

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 26 • Number 2 • April 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

Dynamics and Directions of World Evangelical Theology for the 21st Century

David Parker

Keywords: Salvation, hermeneutics, unity, social responsibility, globalisation, spirituality, fellowship, reform, scholarship

1. Introduction

I compliment the Korea Evangelical Theological Society on its desire to include the global perspective in this conference. The Korean church is well known for its global missions perspective and so it is natural for you to have this topic on your program. It is a delight for me too to participate in this way, not only because of my own personal interest, but also because of the purpose of *Evangelical Review of Theology* to be a forum and channel for global evangelical theology. I think this is a unique perspective in the field of theological journals. Many other fine journals are, of course, devoted to

particular regions, confessions or denominations, schools or areas of theological interest. But our special interest is to serve the international evangelical community by publishing quality articles and book reviews (both original and re-published) which foster global perspectives and interchange.

It is more obvious than ever that Christianity as a whole is truly a global phenomenon—that is, it is ‘catholic’ or ‘universal’—already in these days we are able to experience something of the perspective of the book of Revelation when it speaks of ‘every tribe and tongue and people and nation’ who share in the fellowship of Christ our Lord. For more than two hundred years now, Protestant Christians have been able to have something of this global perspective—ever since William Carey read the journals of English explorer, Captain James Cook (whom we honour in Australia), and as a result, commenced the first major effort in the modern period to express a world missionary vision in practical

Dr David Parker is Editor of *Evangelical Review of Theology*. He is an Adjunct Lecturer at Queensland Baptist College of Ministries and Bible College of Queensland in Brisbane Australia in Theology and New Testament, and holds degrees from the University of Queensland and the University of London. This is a slightly edited version of a paper delivered at the Korea Evangelical Theological Society International Conference on ‘Evangelical Theology for 21st Century’ held at Sungkyul University, Anyang City, Korea, October 25–27th, 2001.

terms. Before Carey's time, the faith had reached many countries, although sometimes at the edge of sword and in company with colonialists and merchants. In many cases, these links were too close for safety, and this is still a continuing problem for us today.

But now more than ever we do not have to travel or look at world Christianity from a foreign missions perspective. With the advent of globalisation, mass communication, travel and migration, the many splendoured fabric of the Christian family (Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:10) is close at hand geographically and in terms of information and relationships—we are urged to 'think globally, act locally'. We need only to consider the large numbers of people from various parts of the world now resident in other locations, and the fact that there are now thriving churches based on these immigrant communities. For example, in the state of New South Wales in Australia, there are about 300 Baptist Churches but there are fifty churches and fellowships based on migrant communities representing 23 different languages—Korean is the largest single group. The same kind of situation can be found in many other areas of the world of course, especially North America and the United Kingdom.

Within the broader picture of global Christianity, evangelicals are also widespread, numerous and varied. This is true of their evangelism, missions, church planting and of their theological understandings

There is no doubt that the church is on the move globally, especially in

the developing world, which contrasts strongly with the situation in western European countries where traditional Christianity is in decline. Yet this rapidly growing church needs to be matured and deepened to strengthen it and to ensure it does not make the same mistakes as the West.¹ It also needs to be more indigenised to refute claims that it is only a western or colonial religion. At the recent Triennial Assembly of the Asian Theological Association held in Malaysia August 7-10, 2001, the chairman, Dr Sang-bok David Kim, emphasized this point by saying it was not a post-Christian situation in Asia but pre-Christian, and that while much had already been done for the kingdom of God, much more remained to be done in the future.

My task is to bring some perspective on this global scene, both past and present, and to think about the future trends. I can do so only from my own particular perspective² and within the very limited range of my knowledge—the amount and extent of activity makes it difficult for anybody to have much more than a partial view of the whole. Yet, despite this, it is impossible for theologians today to carry out their tasks authentically without a global perspective. We are in fact much closer to the early church than we imagine, both in its

¹ Wonsuk Ma, 'Mission: nine hurdles for Asian Churches', *Journal of Asian Mission*, 2/1 (2000), pp. 103-124

² cf William A. Dyrness, *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1990)

multi-cultural context and its intimacy of fellowship; even though the distances are great and the cultural divides significant, it is possible through the benefit of communication to be aware of the rest of the Christian world as if it were as close as it was in the days of the apostle Paul.³

2. Evangelical Issues

In this context it is interesting to reflect on issues of concern to evangelical theologians in the recent past. For example, in the 25 volumes of *Evangelical Review of Theology* which we are just completing this month, some of the most prominent topics have been: culture, contextualisation and the reporting of regional theologies; salvation, pluralism and dialogue; doing theology and theological education; the church, Scripture, hermeneutics and tradition; women, ministry and gender issues; and social justice, poverty and the environment. Since 1984 the latter area has been taken up strongly by the journal of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, *Transformation*, which had its original roots in the Theological Commission. Other important concerns which this journal has discussed include poverty, environment, globalisation and the Jubilee 2000 call, population, economics, work and employment; church and state, political praxis and philosophy in a Christian perspective; refugees, relief and develop-

ment; urban issues, feminism and power; nuclear issues and peace; and matters of critical concern in particular areas of the world including South Africa, and Latin and Central America. Evangelism itself and its relation to social justice has also been on the agenda.

The WEF Theological Commission has during the last twenty-five years focused on a range of topics in its consultations, including, Defending and Confirming the Gospel, Nature and Mission of the Church, Jesus Christ our Redeemer and Liberator, The Unique Christ in our Pluralistic World, and Faith and Hope for the Future. (<http://www.world-evangelical.org/theology.html>)

In the North American scene, a prominent theme has been culture wars involving a large number of issues such as gender, sexuality, pro-life, science, peace, and race; other interests have included forms of spirituality (both innovative and traditional), restructuring and refocusing the church to reach Busters, Gen-X and other such groups, pluralism, inter-church relations, the achievements of (American) cross-cultural mission, eschatology (exacerbated briefly by the advent of the new millennium), tele-evangelists and the charismatic/Pentecostal movement.

This period was the era of Liberation Theology, the inerrancy controversy, the Lausanne movement and its congresses, with the important Covenant of 1974. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have stepped into the mainstream during this period, and closely associated with this has been the rise of the

³ cf Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bridgepoint, 1999)

mega-church and the wholesale restructuring of the institutions of the church, its leadership and its worship; in many cases, far-reaching changes have also taken place in cross-cultural missions from the sending perspective, partially in response to the rapid growth and relative independence of national churches. Some of these churches have now begun to become more indigenised, which means clarifying their own history and colonial heritage, and also tackling some of their own local problems such as ancestor worship and the spirit world, nation building and public ethics, and church nurture and leadership training.

The changes and developments in the global context as well as the growing maturation of evangelical scholarship have both resulted in profound and far reaching shifts in evangelical thought and attitudes. This demonstrates the diversity and vitality of evangelicalism as it responds vigorously to the contemporary issues. However, this diversity and change is too great for some who believe that in the rush to be relevant, not enough of the foundational elements of evangelicalism are being conserved, and that there is too little united focus on essentials. While there is a lamentable lack of local variety in some areas, due to the effects of evangelical globalisation in the hands of major book publishers, to take but one example, there is at the practical level the lack of uniformity which can sometimes be uncomfortable—whether it be the use of Bible versions, the songs used in worship, or the customs and

habits related to personal and social behaviour.

However, the feeling that there is a lack of uniformity and a loss of commonly held beliefs only opens up the question of whether there may be a need to identify a new more basic and valid centre of unity deriving from the fundamental identity of the movement. That is, the claim that evangelicalism is in danger of losing its roots and identity due to recent changes touches on the role of the movement and its very reason for existence.

We shall come back to this question again later, but in the meantime, we may state in defence that some of the observable changes at least arise from the genuine commitment to the question of on-going relevance in a world which is itself rapidly changing as well. A glance at the history of the church shows that the forms, expressions and conceptualisations of the Christian faith have never been static. In fact, they were never meant to be, at least if we take seriously the metaphors used by Jesus and throughout the New Testament about growth, development and the pilgrim nature of a body of God's people on the move. Great diversity and rapid expansion and growth in many different cultures of the world make it hard, indeed impossible and perhaps unwise, to give any absolute judgements on these matters, but we can at least offer some impressions in the hope that they may stimulate deeper reflection and better understanding.

3. Some Classic Concerns

Some of the battles that engaged our

attention in earlier times are still with us, at least in some areas. These include the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture; social justice and the gospel; varieties of eschatology; the place of critical scholarship; spiritual gifts and baptism in the Spirit; the role and place of women in the church and ministry; contextualisation and mission; and separatism and Christian unity. Some, like eschatology, have received renewed interest—if only temporary—with the change of the millennium and the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York—and others seem to persist despite new contexts, as revealed in the article 'Don't hate me because I'm an Arminian'.⁴

Thankfully though, many are no longer the hindrance they once were to our life and work, because they have been resolved by adjustments to thinking, clarification of misunderstandings or some kind of pragmatic working arrangements that allow the contending parties to move on positively. In some cases, the old battles have lost their point because it has become necessary to consider them in a new light brought on by changing contexts and the emergence of other related issues. For example, questions of hermeneutics and the entire issue of how the Bible is used have overtaken the inerrancy debates. Similarly, great issues of human survival related to the abuse of our ecological resources have made it obligatory for even conservative Christians to give serious

thought to the stewardship of our environment as the gift of our Creator God.

This does not mean of course that there are not still positions that need to be defended. Resurgent world religions make mission and beliefs about salvation and the uniqueness of Christ key areas of concern, while ordinary Christians in the now multi-ethnic urban areas of the West must come to practical terms with pluralism in their own communities. Furthermore, at regional, national and international levels, the economic and political implications of these developments must also be taken into account, with questions of religious freedom being a key concern. The revival of local religions, especially in their more assertive forms, are having a significant impact on the attitudes and life of Christian communities in many parts of the world.

In the West and areas affected by it, the practical atheism of secular materialism and the vagaries of post-modern culture are making their mark, both at the conceptual level affecting theology and ethics, and at the practical level of evangelism, community involvement and daily Christian living.

Then in matters of theology and church life, liberalism which places reason and relevance above the authority of the Word of God, though mostly a spent force, may still be found. Denials of the resurrection especially when made by a bishop or other prominent church leader, calls to take a modern approach to the Bible or to update the church and its worship are sure to attract the atten-

⁴ *Christianity Today* (ChrT) 6 Sept 1999 pp. 87-94

tion of the media. There is considerable hope, however, that these old-style liberals whose appeal is often to the popular audience, will be seen in a more balanced perspective as 'The New Theologians' (to use a term from a recent issue of *Christianity Today*⁵) and church leaders who have a more positive approach to the faith take a higher profile. Although for some of them it is true that 'the word "evangelical" makes academics nervous', it is also true that a new climate exists in many areas which has created 'open space' and that 'the intellectual world is no longer dominated by a liberal-conservative polarity'.

Evangelicals in the West are increasingly comfortable in moving into this 'space'. Their counterparts from developing countries are emerging with high quality theological education, and their character and faith tested and tried in the fires of experience to develop credible and impressive post-colonial indigenised expressions of the age-old gospel. There are also others from around the world whose Christian experience has been affected strongly by the impact of the Spirit in recent times through the rapid expansion and renewal of the church. Some are recent converts from previously unchurched backgrounds who therefore sit loosely to the traditional evangelical or general ecclesiastical culture. Notice must also be taken of the 'enormous

demographic transformation' in the Christian population from western to eastern and southern hemispheres and the overall result is seen as a massive change in the global face of Christianity, as it turns into a 'faith without borders'.⁶ Just one example of the changing balance can be seen in the way non-western bishops dramatically re-directed the decisions of the 1998 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church in a far more conservative direction on some social issues than had been expected.

Although it is dangerous to generalise too much, it is obvious from events like the WEF General Assembly (May 2001, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) that this globalised faith has certain characteristics. One of the most prominent is a holistic appreciation of the Christian faith, even what might be called 'a positive worldliness' that pays attention to political involvement and nation building, the expression of faith in culture, the arts and public life; this is a faith that is comfortable with areas such as ecology, economics, ethical behaviour and social transformation. As Jun Vencer, recently retired International Director of WEF, has said, 'There are some negatives to this [involvement in public life], of course, but by and large, it doesn't change the fact that they are picking up a biblical agenda to be truly evangelical and take, as we say, the whole gospel to the whole world.'⁷

If there is a positive dynamic regarding public life, there is also a

⁵ 9 Feb 1999 featuring Kevin Vanhoozer, N.T. Wright, Richard Hays, Ellen Charry and Miroslav Volf

⁶ *ChrT* 19 May 1997, p. 39

⁷ *ChrT* 19 May 1997, p. 45

corresponding confidence in mission. The rapid growth of the church in non-western areas is one clear example of this, but we can also notice the transformation of the traditional missionary culture with 'tent-making', short-term and third-world missions, re-structuring of older organizations and the creative use of all kinds of new technologies and opportunities. Church planting and innovative efforts of worship, witness and service in many older established Christian areas are also encouraging signs even if they have not yet restored the church to its former strength.

There is also a fresh approach to the church, emphasizing community, spirituality and compassionate ministry in the world. In some cases, this may be seen as a negative factor, arising out of a weak or almost non-existent ecclesiology, but overall, it is a serious response to mission in a post-Constantinian context, often backed up by careful thinking and solid scholarship.

Although the evangelical wing of the church globally can marshal high quality scholarship, experienced practitioners of ministry and extraordinary examples of sacrificial faith which give it great hope for the future, yet there are areas of genuine concern that need to be addressed.

4. Some Areas of Continuing Concern

a) Scripture

Fundamental for our faith is a sound and authentic approach to Scripture. Evangelical scholars can easily take

their place in the academic world in areas such as exegesis and backgrounds, even if their basic assumptions and perspectives about biblical authority and hermeneutics are not always accepted. Opinions such as the following are sometimes found in mainstream scholarship: 'The various papers are necessarily confined to a rather narrow theological spectrum and unlikely to appeal to those readers not sharing evangelical convictions'⁸ or 'It collects recent scholarly opinions and debates about Mark, supports those that cohere with a conservative perspective, but rejects more innovative readings'.⁹

This often patronising approach is not a reason for evangelicals to abandon their basic convictions about Scripture as the Word of God, but it is a reminder of the gap that continues to exist between evangelicals and the mainstream. This has been extended by the significant revolution in biblical interpretation that has taken place in recent times with the advent of the new literary and sociological criticism. Evangelical scholars are well aware of the challenge, and need skill in handling it.¹⁰

Furthermore, they need wisdom in

⁸ Review of *The Land of Promise* (IVP/Apollos, 2000) in *Expository Times* July 2001 112/10, p. 350

⁹ Review of Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2001) in *Expository Times* Aug 2000 112/11, p. 390

¹⁰ Gordon J. Thomas, 'Telling a Hawk from a Handsaw? An evangelical response to the new literary criticism', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 71/1 Jan 1999, pp. 37-50; Christopher J.H. Wright, 'Interpreting the Bible among the world religions', *Themelios*, 25/3 June 2000, pp. 35-54

showing how their insights make a definite and positive contribution to the actual exegesis and exposition of the text in practical pastoral settings. One ambitious attempt to do this is the new *Asia Bible Commentary* series, edited by Dr Bruce Nicholls and launched at the Triennial Assembly of the Asia Theological Association in Malaysia in August 2001.¹¹ According to Dr Nicholls, 'Our mandate is to produce commentaries of 125-300 pages that are exegetically faithful to the whole of Scripture, theologically and missiological contextualised in the plurality of cultures of Asia and are pastorally oriented to the needs of the churches.'¹² Thus this project takes full account of the 'Globalization of Hermeneutics' which along with the globalised approach to theology mentioned above is an essential part of our work today.¹³

The temptation is to use the insights of scholarship selectively, and thus to lose authenticity both as scholars and as Christians. This also separates academia and the church, thereby contradicting the basic integrity of heart and mind, and denying both church and academia

the benefits of mutual enrichment.¹⁴ This problem may be the result of lack of courage on the part of our leaders who are not prepared to take the sometimes controversial position that is needed in reforming the church. However it may be a more fundamental problem—as David Wells has pointed out, there is in fact 'no place for truth' in a postmodern church or world.¹⁵

Whatever may be the final analysis, the importance of theological education and pastoral training for moulding the life of the church and its leadership in the current context cannot be underemphasized. While 'the issue of doctrinal integrity is paramount for a theological seminary'¹⁶ it is obvious that a much more comprehensive approach is needed for pastoral training and indeed for the life of the church generally, which leads us to the consideration of spirituality.

b) Spirituality

A second area of concern is spirituality, including worship, nurture and discipleship. It is striking how much interest evangelicals are now taking

¹¹ The first two volumes in the series are *The Gospel according to St John* by Dr Jey Kaanagaraj and Rev. Ian Kemp, and *Song of Songs* by Dr Andrew Hwang and Rev. Samuel Goh. Details can be obtained from the General Secretary, Derek Tan (DerekTan@trinity.org.sg)

¹² Report on the Asia Bible Commentary project to the Triennial Assembly, Asia Theological Association, August 2001.

¹³ See Craig Blomberg's article of this title in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (JETS), 38/4 Dec 1995, pp. 581-593

¹⁴ Moises Silva, 'Can two walk together unless they be agreed?' JETS 41/1 Mar 98, pp. 3-16, especially p. 11f Silva warns against the danger of 'scholars who in one way or another identify themselves as conservative know that they have abandoned distinctive evangelical principles and are simply not very honest about it.' Even more 'alarming', he says, are those who are 'blissfully unaware of having adopted approaches or positions that conflict with their religious convictions at a fundamental level'.

¹⁵ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or whatever happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993)

¹⁶ Quoting a slogan used in a recent advertisement in *Christianity Today* 2 Apr 2001

in traditional types of spirituality and the number of evangelicals taking the journey to Iona, Canterbury, Istanbul or Rome, apparently in search of a more satisfying expression of devotion than they have found in their own classic evangelical forms.¹⁷ The tensions that have existed between evangelicalism and Charismatics and Pentecostalism is as much a matter of spirituality as it is of exegesis and theology. Thus Stanley J. Grenz can say, 'Fundamentally, I believe, the evangelical understanding of what it means to be a Christian focuses on a distinct spirituality.'¹⁸ The revolution in worship in many western churches is another example of the same quest for spiritual reality.

While there could be considerable discussion about the secondary matters of styles of music, forms of liturgy and prayer and aesthetics, temperament and cultural context, perhaps Dr Iain Provan¹⁹ of Regent College Vancouver points us in the right direction in his Bible Study on Genesis chap 1 and 2 at the WEF General Assembly in May 2001 when he asked the question, 'What are we redeemed for?' He said:

¹⁷ See, for example, Robert W. Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, (Waco: Word, 1985), and Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Bridgepoint: 1999)

¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz., *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: a Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993; cf David Parker, 'Evangelical spirituality reviewed', *Evangelical Review of Theology* (ERT) 16/2, April 1992, pp. 152-166)

¹⁹ 'Creation and Holistic Ministry: A Study of Genesis 1:1 to 2:3' by Iain Provan, *ERT* 25/4 Oct 2001, pp. 292-303

We all know, or we think that we do, what it is that we are redeemed from; but what are we redeemed *for*?.... It is, in my experience, a question that many modern Christians find it difficult to answer. Indeed, they have not really *asked* it; for the Christian discipling that they have received has emphasised only redemption *from* something, and that is how they have come to conceive of the Christian life overall. They have a fairly good idea, therefore, about what they are *against*; but they are vague to the point of incapacitation when asked what it is that they are *for*.... All of this, I suggest, is related to (although not exhaustively explained by) a fundamental theological problem; that such Christians ... possess no sufficiently robust idea of creation, with which to undergird and explain their idea of redemption.... Holistic Christians they therefore cannot be. Holistic ministry they therefore cannot practice, for they have not even conceived, yet, of its *possibility*...

In answering this question, Dr Provan pointed to the divine image, conferred on humankind and lost, but restored in Christ, as the key to our identity and vocation.

What are we redeemed to be? Bearers of the divine image in every aspect of our lives. What are we redeemed to *do*? To live out that reality with integrity and joy, doing whatever our hand finds to do in particular instances, at particular times, and in particular places.

If we follow through on this line of approach, we will find a focus and empowerment that will enable us to move on towards a positive goal and also be able to cope with the diversity that is a normal part of the kingdom.

c) Church unity

For years the slogan of the World Evangelical Fellowship was 'Spiritual Unity in Action'. Although it almost sounds like a contradiction in terms,

it is an effective way to sum up the attitude of many evangelicals to the issue of Christian unity—there is a profound unity ultimately created by the Spirit (Eph. 4:3; 2 Cor. 13:14) in which we are to exist as Christians and which we are to express in our relationships, ministries and activities. While this is a sound approach, it is possible to use it as an excuse not to face the more difficult questions of visible unity, and worse, to use it as a shield to hide selfish and unchristian efforts of empire building or independence. In such cases, there is a shocking lack of theological and spiritual integrity.

Part of the motivation for maintaining the traditional stand on spiritual unity is biblical, but it is also part of the non-denominational heritage of much evangelicalism. Although this is an inescapable aspect of our historical background (which needs to be considered again later), it does mean that there is likely to be either a lack of ecclesiological thinking, or more, a strong resistance to it. Some strands of evangelicalism are explicitly non-denominational or para-church, and so are not expected to be concerned with ecclesiology as such—their role is to work alongside of ecclesial structures. Others, however, set aside or demote their church-related thinking for the purposes of greater unity, or often simply because of weak or undeveloped theological convictions. Yet another factor is the emergence of new concepts of post-denominational church life in a postmodern context.²⁰

Whatever the background, ecclesiology and hence the nature and unity of the church is an unresolved issue for evangelicalism. This is likely to be made more difficult by uncritical and even absolutist emphases on the controlling role of the church and the faith community by those influenced by postmodern hermeneutics. This will raise new concerns by evangelicals on both the Protestant ideal of *ecclesia semper reformanda* and the spiritual renewal and biblical basis of the church. For this reason, the WEF Theological Commission gave attention to this matter at its recent Consultation in Kuala Lumpur, papers of which will be published in *Evangelical Review of Theology* in January 2002. There is also a task force being set up to review the WEF Statement of Faith, which, in common with many similar statements, has no clear or definitive article about the visible church. The WEF statement reads: 'We believe in ... 6. The Unity of the Spirit of all true believers, the Church, the Body of Christ.'²¹

When Evangelicals apply their minds to the doctrine of the church and its unity to develop an understanding that speaks specifically to this present age, they can be confident of making a particular contribution where previous institutional, confessional and sacramental approaches have proven to be unsatisfactory.

First of all, they can draw upon the

²⁰ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, chapters 8-10

²¹ For a good piece of foundational theology in this area, see Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998)

vast variety of expression that is found in their movement to bring a rich treasury of experience and insight into the arena of discussion. Evangelicals, for example, have learned to work together in their missionary, evangelistic and service ministries with an extremely broad range of people, and they have quickly adapted and innovated their strategies and methods to make their work more effective, especially in the area of the use of technology. The rapid renewal of the missionary movement with the advent of new forms of pioneer and short term agencies at the present time is only one more example of a long line of progressive innovations in the past that include such developments as the faith missions movement, the science of linguistics and the use of radio, film and sound recordings. If evangelicals can draw effectively upon this legacy, then they will not be held up by the traditional and parochial attitudes that often exist in mainstream church life. Thus the sheer reality of interdenominational partnership (*koinonia*) that is an everyday fact of evangelical life on local and global levels will be a strong incentive for progress towards viable understandings of unity.

Then at the doctrinal level, we can refer to the concept of spiritual unity, and point to the church in its oneness as the creation of the risen Lord who showers upon it the blessing of his Spirit (Eph. 4:8). As Miroslav Volf put it at the recent WEF General Assembly: 'Here, then, you have a definition of the church that is capable of providing impetus for new and fruitful developments: *the church is*

the continuation of Christ's anointing by the Spirit.'²²

Intrinsic to this 'Spirit of Jesus' approach to the nature of the church is another which the evangelical movement can bring with confidence—the missiological element (understood in the broadest possible way, including the concept of the kingdom of God.) As Volf concluded his paper: 'The only thing that truly matters is that the Church be reflection of Christ's own light in that it continues his mission anointed by the Spirit.'²³

Thus we can envisage an understanding and praxis of the church centred on the Spirit endowed people of God in mission, building strong but flexible communities for worship, service and witness which are in integral fellowship with others even though the institutional and bureaucratic links may be minimal. But in the meantime, practical efforts at unity and cooperation are difficult enough to realize within the confines of the evangelical and Protestant world, but they become even more problematic in other contexts. The WEF Theological Commission has been engaged in conversations with the Roman Catholic Church now since 1993 when the late Dr Paul Schrottenboer began the process. Dr George Vandervelde is the current convenor of this Task Force which will conclude its current round of talks early in 2002 when a joint statement summarising the four

²² Miroslav Volf, 'The Nature of the Church', *ERT*, Jan 2002, 26/1 pp. 68-75) p. 69

²³ Volf, 'The nature of the Church', p. 75

sessions is expected to be finalised. It is anticipated that the WEF Theological Commission will also be involved in joint talks with other confessional groups in due course.

This can be a painstaking process and one that is considered too controversial for some. So the approach adopted by those individuals involved in the March 1994 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' statement in North America is worthy of attention. In that particular context (which is not necessarily comparable to any other area), the desirability of what James Packer described as 'non-proselytising joint action for the conversion and nurture of outsiders'²⁴ has led a number of prominent individuals on both sides of the Evangelical/Roman Catholic divide to draw up a statement of commonly held positions, without prejudice to the clearly acknowledged theological issues that remain between them.²⁵

This informal approach has not been clearly understood or accepted by all observers, of course, but it does hold some promise of providing a workable procedure for progress, especially as several doctrinal points of concern were clarified in a later document, *The Gift of Salvation* (1997). One important factor that made such a development possible was the change in the theological landscape, which Timothy George explained when releasing it.

The Gift of Salvation has been made possible by a major realignment in ecumenical discourse: the coalescence of believing Roman Catholics and faithful evangelicals who both affirm the substance of historic Christian orthodoxy against the ideology of theological pluralism that marks much mainline Protestant thought as well as avant-garde Catholic theology. Thus, for all our differences Bible-believing evangelicals stand much closer to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger than to Bishop John Spong!²⁶

d) Relations with other Faiths

Developments such as globalisation and the September 11 terrorist attacks are causing Evangelicals along with other Christians to reconsider their relationships towards the other world faiths and their attitudes to their adherents. This has been the case over many years for those in the non-western world where Christianity is in the minority. Then, as we have noted above, it is a new but pressing issue for many in the old world where there are increasingly large populations who adhere to these religions. However, in this case, the situation is reversed, and Christianity, at least in a nominal form, is the majority religion.

There are at least three critical areas for evangelicals in these kinds of inter-faith and ecumenical relationships—the integrity and resilience of our own personal faith and confidence in the gospel; the practical application of commonly held ethical positions and moral values in public life; and questions of theology and belief. By drawing

²⁴ see *ChrT*, 12 Dec 1994, J.I. Packer, 'Why I signed it', pp 34f; he used Francis Schaeffer's term, grassroots 'co-belligerence'.

²⁵ Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: toward a common mission* (Dallas: Word 1995)

²⁶ *ChrT*, 8 Dec 1997, pp. 34

upon their spiritual resources, the doctrine of common grace and biblical authority, evangelical Christians should have little difficulty in principle in maintaining a positive and faithful witness in all these areas.

Another approach to the matter of cooperation between apparently competing or rival interests is illustrated by the findings of a conference held in Malaysia 1984 on 'Word, Kingdom and Spirit' as the final part of a programme dealing with chronic misunderstandings between evangelicals, social activists, and the Charismatic/Pentecostals. The conference Manifesto stated:²⁷

When we understand the Gospel as the Good News of the Kingdom, we are better able to overcome the tragic onesidedness that has torn apart proclamation, social transformation and renewal in the Spirit. Jesus specifically commanded us to share the Gospel in the way he did in the Power of the Spirit (John 20:21-22). We believe that Jesus both joyfully welcomed all people into the Kingdom and modelled costly incarnation and identification with the poor, weak and oppressed. Since he cared about the whole person, so must we.

The church is called to be the visible expression of the Kingdom, a new community of reborn men and women, transcending differences of race, class and gender, serving the world, suffering courageously for righteousness' sake, witnessing through its communal life to Jesus Christ its King and growing in likeness in him.

This line of approach focuses, therefore, on carrying out the mission Jesus has given us in his role as the embodiment and herald of the kingdom of God as the criterion our

fellowship, rather than on doctrinal agreement, a shared religious experience or organizational links. As the Preamble to the Kingdom Affirmations issued by the conference stated: 'We believe that focussing on the Gospel Jesus himself announced can unite and empower the church for costly obedience and wholistic mission.'

e) Social change

With the massive cultural changes facing the world, different in each area for sure, there is need for a body such as the church with its remarkably long heritage, deeply held traditions, elaborate institutions and complex patterns of authority to be particularly alert to the questions of relevance and strategy. Even evangelicalism, which has a far shorter heritage than the church at large, has a problem with entrenched traditions. Thus we need to bear in mind that this was a matter which our Lord seemed to target specifically in his engagement with the religious leaders of his day.

In many cases, the problems are ones of priorities, methodology, communication and even perception; as such they can be dealt with through education, patience and love—and sometimes applying the principle of 'the strong and the weak' (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8). In other cases it is a matter of strategy and policy, where prayerful discussion and common sense must be used to seek unanimity of purpose. Thus, for Africans, whether to direct resources to the equally desperate needs of leadership training to meet the dramatic numerical explosion of the church or compassionate assistance

²⁷ *Transformation* Vol 11/3 July-Sept 1994, pp 2-3

in response to the devastating AIDS epidemic is not a matter of basic principle but of practical guidance and fellowship.

However, there are other matters which require more profound thought and adjustment to attitudes and values. In the West, the advent of postmodernism, considered by many to be as far-reaching as any of the great conceptual revolutions of the past, calls for radical re-thinking and re-strategizing by evangelicals no less than by any other section of the church. For other regions, the advent of liberal democracies and their associated social-economic systems, or the downfall of traditional cultures may be the issue. Certainly for the world in general, the church as a global body is in the forefront. These changes throw up various particular issues, such as worship, gender, and the leadership structure and governance of the church, which must also be addressed one by one, but always with the larger context in mind. In some cases, we may need to revise our received interpretations of Scripture to correct mistaken positions, or to fill out gaps in our worldview (such as a Westerner dealing with the spirit world of an African society); in other situations, new issues, such as bio-ethics, may call for fresh applications of basic principles.

As our survey of trends in recent times mentioned above shows, evangelicals have made considerable progress in dealing with many of the new ethical issues.²⁸ In this they are

driven by a genuine desire to meet deep human needs in the name of Christ, but there is also considerable activity at the theoretical level.

However, more reflection is needed in these areas, especially at the local level, because a naturally conservative membership requires careful teaching about the biblical and practical aspects of controversial issues if uncertainty and even division over questions such as gender and ministry, life and family issues (abortion, contraception, euthanasia), sexuality, or race are to be avoided.

But whether it be matters of methodology, strategy, ethics or worldview, evangelicals will find that a missiological and spiritual approach to the church and a dynamic view of scripture will provide important guidelines and norms for progress. These factors will also be relevant in tackling areas of doctrinal controversy currently exercising the minds of evangelicals, although more theoretical factors will be needed to resolve them. Among the more interesting of the doctrinal matters on the evangelical agenda at present are open theism, annihilationism, the nature, mission and ministry of the church, the impact of postmodern thought and culture, salvation and the Lordship of Christ, and especially the role and ministry of women in the church. There are also many interesting developments in the Pentecostal and Charismatic area as these movements move towards greater theo-

²⁸ See, for example, John R.W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, (London: Collins Marshall Pickering, 1990)

logical maturation.²⁹ The events surrounding the terrorist attacks in the US on Sept 11, 2001 have thrown up a whole new context for theological work which affects evangelicals, as well as others, with a focus on such key issues as reconciliation and forgiveness, the nature of God, justice and evil, relations with other faiths and the mission of the church.

5. Trends in understanding Evangelicalism

From this brief and rather selective survey, it is clear that the new context of a globalised, post-denominational, post-colonial Christianity causes us to review many of the older issues and turn our attention to new ones, or at least to develop a new perspective on existing issues. Many of the concerns are intrinsic to evangelicalism and the wider church, but others are the products of a complex, but overbearing global sociopolitical climate where human rights, crimes against humanity, abuse of economic power and ecological irresponsibility are rife. Others arise from profound changes in the worldview and religious outlook. We need a revived and re-envisioned evangelicalism for these circumstances that is capable of pursuing the goal of faithful discipleship on the broadest possible spectrum as it has done so successfully in the past.

In the past, evangelicalism has been characterized variously as a confessional position by its adherence to certain doctrinal positions, or as an ecclesiastical party (especially in the Anglican world), or especially of late in North America, as a cultural option. Historically, it has carried out the role of a reform (or protest) movement, witnessing against doctrinal and spiritual decline both negatively by standing for the fundamentals, and positively by its active commitment to evangelism, missions and spirituality. With the passing of time, this cause has achieved considerable success, making it now appropriate to speak of evangelicalism in sociological terms as a kind of loosely knit denomination.³⁰ It is difficult to hold all these elements together in any meaningful way, but David Wells has proposed with some success the triad of confessional, transconfessional and charismatic to interpret recent British and American evangelicalism.³¹ In this paper, I have tried to avoid focusing on any particular strand, but have concentrated on what is held in common and what characterizes the movement at its heart.

What is obvious, however, is that the older definitions are not necessarily any longer appropriate or advantageous, at least in their traditional forms. Furthermore, the rapid

²⁹ See, for example, William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power: foundations of Pentecostal experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Sam Hey, 'Changing roles of Pentecostal Hermeneutics', *ERT*, 25/3 July 2001, pp. 210-218; and *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*

³⁰ See a brief discussion of this idea of George Marsden in Robert K. Johnstone, 'Orthodoxy and Heresy: a problem for modern evangelicalism' (*Evangelical Quarterly* LXIX/1 Jan 1997, pp. 7-38).

³¹ 'On Being Evangelical' in *Evangelicalism*, edited by Noll, Bebbington and Rawlyk, (Oxford, OUP, 1994), pp. 390-393

growth of the movement has inevitably produced wider variety and increased fragmentation. Hence there have been attempts to produce new definitions of the movement, such as David Bebbington's famous 'quadrilateral of priorities'—biblicism, conversionism, activism, crucicentrism.³² Richard Turnbull argues that Bebbington's list is too general and seeks to improve upon it by offering 'four centres of evangelical spiritual identity: authority, doctrine, spirituality and practical commitment'.³³ Roger Olson, however, reverts to a stricter position, believing that evangelicalism is 'primarily a theological movement' and therefore lists the following four as 'minimum characteristics'—biblical authority, a supernatural worldview centred in a personal transcendent God, the grace of God in conversion as the 'center of authentic Christian experience' and the role of theology to serve the mission of the church in bringing this grace to the world in witness and service.³⁴ However, it is evident that even this 'theological' approach spills over into areas of experience, spirituality and action, indicating that evangelicalism is best defined in terms of 'a specific vision of what it means to be a Christian'.³⁵

Assessments of the current state of evangelicalism have therefore been set against both the old and the new definitions, but often in these discussions, the protest or reforming nature of the movement has been insufficiently noticed. Robert Letham,³⁶ for example, points to this feature by noting that 'Evangelicals tend to consider as axiomatic that theirs is the quintessential expression of the Christian faith'. He then goes on to argue that in comparison with some classic expressions of Christianity, evangelicalism falls short by being insufficiently God-centred or Trinitarian and for holding a low view of the church. After drawing attention to current forms of evangelicalism that emphasize regeneration and personal spiritual experience, world missions and personal evangelism and the defence of the authority, infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible, he concludes, 'Evangelicalism at its best has marched off at a tangent from the trajectory of the historic church. It has followed interests it has perceived as important in the confidence that it, more than others, has a true understanding of the Christian faith.' As a result, he finds, 'evangelicalism is a variant form of Christianity, and one that ... could now be in danger of losing its grasp of the faith it seemingly holds dear'.³⁷

Despite this negative assessment, the evangelical movement in its various has emphasized from the days of

³² *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 2-17. See John Stott's comments on this in his *Evangelical Truth: a personal plea for unity* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1999), pp. 24-28.

³³ Richard Turnbull 'Evangelicalism: the State of Scholarship and the Question of Identity' *Anvil* 16/2, 1999, p. 95.

³⁴ Roger E. Olson, 'The future of evangelical theology', *ChrT* 9 Feb 1998, pp. 40-48.

³⁵ Stanley J. Grenz., *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: a Fresh Agenda For The 21st Century* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), p. 30f.

³⁶ Robert Letham in Robert Letham and Donald Macleod, 'Is Evangelicalism Christian?' *Evangelical Quarterly* LXVII/1 Jan 1995 pp. 3-33, p. 3.

³⁷ Robert Letham, 'Is Evangelicalism Christian?' p. 16.

the Protestant Reformation the importance of such key features of Christian truth as justification, holiness, evangelism, cross cultural mission, the transforming empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the authority of Scripture.³⁸

It is obvious, however, that there are difficulties with a protest movement and its negative message when it achieves a measure of success and becomes dominant (as in USA and some other parts of the world), or if the causes of concern against which it is directed are rectified or removed (as is the case with some forms of liberal or Catholic doctrine). If protest or opposition to the mainstream is what defines a group rather than a positive message, then the (fighting) fundamentalist spirit, (that is, fighting for one's position as the sole object of one's existence), easily emerges. When there is nothing important left to fight against, its proponents can only perpetuate obsolete controversies, or worse still, turn upon each other and their friends.

It is better therefore to see evangelicalism as a reform movement taking its place within the broader church, enjoying its fellowship and supporting its mission. This approach is seen in some recently revised statements of faith which retain the standard evangelical clauses on Scripture and Christology but relate them primarily to the central doctrines as reflected in the ecumenical creeds. For example the

Australian Evangelical Alliance refers to 'the faith therein set forth and summarised in such historic statements of the Christian Church as the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and in particular, the assertion of doctrines summarily stated as follows' (which includes seven familiar statements of evangelical emphasis). The Scripture Union and the Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Church (EFAC) adopt a similar approach.

6. The way forward

It is understandable that in this process some people may fear their position has been compromised and that evangelicalism will lose its identity. So we are brought back to a problem we mentioned at the outset—the need to identify a new more basic and valid centre of unity deriving from the fundamental identity of the movement which people could adopt enthusiastically and without any fear of compromise.

Certainly, adjustments will need to be made to evangelicalism as time progresses such as corrections to statements of faith, re-formulation to maintain relevance in newly emerging situations, not to mention more radical changes to reflect new insights and its own continual need to be reformed. This is true for any movement, but particularly for a reform movement. Some particular ways of making the transition from one period to another have been already identified earlier in this paper, but two more general ones may be mentioned in conclusion as suggestions for the way forward.

One has already been alluded to—

³⁸ Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, draws a helpful distinction between 'evangelical essentials' and 'evangelical distinctives' (p. 9)

the historical relativity that is intrinsic to any human movement. It is only necessary to think of well known contemporary cases of historical ghettos, where customs and rules of a bygone era are still literalistically applied, to see the point. An application of this principal to the area of belief is to consider the concept of the 'progress of dogma' (to refer to James Orr's book of this title) and see that theology has focused on different issues as it has expanded and matured. We need also to think of theology as a derivative exercise, not a primary one. One way in which this can be seen is in Robert Webber's discussion of the difference between 'creeds, confessions and personal opinion'. He further points out that in accordance with the reality of the Incarnation, 'the task of the church is to articulate truth within the context of history and culture'. Thus we can see that creeds and theologies have been developed 'as means to communicate truth, not as ends in themselves'.³⁹ Hence there is scope for re-presentation of theological statements in varying contexts without any threat of assault upon fundamental truth.⁴⁰

A second mechanism is the now familiar distinction between 'bound-

ed sets' and 'centred sets'.⁴¹ In the former case, evangelicalism would be defined by 'a list of essential characteristics which allow clear boundaries to be defined and maintained.' Examples of such a list would be the five 'fundamentals' or other doctrinal statements, or a set of behavioural norms, giving a static condition in which orthodoxy is defined with extreme clarity and variance is as obvious as it is difficult.⁴²

'Centred set' thinking however, focuses on what holds people together at the heart of their movement with less emphasis on the boundaries, which are defined *only* in terms of the centre. 'Here the relationships are dynamic, not static. One can be moving towards or away from the centre. There is still clear division as to who belongs ...' Johnstone interprets recent American evangelicalism as a transition from bounded to centred set thinking, and accordingly offers his definition of the movement in terms of *solus Christus* and *sola Scriptura*.

A clear application of this kind of thinking is to focus on the question of discipleship, finding our unity, not doctrinally, organizationally or culturally, but in the Lordship of Christ and our 'obedience of faith' (Rom.

³⁹ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, pp. 195-199

⁴⁰ See also Brad J. Kallenberg, 'Conversion Converted: a Postmodern Formulation of the Doctrine of Conversion.' (*Evangelical Quarterly* 67/4 Oct 1995, pp. 345.f) for a discussion of George Lindbeck's distinction between first and second order propositions.

⁴¹ A clear explanation of this in the current context may be found in Robert K. Johnstone, 'Orthodoxy and Heresy: a problem for modern evangelicalism' (*Evangelical Quarterly* LXIX/1 Jan 1997, pp. 7-38); see also Roger E. Olson, 'The Future of Evangelical Theology', *ChrT* 9 Feb 1998 p. 41ff.

⁴² Cf the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in North America with its advertised theme, 'Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries' (http://www.etsjets.org/meetings/annual_2001.html)

1:5). This does not rule out intellectual or other interests, for we are to worship God with our minds, but it does put them into the proper perspective. To put it another way, we are fundamentally *evangelicals*, or *gospel* people.⁴³ This may not seem

so convincing or definite for those who want absolute answers and neat definitions, but what could be more Christian, and what could be more appropriate if indeed the Spirit is with us to empower and guide?⁴⁴

⁴³ Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, pp. 29ff. 135-146.

⁴⁴ I would like to thank Dr George Vandervelde of Toronto, Canada, for his advice in editing this paper for publication here.

Where Wrath and Mercy Meet

Editor: David Peterson

The cross of Jesus is central to evangelical Christianity. Yet the theology of atonement is under attack, not only from those outside the evangelical fold, but also from those within who challenge the doctrine of penal substitution.

In this collection of papers, delivered at the Oak Hill College Annual School of Theology 2000, four members of the faculty defend a strong articulation of penal substitution in the face of contemporary challenges. **David Peterson** surveys the atonement in both Old and New Testaments; **Garry Williams** examines the nature of punishment at the heart of a penal doctrine; **Michael Ovey** expounds how sin is the 'de-creation' of God's world; and **Paul Weston** reflects on John's Gospel and the lessons it provides on proclaiming the cross today. The collection is then completed with an appendix on justification by faith by a former vice-principal of Oak Hill, **Alan Stibbs**.

'Thank God that someone is prepared to cut through all the therapeutic nonsense written about this issue and present a solid, biblical case for an atonement which places penal and substitutionary categories at its very heart. David Peterson and the staff at Oak Hill have placed all those who love the truth in their debt'.

Carl Trueman, Senior Lecturer in Church History, University of Aberdeen.

David Peterson is the Principal of Oak Hill College and has written amongst other volumes 'Possessed by God'.

This is the third in the Oak Hill College Annual School of Theology series. Other volumes are *Proclaiming the Resurrection*, edited by Peter Head, and *Witness to the World*, edited by David Peterson.

1-84227-079-6 / 229 x145mm / p/b / 180pp / £14.99



Paternoster Press, PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK