment of Dave Cave, which ran from 1993-96, was expanded after I took over in 1997 to a 4.5 day-a-week post. This now virtually full-time job also entails the running of a permanent in-house 'Theology Department' within the Alliance, whose brief beyond ACUTE per se is to handle members' enquiries, liaise with the media,

---

[16] Mark Bonnington, 'The Bible and Christian Organisations', pp. 17-18

[17] Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, Ch.10.

[18] Minutes of the Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals, December 2nd 1993.

train staff in theological matters relevant to their work, operate a dedicated page on the Alliance website, and to brief managers on doctrinal topics as appropriate.

ACUTE now comprises a Steering Group of twenty theologians under the Chairmanship of Professor David Wright of Edinburgh University. The Steering Group meets at least three times per year for half a day. It aims to reflect the breadth of the Alliance's constituency while maintaining a high level of theological expertise. Roughly two-thirds of the Group are academic theologians working in theological colleges and university departments, or involved regularly in theological education. The remaining third consists of pastors, teachers and practitioners working more directly 'in the field', but committed to serious theological reflection.

As appropriate, the Steering Group appoints specialist Working Groups to deal in depth with a particular matter of concern, and to report on that matter in print. These Working Groups normally number 6-7 and comprise those who have an established 'track record' of work in the area being covered—either in publications, academic teaching, research or grass roots ministry. In addition, from time to time there has been scope for ACUTE to contract an individual specialist to carry out a particular piece of work on its behalf. This has consisted of research, writing a short paper, editing or coordinating a conference.

Texts produced for publication by ACUTE are normally peer reviewed by a wider circle of nominated specialists and interested parties. Draft versions of reports and papers are usually sent by e-mail for comment to such peer reviewers. Their insights are then incorporated, as appropriate, into the editing process.

ACUTE makes its work available in various ways, ranging from detailed commercially-produced volumes, through consultations, to short magazine and web site articles.

The most in-depth means by which ACUTE deals with theological issues is through the publication of books. As with the WEF Theological Commission, these are produced by its Working Groups in collaboration with Paternoster Press. Paternoster run a special 'ACUTE' imprint for such publications and cover all production, marketing and distribution costs on our behalf. So far, ACUTE has produced two book-length reports with Paternoster, both of which have now been reproduced on a special CD-ROM of WEF resources. The first, *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality* was published in January 1998. The second, *The Nature of Hell*, appeared in April 2000.

Both texts have been reprinted, and because of the high media profile of the Alliance, have also received extensive coverage in the press and on radio. In October 2000, *The Nature of Hell* was the subject of an 8-page cover feature by Robert A. Petersen in the leading American magazine *Christianity Today*. These publications have done much to establish ACUTE as a serious contributor to evangelical

theological debate, and have helped to assuage a criticism often previously levelled at the Alliance, and acknowledged explicitly by Clive Calver in the Jersualem Paper—namely, that it would not engage sufficiently in theological analysis.

Further reports are now in process on Evangelicals and the Orthodox Church, theological issues arising from generationally-based mission and ministry, and the prosperity gospel.

Alongside these full, Working Group-produced reports, ACUTE has also begun to produce certain special texts which are either written or edited by named writers. These are not collaborative to the same degree as full reports, but still make a significant contribution to the theological work and profile of the Alliance. Two such books are imminent as I write. *'Toronto' in Perspective* is a collection of essays, statements and sources reflecting on theological issues raised by the so-called Toronto Blessing phenomenon of the mid-1990s. *One Body in Christ: The History of the Evangelical Alliance* has been co-written by Ian Randall and myself, and seeks to set the development of the UK Alliance against the broader backdrop of world Evangelicalism.

ACUTE also produces briefing papers, which range from approximately two to five thousand words. These address specific theological issues on which some guidance, information or position-statement is required from the Alliance, but for which a book is deemed unnecessary. So far, such papers have covered the topics of evangelical identity, and the historicity of Jesus' birth and resurrection and the theological basis of morality.

In addition to papers made available publicly, Dave Cave and I have each produced briefing documents for the Alliance's Council on specific items of concern, ranging from the ethics of the National Lottery to the question of whether Christian organizations and charities should tithe their income.

As well as providing a medium through which to disseminate shorter papers, the Alliance's internet site offers a means by which members and others can e-mail theological questions and comments. Some of the messages received are answered directly by me; others are now passed on to ACUTE Steering Group members for expert response.

Further to all this, ACUTE is regularly asked to supply short features on theological topics to the Alliance's members' magazine, *Idea*. Past articles have summarized the books and papers mentioned above, and have also dealt with alternative worship, demonology, ecclesiology, Christian aesthetics and the radicalism of Jesus.

Under certain circumstances ACUTE has also organized consultations of theologians and church leaders on issues which have been thought to merit preliminary exploration and dialogue before any more definitive pronouncements have been made. The controversial matters of the 'Toronto Blessing' and the 'Prosperity Gospel' have so far

prompted such consultations. Moreover, in July 2000, ACUTE acted for the first time as a co-sponsor, with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, of the Tyndale Fellowship Triennial Conference for evangelical theologians. With support from ACUTE, Henri Blocher delivered a special plenary lecture on 'God and Time'. It is hoped that this partnership will be developed in future. In the meantime, ACUTE is also considering the establishment of its own theological conference in the years between Tyndale Triennials. A first conference is being planned on the theme of 'Pan-Evangelical Theology: Models, Problems and Opportunities'. As this proposed title suggests, the 'commission' paradigm has occasioned difficulties as well as joys for ACUTE. I shall now turn to consider these difficulties and joys, in the hope that my assessment of them at this point in ACUTE's development will prompt further reflection within and beyond the UK.

Problems and Opportunities of the 'Commission' Model

In order to assess the advantages and disadvantages of doing theology through a pan-Evangelical commission, it will be instructive to return to the very beginning of ACUTE's life, and to take account of some fundamental issues raised at the initial Steering Group meeting in December 1993. These issues have continued to exercise the Commission ever since, and to illustrate how we have grappled with them in practice, I shall show their relevance to the recent preparation and publication of *The Nature of Hell*.

Truth, Unity and Diversity: Vanhoozer, Discourse, Canon and Drama

First, a vital point was aired in 1993 with regard to how that unity-in-diversity which ACUTE had been formed to promote might affect its mandate to articulate *truth*. Both at that time, and often since, the usual observations have been made that Evangelicalism is a multifarious movement embodying different dogmatic systems, polities and sub-cultures, such that its unity could never be mere uniformity, and must perforce entail a degree of diversity. Yet as a Commission also formed to define sound doctrine, debate has arisen as to whether this diversity might have any significant implications for the operative epistemology of ACUTE—that is, whether the plurality manifest in the group was at best an impediment to be overcome in the quest for the unitary truth of the Lord God who is One God, or whether it instead reflected something intrinsic to *the nature of divine truth as such*. In other words, was the *de facto* theological plurality of the Commission a purely provisional and pragmatic plurality, or could it in some way be construed as a *principled* plurality?

Consideration of this issue is ongoing within ACUTE, but helpful light is shed on it, and on other challenges facing us, in a recent article by Kevin Vanhoozer entitled 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of

Theology'.[19]

Vanhoozer begins by noting that in reaction to liberal and radical movements which denied the verbal and cognitive nature of divine revelation, many Evangelical theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries developed models of doctrinal truth which identified God's Word closely with the unitary propositions of Scripture. While clearly capturing an important facet of God's self-disclosure, Vanhoozer comments that this approach has tended to present the task of theology as 'the systematization of the information conveyed through biblical [statements]'. By contrast, he suggests that developments in contemporary linguistics and linguistic philosophy have helped theologians to appreciate that the range of communication in Scripture in fact extends much wider. Vanhoozer is here bearing out what may be described as a more general turn in contemporary evangelical theology—the turn to *discourse*.[20]

In the first place, discourses are linguistic phenomena, representing 'continuous stretches of language longer than a sentence'—stretches in which one phrase or utterance 'contextualises' the phrases of utterances which follow it.[21] More generally, however, discourse is configured as a *human activity*—an interrelational enterprise in which meaning is seen to emerge from what Gillian Brown and Gordon Yule call 'a dynamic process in which language is used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker/writer to express … and achieve intentions.'[22]

While not neglecting the propositional model, Vanhoozer advances this discoursal paradigm as one which more fully describes the evangelical theological task. In this paradigm, not only is the God Who Speaks also in discourse with us, through prophecy, Scripture and the living Word Jesus Christ; he is additionally in discourse with *himself*, through the mutual interaction of the three persons of the Trinity—a mutual interaction which is reflected in the ongoing 'conversation' of the various traditions of the church. Hence, Vanhoozer infers a positive theological plurality which, far from being inimical to God's purpose, is woven into his cosmic plan:

> A certain plurality would seem to be biblical. At the very least, there is a recognizable plurality in the communicative acts of Scripture … While the truth about what God has done in Christ may transcend the particular interpretative perspectives, interpreters cannot. While it is true 'that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19), we may need more than one interpretative framework to articulate fully its meaning and significance, just as it took

---

[19] Vanhoozer, Kevin J., 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology', in John G. Stackhouse Jr (ed.), *Evangelical Futures*, (Leicester: Apollos), pp. 61-106.

[20] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 80-81.

[21] David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (3rd Edn), (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 106; Peter Auer, 'Introduction: John Gumperz' Approach to Contextualization', in P. Auer & A. di Luzo (eds.), *The Contextualization of Language*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins), pp. 1-37.

[22] G. Brown, and G. Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 26.

> four Gospels to articulate the truth of Jesus Christ. There may therefore be several normative points of view in the Bible that are all authoritative because they disclose *aspects of the truth*. It is therefore possible simultaneously to admit a multiplicity of perspectives and to maintain 'aspectival' realism.[23]

As for the Bible, so also for interpretative traditions, Vanhoozer advocates a constructive 'catholicity' which appreciates what different strands within the church might variously contribute to the task of evangelical theologizing. Drawing on the work of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, he proposes a positive 'plural unity' which recognizes that no single human voice—no one perspective or genre of criticism—is able to exhaust the truth of a text. Hence, as Vanhoozer puts it, 'The dialogue's the thing'—dialogue being a cardinal manifestation of discourse. He goes on:

> One of the defining characteristics of dialogue is its 'unfinalizability'. The moral for Christian theology is clear: 'Final' or absolute biblical interpretations are properly eschatological. For the moment, we must cast our doctrines not in the language of heaven but in the time-bound, culture-bound languages of earth, governed, of course, by the dialogue we find in Scripture itself.[24]

Whilst there is little doubt *in fact* that ACUTE and WEF's TC proceed along such dialogical lines, it is important to emphasize here what Vanhoozer says about finality and authority in respect of the truth which is dialogically explored. He is well aware that there are plenty of non-Evangelical traditions which have become content to conceive the discoursal/dialogical model as either infinitely 'open' or infinitely self-reflexive. On the radical side, following Roland Barthes, the view that language is an endless chain of signification in which 'meaning ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it', and in which God, reason, science and law are eternally 'deferred', becomes a keynote of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theology.[25] More moderately, the Postliberalism of George Lindbeck, Hans Frei and others maintains a place for authority, but typically locates it with the 'cultural-linguistic system' developed by the interpreting community, rather than within the revealed Word of God itself.[26]

By contrast, for Vanhoozer there is no question of abandoning Scripture as the locus of theological authority. Rather, it is the *manner in which biblical authority is understood* which, he suggests, merits reassessment by Evangelicals. Rather than presenting theology purely in terms of a unitary Word, Vanhoozer advises that we promulgate our vocation as theologians more clearly in relation to the *canonicity* of Scripture. The term 'canonicity' is carefully chosen here, because it is seen to capture both the fixed and formal status of the biblical text, while at the same time conveying its transparent

[23] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 78-9.

[24] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 80.

[25] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 149. For Vanhoozer's fuller consideration of this model, see his *Is There A Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

[26] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 77.

multiplicity—of books, authors, codes, languages, styles, settings and, perhaps, of theologies.[27]

Developing a fertile analogy with dramatic performance, Vanhoozer underlines the importance for evangelical theology of respecting the author's intent, and of adhering to the given 'script'. Yet he adds that different 'stagings' of the play might actually complement, rather than subtract from, our appreciation of it as a whole artwork, or 'canon':

> As often as not, we are called upon to make theological judgments in the absence of clear and distinct propositions. What we have instead to guide us are some broad principles, a number of biblical examples, and a host of canonical judgements, formulated for specific situations, on which it is appropriate to say and do in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Bible does not give us axioms for a theological calculus so much as a variety of narratives, laws, prophecies, letters, and songs that cultivate the evangelical heart, mind, and imagination. Evangelical theology is a matter of deliberating well (e.g. canonically) about the gospel in non-canonical (e.g. contemporary) situations.[28]

Vanhoozer is emphatically not suggesting here that all interpretations are equally valid. The testing of an interpretation through time, and through dialogue with other well-honed interpretations, will do much to establish its value—the extent to which it 'funds' the canon of evangelical theological understanding. Indeed, Vanhoozer particularly appreciates the contribution which can be made by an experienced and time-honoured 'cast' of denominational traditions in the hermeneutical process:

> I for one would be sorry if everyone thought just like me. I would deeply regret it if there were no Mennonite, or Lutheran, or Greek Orthodox voices in the world. Why? Because I think that truth would be better served by their continuing presence. To some, this may be a shocking way of thinking about truth. Is not truth one? Must not our confessions of faith contain not only affirmations but also denials? Yes! But my question concerns whether a systematics that employs only a single conceptual system can fully articulate the truth.[29]

Of course, mere durability is, in and of itself, no guarantee of orthodoxy, and it is not hard to cite instances in which a long-standing, consensual evangelical reading of Scripture has fallen to superior exegesis (e.g. slavery). Indeed, as Vanhoozer concedes, 'to locate authority in the community itself is to forgo the possibility of prophetic critique'.[30] And yet his view of a collaborative alliance of theologians from diverse traditions seeking communally to express a truth which they take to be objective, if not immediately exhaustible, and which they acknowledge to be supremely mediated for today through the canonical Scriptures, comes close to what many in ACUTE and the TC have actually experienced as we have done theology together on behalf of the Evangelical Alliance and WEF.

In such a model, truth need by no means be 'compromised' by dialogue, collegiality and consensus. On the contrary, it may be revealed at a

[27] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 81-4.

[28] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 83-4.

[29] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 80.

[30] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 80.

more godly pitch, since it is through the church, rather than through isolated individual theologians, that God has promised to bring his glory definitively to bear (Eph. 3:21). Whereas a great deal of today's 'western' theology, whether practised in the West itself or exported to the two-thirds world, is atomized, individually-focused and effectively divorced from the life of the church,[31] ACUTE in a modest way reflects something of the ethos of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), and the earliest ecumenical Councils of the post-apostolic period. It attempts to do theology *ecclesially*—that is, in a manner that is consciously of, with and for the church, as well as for wider society. As the record shows, the discussions which took place in these early councils were hardly superficial or uniform; indeed, they were often highly charged. Yet by God's grace positions were defined, and texts produced, which could realistically claim to articulate the mind of the church. Granted, they might have looked like 'compromise' to some, and granted, in the case of councils like Chalcedon, they often marked out boundaries rather than presenting exact definitions on every point. Yet it is doubtful whether anything better, or more representative, could have been produced at the time. While it only claims to act for one stream of the wider church, and while it clearly does not carry the authority of such ancient councils, ACUTE does seek to operate on the same basic, ecclesial model.

Now if we accept Vanhoozer's canonical analogy as an analogy of both plural unity and bounded unity—of both diversity and restraint, freedom and order, grace and law—we must immediately face the question of *how much* variety can be allowed—of how pluralistic we can become before we threaten the definitive, irreducible norms of Evangelical belief.

Not surprisingly, this is an ever-present concern in the work of ACUTE, but it came most starkly to a head as we developed our report on the nature of hell.[32]

For the last decade or more, there has been an escalation of evangelical debate and tension on the subject of hell, and in particular, on issues related to its duration, finality, quality and purpose. While the majority of Evangelicals continue to hold that hell entails conscious everlasting punishment for the unredeemed, a growing number of evangelical theologians, pastors and lay people are embracing the doctrine of conditional immortality. This teaches that although they will face final judgement and some degree of divine punishment after that, the unredeemed will eventually be destroyed, or annihilated (hence the term 'annihilationism', which technically refers to the outcome of this view rather than its whole theology, but which in prac-

[31] For corroboration of this point see, George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Leicester: IVP, 1994).

[32] ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

tice functions as a synonym for it).[33] Both sides of this debate have their signature texts: Mark 9:48, Matthew 25:46, Revelation 14:9-11 and 20:10 are most often adduced by traditionalists; Matthew 10:28, John 3:16, Romans 6:23 and 2 Peter 3:7 are frequently claimed for the conditionalist cause. Other verses—not least 2 Thessalonians 1:9—appear equally amenable to both sides, containing as they do images of both punishment *and* destruction.[34]

Now we were aware when we began work on this issue that the conditionalist view had to some extent already been assimilated within the Evangelical constituency. Derek Tidball's influential book *Who Are the Evangelicals?* had in fact already defined this debate on hell as a distinctively Evangelical one, which many in the wider church and world would regard as an internal 'family' dispute.[35] Likewise, Rob Warner and Clive Calver's 1996 account of Evangelical unity and doctrine, *Together We Stand*, had portrayed conditionalists as an established 'Evangelical party'.[36]

On the other hand, we were also aware that concern had been expressed in some quarters that conditionalists might be transgressing the boundaries of Vanhoozer's Evangelical 'canon'. Thus both Anthony Hoekema and John Gerstner had provocatively cast the growth of evangelical conditionalism as a 'revolt', with Gerstner calling its proponents to repent as a matter of urgency.[37] Then again, it became clear quite early on in our investigations that Evangelical conditionalists were now emerging as equally passionate advocates of their own position. Indeed, John Wenham, Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow had presented themselves as nothing less than 'proselytisers' for the conditionalist cause, seeking to 'convert' Evangelicalism from what they now saw as a grossly mistaken doctrine of eternal conscious punishment, to one which would, in their view, reflect the true message of the gospel.[38]

Bearing such tensions in mind, ACUTE was forced in a very stark way to determine issues of truth and falsity in respect of hell. More subtly, and perhaps more complexly, however, it was also compelled to consider those aspects of the doctrine of hell which Evangelicals should regard as primary and non-negotiable, as against those which might be deemed adiaphora—that is, secondary concerns over which it would be possible to differ with integrity. In doing so, it was prompted more gen-

---

[33] This background is explained more fully in *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 1-8.

[34] For a detailed discussion of the relevant biblical material see *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 36-52.

[35] Derek J. Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), pp. 152-5.

[36] Clive Calver and Rob Warner, *Together We Stand: Evangelical Convictions, Unity and Vision*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), p. 87.

[37] Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), pp. 265; John Gerstner, *Repent or Perish*, (Ligonier, PA.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990).

[38] Wenham, John, 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' in, Nigel M. de S Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), pp. 190-1; Clark Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), pp. 88, 94.

erally to reflect on the methods by which Evangelicals in a collegial setting might distinguish canonicity from non-canonicity, primacy from secondariness, essential from inessential dogma.

As it was, we concluded the report by recognizing conditional immortality as a 'significant minority Evangelical position'—one which stands on the margins of Evangelical belief, but which falls within, rather than beyond, its parameters. By contrast, we defined both universalism and 'second chance' or 'post-mortem' salvation as lying beyond the bounds of legitimacy.[39]

What emerges particularly from our reflection on the essential-inessential tension is that the distinction of primary from secondary issues depends to a large degree on how one chooses to define Evangelicalism. At present, there is an abundance of studies addressing this matter.[40] All agree that Evangelicals are those who believe in a triune God, the incarnation, the sacrificial atonement of Christ, his bodily resurrection and second coming, justification by faith, the supreme authority of the Bible and the missionary prerogative. Yet it is clear that differences arise when Evangelical authenticity is assessed in relation to issues such as baptismal practice, the ecumenical movement, the ordination of women, biblical inerrancy, evolution, spiritual gifts, the millennium and, for that matter, the nature of hell. Some writers see one or more of these issues as 'primary' rather than 'secondary', with lines between essentials and non-essentials being drawn in different places. For others, none of them would warrant separation or breach of fellowship.

Beyond all this, the actual criteria by which it is determined whether something is primary or secondary struck us as being far from straightforward. It might be reassuring to think that these criteria were purely biblical-theological. But in practice, they also include considerations of history, culture politics and relationships.

Truth, Unity and Scripture

Virtually all Evangelicals would agree that the first criterion by which we must establish whether something is orthodox or heterodox, or primary or secondary, is the criterion of Scripture. The Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith typifies this priority when it takes its definitive guide in such matters to be 'the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments', and affirms them to be 'entirely trustworthy' and 'supremely authoritative in all matters of faith and conduct'. Given Evangelical agreement on the Bible's witness to the existence of hell *per se*, the question facing ACUTE was whether Scripture depicts this hell so unambiguously as

---

[39] *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 131-134.

[40] E.g. Derek Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994); Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) and *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism*, (Leicester: Apollos, 1996); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. (Leicester: IVP, 1994); David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Leicester: IVP, 1993); Mark Thompson, *Saving the Heart: What is an Evangelical?* (London: St Matthias Press, 1995).

a place of eternal torment that no alternative view could legitimately be deemed 'evangelical'.

In addressing this key question, the report notes that the main evangelical proponents of conditionalism demonstrate a high regard for the authority of Scripture, and seek to make their case by thorough exegesis of the relevant texts. From this perspective at least, we suggest that they operate as Evangelicals. Furthermore, we go so far as to say that their work highlights verses and images which some traditionalists might previously have ignored, or even misconstrued. No one, we suggest, who has studied the work of Edward Fudge or David Powys could seriously read the many biblical references to God's 'destruction' of the impenitent without considering whether they might, in fact, denote a final cessation of existence, rather than endless conscious torment.[41]

Having made this point, however, the report goes on to concede that a properly Evangelical *intention* to uphold the primacy of Scripture does not necessarily lead to good Evangelical theology. Evangelicals, we observe, characteristically seek to make doctrine clear and consistent, since they are those who maintain the core Reformation principle of biblical 'perspicuity'. On the face of it, we suggest, this would militate against a conciliatory, 'both/and' approach to the hell debate. After all, it seems illogical to propose that people could be both annihilated *and* tormented forever. In the end, surely either traditionalists must be right and conditionalists wrong, or vice versa. To conclude otherwise would, surely, be un-Evangelical?[42]

On one level, it might have been adequate to deal with this point by invoking Vanhoozer's 'eschatological' view on Evangelical truth. We might simply have agreed that eternal conscious punishment and annihilation cannot logically be reconciled, but have then suggested that since there appear to be images of both in Scripture, it might be necessary to suspend judgement on how they relate to one another until this interrelation becomes clear at the parousia. But as it is, we do not leave the explanation there. Rather, we consider another possibility—a 'third way'—driven not by insipid compromise, but by astrophysics. We emphasize that both conditionalism and traditionalism rely to some extent on words and images from our present space-time world to portray a destiny which lies beyond that world. For the present, however, we underline that space and time are known to be relative, that time is experienced differently at different velocities, and that visibility is affected by gravity. Against this background, we cite an article by Douglas Spanner to suggest that one recently discovered feature of the universe might help the resolve the tradition-

[41] *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 124-6. Cf. Edward William Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Revised Edn.), (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994 [1982]); David Powys, *'Hell': A Hard Look at a Hard Question*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997).

[42] *The Nature of Hell*, p. 125.

alist-conditionalist dichotomy. A spaceship travelling into a black hole would be sucked in and annihilated. Yet an observer would continue to see this ship appear to hover above the horizon of visibility, gradually fading but without definite end. Similarly, we propose, hell might be *experienced* as annihilation but *observed* as continuing punishment, with those condemned gradually fading from view.[43] From the ACUTE perspective, this is a useful example of the way in which fresh Evangelical thinking, which is prepared to look beyond entrenched dogmatic convictions, might contribute to the cause of Evangelical unity.

Truth, Unity and Tradition

For all our commitment to the primacy of Scripture, it would be hard to deny the role of historical considerations in seeking to distinguish essentials from non-essentials in the pursuit of Evangelical unity. This process typically entails looking back to those periods of the church's life when God has invigorated his people through reformation, awakening and renewal. The birth of Protestantism in the early 1500s, the Puritan era and the Evangelical Revival are obvious reference-points for us here.[44] Indeed, these eras tend to supply the key traditions in Vanhoozer's canon of pan-Evangelical interpretation.

Now in *The Nature of Hell*, we recognize that where eschatology is concerned, this historical criterion of unity is comparatively unfavourable for conditionalism. After all, we say, evangelicals did not seriously entertain the eventual extinction of the unsaved until the late nineteenth century, and then did so only in relatively small numbers.[45] Besides, it had been consistently anathematised by the church in the preceding thirteen centuries. At the same time, however, we point out that Evangelicals are typically cautious about tradition as compared to Scripture, and are especially wary of appeals to ecclesiastical precedent. At this point we invoke the aforementioned example of the way Evangelicals modified their thinking on slavery in the early 1800s. Here, we suggest, was a 'doctrine' and practice that many evangelicals had advocated, and justified from Scripture, but which came to be seen as misguided, and which we would now reject out of hand.[46]

As I have reported, some evangelical conditionalists contend that eternal conscious punishment is at least as deserving of theological revision as was slavery. What is clear, however, is that for Evangelicals worthy of the name, revision on this or any other historic article of faith must proceed on the basis of biblical interpretation rather than simply by emotion, or even, by moral indignation alone.

---

[43] Douglas Spanner, 'Is Hell Forever?' *Churchman* 110/2, 1996, 107-120. *The Nature of Hell*, p. 125.

[44] Alister McGrath makes illuminating use of the Reformers, for example, as one inspiration for evangelicalism today: *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992.

[45] *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 126-7.

[46] *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 126-7.

Here the report argues that history can help, since the interpretative tradition on a biblical text or doctrine can indicate how heavily the burden of proof lies on those who wish to change things. In the case of conditionalists this burden of proof is considerable, since the traditional view has prevailed for by far the greater part of the church's history. It is consequently incumbent upon them to make their case with humility and respect among traditionalists, whose convictions in this case reflect the legacy of Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and others who helped most significantly to shape the Evangelical movement.

Truth, Unity, Attitudes and Behaviour

If the definition of Evangelical unity is at least partly historical as well as biblical, then we ought to acknowledge that it must also to some extent be *attitudinal* and *behavioural*. In *The Nature of Hell*, we suggest that doctrine plays a part in such definitions, but add that it is not identical with them. Probably the best known attitudinal/behavioural definition of Evangelicalism is that offered by David Bebbington. Bebbington identifies four key characteristics of an evangelical—conversionism (a call to people to be converted), activism (an active faith affecting all of life), biblicism (a commitment to the authority and inspiration of the Bible), and crucicentrism (holding the cross at the centre of all life and theology).[47]

In *The Nature of Hell* we observe that according to these and most similar taxonomies, those who hold a conditionalist position would remain within the parameters of authentic evangelicalism. Certainly, the conditionalists whose work we scrutinize in the report are shown as unequivocally committed to conversion and mission, to activism in the world, to the Bible as their ultimate authority, and to the centrality of the cross. By this set of criteria, at least, we conclude that those specific details of hell's duration, quality, finality and purpose which are at issue in the current Evangelical debate are comparatively less essential.[48]

Truth, Unity and Relationships

As a final factor in determining the parameters of Evangelical unity, the ACUTE working group on hell comments that Evangelicals often identify one another not because of any clear outward 'badge', but because of what might be called a 'family resemblance'. In practical terms, we function within relational networks and, although we may differ from one another in many other ways, we generally recognize and accommodate the differences. Whether we talk of there being various tribes of Evangelicals,[49] branches of the same tree,[50] colours of the rainbow, or

[47] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 10-12.

[48] *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 127-8.

[49] As in Clive Calver and Rob Warner, *Together We Stand: Evangelical Convictions, Unity and Vision*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996).

[50] As in Martyn Percy, *Words, Wonders and Power: Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism*, (London: SPCK, 1996).

facets of a Rubik's cube,[51] in time we become adept as recognising 'family' when we see them. And the report concludes that when it comes to those who have moved from traditionalism towards conditionalism, the familial ties remain strong. Such people may have shifted to the margins on the matter of hell, yet it is clear that virtually all of those who have defended conditionalism in print have done so as self-professed and well-established members of the Evangelical household. Some, indeed, have made enormous contributions to it (e.g. John Stott, John Wenham, Michael Green and Philip Hughes).[52]

These images of 'family' and 'tribe' are, of course, more than simply pragmatic. They are significant scriptural motifs. The people of God, though diverse through time and space, together form part of the same extended community. On this analogy, those who have embraced conditionalism, while disagreeing with the majority, could be said to have done so overwhelmingly from *within* the community, and on *behalf of* the community. Furthermore, despite the protestations of Gerstner, Hoekema et al, it seems likely that they will remain within the community as a whole, even if it finally rejects their convictions on this specific point of doctrine.

Now of course, as Theological Adviser to the major pan-Evangelical body in the UK, and as editor of *The Nature of Hell*, I am aware that these observations on the future of conditionalism and conditionalists might well look like self-fulfilling prophecies. After all, by publishing a report which deems conditionalism to be legitimate, ACUTE has probably gone a long way to making it so—at least for Evangelicalism in Britain, and at least this side of Judgement Day! This observation in turn raises a final, major question for our examination of how evangelical theological method is affected by the 'commission' approach.

Truth, Unity, Expediency—and Hope

Given all that I have said about the interaction of exegesis, doctrine, tradition, culture, worldview and community, and bearing in mind how this interaction is born out by *The Nature of Hell*, one is led to ask just how far it is really possible in a body like ACUTE, or the WEF Theological Commission, to operate free from contingent political, relational and institutional imperatives. To put it more concretely: if *The Nature of Hell* had declared unequivocally against conditionalism, and, more to the point, if we had deemed it to be incompatible with the UK Alliance's Basis of Faith, then we would logically have had to expel one of our most respected Vice Presidents, Rev Dr John Stott—for it was Stott who, in 1988, did so much to open up this debate by preferring annihilationism

[51] As in Derek Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994).
[52] *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 128-9.

to the traditional view.[53] We would also almost certainly have lost other esteemed British evangelical leaders who happened to be conditionalists—not to mention an unpredictable number of rank and file members. Of course, having decided to accept conditionalism rather than reject it, we faced the opposite prospect of traditionalists resigning because of a perceived downgrade in this area.

It would be disingenuous to pretend that ACUTE functions quite apart from such strategic concerns. We are, after all, the theological commission of the Evangelical Alliance, rather than an independent, autonomous think tank. We are funded by the Alliance, to serve the Alliance, and it is therefore not surprising that, to a large extent, we reflect in our composition, research and reports the *existing* theological profile of our membership. Moreover, we do not merely guess at or assume this profile; we know it, because from time to time we poll our members on key theological questions. For example, prior to embarking on *The Nature of Hell*, a recent survey had informed us that 79.6% of our affiliated churches affirmed belief in hell as eternal conscious punishment, while 14.2% favoured the doctrine of annihilation.[54]

Plainly, one must beware of being 'led' by such figures. It would be easy to run ACUTE in such a way that it merely reflected back to the Alliance what the Alliance already was, and what it already believed—with footnotes added for a sheen of academic respectability. Our brief may be advisory rather than prescriptive, but we must surely be more than simply descriptive. There are many books in print which address Evangelical theological divisions by essentially explaining those divisions without comment, or by presenting a debate between representatives of the various key positions. Both approaches have their merits, and as I have explained, we have followed this latter format in our next ACUTE publication, which seeks to draw lessons for all quarters of the church from the so-called Toronto Blessing. Yet there is much to be said for undertaking the harder work of producing genuinely conciliar, 'through-composed' texts like *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality* and *The Nature of Hell*. The writing, editing and peer review process can be painstaking and deeply frustrating, but at its best, it can operate as an exemplar of what Evangelical theology must be—that is, theology in the service of the church.

Similarly, since the UK Alliance is a broad based body which takes in Cessationists and Charismatics, five-point Calvinists and radical Arminians, Anglican Bishops and Brethren elders, there is a serious danger of generating little more than what might cynically be termed 'theological diplomacy'—that is, a bland dis-

---

[53] John Stott and David L. Edwards, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), pp. 287-304; 312-329. For an account of the disagreements among Evangelicals arising from Stott's work, see Tony Gray, 'Destroyed for Ever: An Examination of the Debates Concerning Annihilationism and Conditional Immortality', *Themelios* 21:2 (January 1996), pp. 14-18.

[54] *The Nature of Hell*, p. 6, n.13.

course of generalities and platitudes designed, however elegantly, to do little more than 'keep the peace'. The applied linguists Geoffrey Leech and Jenny Thomas have coined the term 'pragmatic ambivalence' to describe the use of language in such a way as to keep two apparently contradictory assertions in play for some wider practical purpose.[55] The eucharistic vocabulary of the Book of Common Prayer is, perhaps, a more constructive example of this phenomenon; the recent attempts of mixed denominations like the United Reformed and Methodist churches in the UK, and the Presbyterian Church (USA), to define their position on homosexuality, have proved less edifying, and ultimately less irenic.[56] While there may be an inevitable dimension of 'pragmatic ambivalence' in collaborative, interdenominational theology, it demands continual scrutiny and restraint.

There are, then, genuine pitfalls associated with the enterprise in which ACUTE, TC and other such bodies are engaged—genuine dangers that we might fail, out of timidity, or fear, or financial concern, or academic self-preservation—to let our Yes be our Yes and our No our No. Yet as I have suggested in relation to hell and the new cosmology, the discourse of an evangelical theological commission does not have to reduce to the lowest common denominator; it can operate as a highest common factor. The language of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed may have been pragmatically ambivalent; it may have been be highly politicised and historically expedient; yet it also happens to be sublime and, most important of all, faithful to Scripture. ACUTE may not aspire to such heights, and as I have stressed we certainly do not have a comparable authority. Even so, my hope is that we and similar evangelical commissions across the world will, in our collegial and consensual quest, correspond to that 'evangelical reality' which, in Vanhoozer's words, 'is disclosed to us in the plural form of the biblical witness to the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'. With Vanhoozer also, I trust that by God's grace, our mission of theology will thus be related to the mission of the church—'creatively and faithfully—dramatically!—to interpret and perform the way, the truth, and the life'.[57]

APPENDIX: ACUTE'S MISSION STATEMENT

ACUTE exists:

To work for consensus on theological issues that test evangelical unity, and to provide, on behalf of evangelicals, a coordinated theological response to matters of wider public debate.

---

[55] G.N. Leech and J. Thomas, 'Language, Meaning and Context: Pragmatics', in N.E. Collinge, *An Encyclopedia of Language*, (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 173-206. For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in relation to theology, see David Hilborn, 'The Pragmatics of Liturgical Discourse', Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Nottingham, 1994.

[56] See ACUTE, *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pp. 7-11.

[57] Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 106.

ACUTE recognises and urges others to recognise:

- That views which seem contradictory can sometimes be complementary
- That differences are sometimes exaggerated by historic separations, which can lead to a failure to understand the language or the perspective of the other side.
- That nonetheless, some differences are genuine and real.

ACUTE believes that within the framework of unity in Christ and agreement on basic doctrine:

- Some differences can be resolved by thoughtful discussion.
- Some differences are more substantial, but can be accepted as allowed diversity.

ACUTE is committed to:

- Working to create better mutual understanding and a resolution of differences, or an agreement to differ, within the framework of our unity in Christ.
- Seeking to clarify those issues which are primary and essential, and the extent to which varying forms of words are acceptable in expressing them.
- Researching and analysing issues referred to it by the Evangelical Alliance and reporting as appropriate.
- Encouraging deeper theological understanding among Evangelicals.
- Providing theological reflection on major issues affecting the evangelical community.