

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 27 • Number 4 • October 2003

*Articles and book reviews reflecting global
evangelical theology for the purpose of
discerning the obedience of faith*

Published by



PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
**WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE**
Theological Commission

A Patristic Perspective on European Christianity in World Perspective

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Keywords: Colonialization, contextualization, Patristics, Europe, Asia, Africa, Mediterranean, ecumenical consensus, *consensus fidelium*, missionaries, exegesis, multiculturalism

Introduction

The conference theme is *Europe and its Relevance for Christian Theology and Church*. The subject is Europe, the major modifiers are theology, evangelical, patristic, and world. Our issue is: How is the histo-

ry and destiny of Europe pertinent, both as an ancient and modern reality, to worldwide evangelical theology and church life today?

This one theme is being addressed in three ways, by reference to the past, present, and future, so as to embrace a discussion of Europe's theological heritage, its contemporary problems, and its future possibilities. There are four presenters on historical dimensions of European Christianity in world perspective, relating to its patristic roots, Reformation developments, through pietism and the world mission movement, and into the twentieth century.

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My Assignment

My assignment is to discuss the theological heritage of the church fathers, viewed, however, in relation to the general theme of 'European Christianity in World Perspective'. That is, in what ways do the patristic

exegetes, the ecumenical conciliar decisions and ancient creeds impact upon evangelical theology and church life today?¹ How does the patristic tradition weigh in on questions of the fundamental relation of European evangelical theology to world Christianity?

The Holy Spirit worked in the early centuries of scriptural exegesis to form the canon and to provide a reliable and reasonably cohesive commentary on the written word, canonically defined. The Holy Spirit has effectively preserved the apostolic witness and guided its interpretation ecumenically in a way that became firmly consensual in the first five centuries of Christianity. The consensus of the first five centuries stands in stark contrast with the fragmenting dissensus of the last five centuries. That early integration still remains relevant to the future of European and world Christianity.

My own view, as stated in my *Systematic Theology*, volume 3², is that there indeed exists such a common ancient ecumenical consensus, that it can be defined textually, and that it is an enduring work of the Holy Spirit that it still remains serviceable to evangelical exegesis today. It is always subject to contemporary reevaluation and reinterpretation under the guidance of Word and Spirit, but not so as to deny the cen-

tral confession of apostolic truth articulated by ancient ecumenical orthodoxy. The earliest consensual exegetes remain formative for, and a stimulus for, worldwide evangelical witness and experience today.³

I. Unburdening the Burden of Europeanization in World Mission

The burden of Europeanization, Westernization, and colonialization of modern Christian witness remains heavy upon the younger churches of Africa and Asia. That burden is diminished, however, by the simple reminder that *the formative period of biblical exegesis is pre-European*. The earliest layers of Christian exegesis were much closer to Asian and African origins than European. Ancient Christian missions were not tarnished or encumbered by the western colonialism that would specifically accompany modern world missions, because they were pre-western.⁴

God the Spirit powerfully used modern European languages (English, French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese) and thought forms and indeed political assumptions and cultural premises by which to convey to 19th century Asia and Africa the heart of God's action in Jesus Christ.

¹ I view this assignment as an exercise in systematic theology, especially its methodological prolegomena, as grounded in exegetical and historical theology, but also as pertaining to contemporary missiology.

² *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992)

³ The most widely respected and authoritative early Christian interpreters of scripture who gained general ecumenical consent in the era of the relatively undivided church of the first millennium are available for our spiritual formation. This has profound importance for evangelical theology and witness today world wide.

⁴ I am not here assuming that colonialism was altogether demonic or dehumanizing, or that it was not used by the Spirit for evangelization.

These are the languages through which the gospel was channelled and transmitted into much of the two-thirds world. But these are not the languages spoken by the pre-European patristic writers, nor did they make assumptions that correspond with modern western economic, political, psychological or sociological ideologies. The gospel itself and its early orthodox interpreters were antecedent to and thus independent of modern colonialism and all forms of westernization.

What were the languages of the pre-European writers? Look south and east: Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Farsi, the languages of the Indus valley and of coastal India (and not Latin alone). None of these languages of the ancient Christian tradition bears any onus of the westernization that hangs heavy over world missions. The early Christian exegetes were not in the slightest effected or corrupted by modern European thought forms which did not exist at the time of Origen and Eusebius.

If European thought forms are regarded today by some as subversive or debilitating to Christian witness, they need not be the only thought forms through which the gospel is understood. This is a simple and decisive point. The European languages through which the mission of the church was conveyed in the 19th century did not exist in the first five centuries. They may have later skewed the gospel, but they had no effect upon the early ecumenical consensus. For most Christian centuries these modern languages had

no impact whatever upon the *consensus fidelium*. They did not affect the vitality or reach of the Jacobite or Thomas traditions along the silk road and around the gulf of Ormuz into India, nor did they have any effect upon the upper Nile valley or Ethiopia or Nubia when the consensus was formed.

The primary languages of early Christianity were African, Asian, Byzantine, and Levantine. The Latin exegetical tradition did not lead but followed the cultural, literary and intellectual achievements of Greek and Aramaic and Anatolian and Syriac civilizations, even in the high patristic period. Even the church of Rome read its scriptures and practiced its liturgy in Greek in the early Christian generations. Latin as an exegetical language was late coming to Christianity in real force, though it finally did with Hilary and following. Recall that the Latin Bible of Tertullian and Cyprian were translations of the Greek Septuagint. Only much later, long after the formation of patristic consensual exegesis, do we have anything that looks like European civilization, excepting inchoately along the northern Mediterranean coast of what we today call Europe.

Pre-European Christianity: The Older East and Younger West

During the 1990s when I travelled numerous times to India, China and the Near East, I presented a lecture to various audiences on pre-European Christian exegesis. I was in places like Cairo and Delhi and Beijing looking for translators for the *Ancient Christian Commentary* on

Scripture from Greek and Latin to these modern languages. I delivered lectures in Bangalore and Puna on 'Pre-European Christianity: The Older East and the Younger West'. I was amazed at the intensity and warmth of the responses to that argument. I wondered why it had not been pointed out earlier that ecumenical Christianity preceded Europe.

Westerners have allowed the assumption to prevail among Christians in India and China that Christianity is basically a western religion. Entirely wrong. India received Christianity from Asia (not Europe) long before it was even heard of in Canterbury or Paris or Amsterdam. Silk eggs were brought to Constantinople from China in 552 by two Persian missionaries. Christianity came east from Pontus and Armenia and Nisibis to the Phasis and Oxus and Harirud river valleys to Merv and Turkmenistan and down the silk road to China to the upper Yangtze valley, and through the Indus valley and sea routes to India. All this took place while literate Europe was still an embryo in the libraries of Finian and Alcuin and Cassiodorus in Clonfert, Bangor, Paris and Squillace. Bishops from Bactria and India and Persia attended early ecumenical councils. The classic ecumenical consensus was maturely formed well before the formation of Europe. There was not anything literarily to be called Europe or European in any meaningful cultural sense when Anthony was living in the desert or Athanasius was teaching in Alexandria or John Chrysostom was preaching in Anti-

och or Ephrem was writing hymns in Upper Mesopotamia.

It is worth noting how many of the eight doctors of the church were from Africa and Asia: Athanasius and Augustine were African by birth. Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom were all from the ancient near east—Anatolia, far from Europe. Even among the leading fathers of the west, Jerome, born at Strido in Croatia, spent much of his adult life in Palestine, and Gregory the Great served for an extended time in Constantinople. Since Europe in its Carolignian sense had not yet come into being, and would not palpably emerge until long after the passing of the fathers, none of the fathers can be said to be 'distinctively European' in any mature or decisive sense. One defining point is useful to clarify: When I use the term European, I am pointing more deliberately north of the Alps than marginally to the Mediterranean's northern rim. I am distinguishing between Mediterranean coastal cultures and northern European cultures. In this sense no church father was European.

Consider also the non-European locations of all seven Ecumenical Councils: Nicea in Asia Minor, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon — all beyond the pale of what we today call Europe. Modern Turkey is still trying to get into the European Union. Not one Ecumenical Council met on European soil. And who attended these councils? The predominant leadership was largely African (notably Alexandrian) or Antiochene (Syrian) or Cappado-

cian (central Anatolia). A few came from the margins of the Mediterranean's north shore, but none from any location more than a short distance inland. Far more came from Africa and Asia and as far east as Persia and India than from the Mediterranean coast. The cultures that would later blossom along the Danube, Rhone and Rhine rivers, though marginally represented in ancient orthodoxy, were only beginning to exercise modest influence upon the more powerful east and south.

So how can it be said that ecumenical Christianity in its formative period was predominantly western or European? The 'west' was its outcome, not its premise. This is no minor point. The history of salvation was largely a story that first occurred in the ancient near East and then moved largely from Antiochene Syria to Anatolia and beyond. It was not until Paul's mission took him from Ephesus to Troas and then to Philippi that the European south perimeter was even broached, when 'During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."' ⁵

When I travel and speak in Africa and Asia, I always remind evangelical friends there that their own lands were introduced to the gospel long before the European west became a learner of those in the east. I pray that Asians and Africans may gain deeper rootage in ancient ecumeni-

cal teaching to help correct western astigmatism.⁶

A sustained conversation with the multi-generational, multicultural *consensus fidelium* will help connect the dots. Westerners are called to listen all the more empathically for the lost accents of the east and south in early Christianity, attuned especially to the neglected and silenced voices not only of the Christian present but also the past. It makes no sense to miss out on the wisdom of the great African tradition of Christian exegetes from Origen and Cyprian through Didymus the Blind of Alexandria to Augustine of Hippo. So with the great early eastern traditions from Aphrahat to Ephrem and Nemesius to John of Damascus. The classic Christian tradition would have been impoverished without these profound African and eastern voices. We are called critically to assess our own American and European cultures on the ground of evangelical testimony that predates both.⁷

⁶ I learn constantly from my own African and Asian students about my western predispositions, made more toxic when I forget it. This is not a feigned display of humility, but the simple awareness that my western perspective must work hard to enter empathically into a pre-European language environment to understand the Word of God, and I pray for the grace of the Spirit to do just that. That calls for genuine, not false, humility.

⁷ Do we risk misnaming as 'classical' or 'ecumenical' what is actually a class-bound, race-bound, gender-bound hegemony? Marxist critics have for decades dismissed Christian theology as ideologically motivated to sustain the economic status quo. Here it must be remembered that the confessors and martyrs were not cultural winners coercing losers. Social location arguments apply most poignantly to those who have power to coerce, not to those who have no power.

⁵ Acts 16:9; Irenaeus, *Ag. Her.*, III.14, ANF I, pp. 437-9.

II. The Geography of Pentecost

The Spatial Map of Pentecostal Power

Empowered by the Spirit at Pentecost, the witnesses move into four quadrants or eight subquadrants of the spectrum of world spaces—they

go in eight directions, only one of which was toward Europe (WNW: Roman proto-Europe). The others were NNW: Byzantine Turkey; NNE: Armenia; ENE: Syriac, Northern Mesopotamia; Southern Mesopotamian; SSE: Arabic; SSW: Alexandrian, Egypt; WSW: North-west Africa.

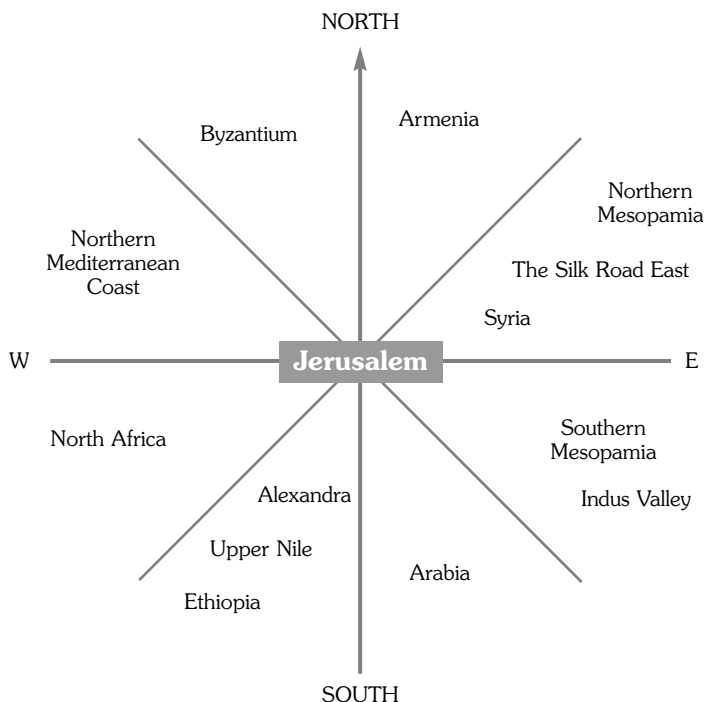


Diagram A

Of the native languages listed in Acts 2:7-11, only one is found in what was later to become continental Europe—and that was Rome. The point: Europe's major languages-to-be were as yet unformed.

When the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost, he came upon devout Jews from every nation present. Here were Jews at the temple, from all over, having come on a pilgrimage to behold the glory of the Lord.

Note the languages they spoke. They indicate where they came from and where the Spirit was taking them: From the northwest they came speaking not only Galilean, but also there were Asians, Phrygians (Jews from western Asia Minor), Pamphylans (southern Turkey), as well as Greeks from Crete and Latins from Rome. From the northeast quadrant there were Parthian (central Persia), some from the Medes

(northern Iran), from Mesopotamia (today northern Syria and southern Turkey). They were from Cappadocia and Pontus (Jews from northern and central Anatolia). From the southwest they came from as far away as Cyrene of Libia and from Egypt, and Libya. From the southeast quadrant some spoke Arabian and some were Elamites (near the Persian Gulf, today SW Iran).

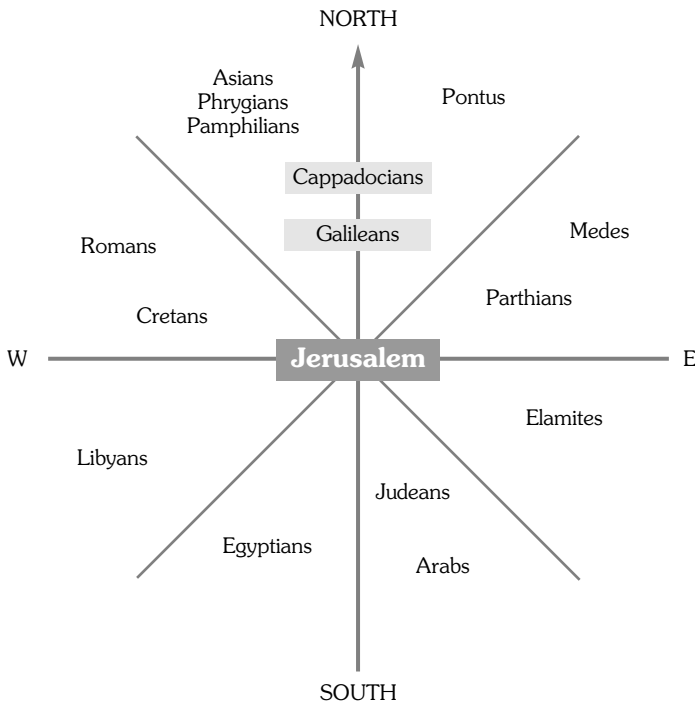


Diagram B: Languages of participants in the event at Pentecost listed in Acts 2:7-11

Even before the church is called into deliberate formation, we already have the rudiments of an embryonic international community: the Jews scattered abroad in the diaspora.⁸ After Pentecost the church moves by the power of the Spirit quickly in all directions with incredible courage and determination. This is a historical fact, not merely an artifact of the imagination of believers in salvation history. Anyone who has eyes to see can see the fecundity of the work of the Spirit among early Christian confessors. The testimony to God's saving purpose for all humanity thus abruptly entered into the Gentile world.⁹

According to Alexandrine tradition, Mark the evangelist took Peter's gospel to Africa and died in

Alexandria, having accompanied Peter and Paul from Antioch to Rome. North Africa would soon become the greatest international intellectual centre to be early addressed by the gospel. The greatest library in the ancient world was in Alexandria, the first place any world wide religious movement would want to go to gain roots and plausibility. Out of this North African ethos come the decisive patterns of exegesis reported first by John Mark and then interpreted by Clement and Origen. Shortly thereafter emerged the movement of monasticism, which started in the arena South-South West from Jerusalem in the Egyptian deserts and soon spread northeast to Palestine and Cappadocia, and later to the west. Only a few generations after Mark's gospel we will find influential witnesses such as Anthony, and Pachomius, Macarius, and the desert ascetics of Scetis, who would influence all subsequent Christian spirituality.

Wherever there were diaspora Jews, they were like a ready-made conveyance belt for the spread of Christianity. After Jerusalem Christians were found in the Jewish settlements of Samaria, Damascus, Urfa-Edessa, Nisibis, and rapidly from there all points east. From the ministries of Peter and Paul and Barnabas out of Antioch, the Christian message spread to all points north and west, but it would take some centuries for the gospel to reach the Rhine valley, where during most of the first half of the first millennium a pre-literate culture was constantly on the move. The gospel would reach

⁸ Until the coming of the Messiah, the people of Israel was racially defined as Jews, not Gentiles. They were Jews living in Gentile territories. This racial definition of the people of God would soon turn into a transracial definition of the worldwide people of faith drawn from among the Jews and Gentiles. They had news to declare to the nations. It would be preached first of all through the agency of diaspora Jews, and then through Gentiles who shared their faith in the promise of God to Abraham.

⁹ Everything begins from Jerusalem because the covenant people have been promised the land as children of Abraham by faith. The promise of God is first of all for a particular land, Canaan, Israel, Palestine. The central point within that land where the people of Israel are to meet the Lord God until the anointed One appears is Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the specific place where David reigned and Solomon built the temple, and where the second temple was again reconstructed after captivity by Herod in Roman times, only to be destroyed again in 70 AD. The cultus of Israel was centred in temple sacrifice which took place preeminently in one location, the mount of Zion in the city of David. After 70 AD Judaism went through a transformation, from Jerusalem temple worship to the diaspora, where worship was dispersed into the synagogues wherever the disperse people of Israel met.

east to the Tigris before it found its way to the Danube. Cappadocia was the major spiritual, liturgical, monastic, ecclesiastical and intellectual centre while Cologne, Mainz, Bonn, Aachen, Regensburg (Ratisbon), Vienna, and Budapest were still unformed.

To China and India

How did these Antiochene and Edessan centres of influence move east? We know they are in China by 735 AD and remained there through the 14th century. The Sigan-Fu (Sian-Fu) Stone was erected in north-west China in 781. In China there has been a Christian presence in eleven of the last fourteen centuries (only from the 14th to the 16th centuries is there no evidence of Christianity). Missionaries went along the trade routes of the silk road all the way to China. Where have you heard this argued? There were Chinese Christian communities even before Europe was a palpable literary culture. China heard the gospel even before the Swedes and Finns and Prussians and Pomeranians, and quite a long time before the Russians.

Then there is India. There is growing evidence that Christianity entered India much earlier than most westerners imagine. After a study of the textual and numismatic and archeological evidence,¹⁰ I think a

good argument can be made that the gospel reached India by the first century, and almost certainly before Nicaea. There was a representative at Nicaea from India. The first century trade routes along the sea made the Indus valley and the western shore of India relatively accessible. We now know much more about these trade routes than we did only a few decades ago. The overland trade routes also went through Afghanistan to the Indus valley and China. The sea routes went south from the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba to the Indus valley. Arguably India heard the gospel before or at least about the same time as Germany and France and Britain.

The Recovery of Classic African-Asian Exegesis

Today it is beginning to dawn upon African and Asian Christianity that *Christianity's earliest exegetical sources were not European, strictly speaking, but African and Asian* — from Origen to Ephrem, from Clement of Alexandria to Aphrahat, from Athanasius to Chrysostom. The eastern and southern sectors came long before the mature development of Europe in the period after Charlemagne and Alcuin. The European sub-quadrant was among the last of the eight to develop exegetically. It would come, but only to be built upon earlier African and Asian layers of biblical interpretation.

The African Exegetical Tradition: The classical period of theology and exegesis on the African shore of the Mediterranean preceded the classical period of theology and exegesis on the northern shore of the Mediter-

¹⁰ This is no longer just a fantastic speculation. It is gradually taking on palpability as an archaeological-numismatic and textual fact. India got its theology and exegesis largely from the Syria tradition. Syriac Christianity, having absorbed both Palestinian and Cappadocian traditions, moved down the Euphrates to Gulf and to India. This was not a major leap. The coastal sea lanes were readily accessible, as well as land routes.

ranear by at least a century. The pre-Augustinian Carthaginian exegetical tradition (of Tertullian and Cyprian and Minucius Felix and Arnobius of Sicca) would produce the earliest Latin Christian literature and the early Latin translations of the Septuagint.

The Eastern Exegetical Tradition: The same can be said of the exegetical centres of the Asian shores of the Mediterranean: With Ignatius of Antioch, with Origen and Eusebius in Caesarea, with Cyril in Jerusalem, — none in the Latin west would approach their greatness until Jerome. The exegetical centres were Alexandria, Caesarea Palestina, Antioch, and Edessa long before a comparable level of exegetical or formative intellectual development reached so far west as to Rome or Arles or Granada or Lerins.

There indeed were Goths and Franks and Huns and Celts and Slavs and Saxons and Northmen and Irish and British in the area that would later be called Europe, but where is their written literature prior to Beowulf? We have no manuscripts of Beowulf until the eighth century, and little written tradition of Norse culture until the second millennium. During the time the Antiochene and Syriac Fathers were writing highly nuanced exegesis and hymnody in the East, and while the Alexandrians were writing subtle and complicated treatises in Africa, central Europe was largely preliterate. The zenith of western Latin Christianity would not even begin until Jerome of Croatia, who would himself come east and south to Constantinople and Capadocia and Palestine for his mature

philological work. North of the Alps it remained still very rough country, prior to and after Ambrose and Augustine. Augustine of Canterbury would not be sent from Rome to England until 597. Columbanus would not transit into Gaul until after 585. Bobbio would not be a major factor in the transmission of the classic Christian tradition until the seventh century. Willibrord would not arrive in Frisia until 690. Boniface would not arrive in Geismar or Fulda until well into the eighth century. By these dates most ecumenical decisions were settled.

*What Happened Below the Line
From Carthage to Constantinople*

If you draw a straight line from Carthage to Constantinople, most early Christian exegetes were below, not above that line. Prior to Ambrose, there were only few north of that line that influenced those south, yet many from the south and east that decisively affected those north and west. The point: *African and Asian Christian exegesis preceded European Christian exegesis and was predominant in Nicene Christianity.*

Christianity after Pentecost moved in every direction to the ends of earth as then known, but only after a half millennium to Clairvaux and Cluny and Paris. Excepting the valleys of the Rhone, Danube, and Rhine, the heart of Europe would be won to the gospel only with the Carolingian Empire and following. During all these earliest classic Christian centuries when the ecumenical councils were meeting and most patterns of exegesis were well formed consensually, northern Europe was still in a

very early stage of largely preliterate cultural formation.

Of the first fourteen bishops of Rome fewer than half were Latin in origin: one was African, one Syrian, six were Greek, and then there was (arguably) Peter of Galilee. All roads did indeed lead to Rome, but from where did Rome and the Rhone valley get its exegetical and theological strength? From Palestine (Justin Martyr and probably Hippolytus), Asian Smyrna (Irenaeus), Syria (Anicetus), and Africa (Victor).

Clemens Romanus himself was a Jew living in Rome writing his letter to Corinth in Greek. It was only gradually that the monastic movement was brought into the north. John Cassian came to Lerins, and Benedict to Subiaco in Italy, but the patterns of Egyptian, Palestinian and Cappadocian monasticism were well established before they were transported to Ireland, Britain and Northern Europe. The direction of the spread of Christianity was largely from southeast to northwest.

Correlate the geography with the temporal sequence:

CENTURY	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Africa	Clement of Alexandria	Tertullian Origen Cyprian Dionysius Anthony	Pachomius Athanasius Macarius Didymus	Augustine Cyril of Alex. Quodvultdeus Palladius Ammonius
Asia (Syria, Asia Minor, Palestine, Mesopotamia)	Justin Martyr Ignatius Polycarp Theophilus	Hippolytus Gregory Thaumaturgus Methodius Aphrahat Eusebius	Cyril of Jerusalem Ephrem Basil Gregory of Nazianzus Gregory of Nyssa John Chrysostom Evagrius Theodore Nemesius	Severian Theodoret Philoxenus Cassian
Northern Coast Of Mediterranean	Clement of Rome Athenagoras	Minutius Felix Novatian Marius Victorinus	Ambrose Jerome Ambrosiaster Rufinus	Vincent Hilary of Arles Salvian
North of The Alps				

The obvious point is that few important exegetes are north of a line from Carthage to Constantinople, and there is a noticeable absence of any north of the Alps. Jerome spent his younger years in Strido and Rome, but then most of his adult life in the Byzantine east and especially in Bethlehem. The Vulgate Latin was translated in the east. Where does Jerome go for spiritual nurture? First to Cappadocia and Syria, and then to the heartland of spiritual formation in Christianity in Palestine, indeed south of Jerusalem on the edge of the Judean desert. It was not until the post-Augustinian fifth century (with Chromatius, Maximus, Paulinus, Leo, Caesarius, Benedict, Cassiodorus and Gregory I to Bede) that a strong, stable, consensual Latin tradition of exegesis flowered.

Peter's martyrdom in Rome did not make Peter a westerner or a European. He remained primarily an Aramaic speaker even in his ministry to the Greek speaking Jewish Christian community in Rome. When Paul went to Corinth and Rome, he did not divest himself of his cultural roots in Tarsus and Palestine.

The African tradition forms the earliest breathings and anticipations of proto-European exegesis. When Gregory the Great writes his book on Job, he is living in Constantinople and drinking deeply from the eastern exegetical tradition, with few Latin voices or books in his midst. When Ambrose writes his *Hexaemeron*, he has Basil's *Hexaemeron* close at hand. When Jerome flees from Rome to Byzantium and Bethlehem, he is plunging deeper into historic

Judaeo-Christian roots to learn Hebrew and practise eastern ascetic monasticism. Jerome learned his deepest spiritual formation not in Rome, but in northern Mesopotamia and Palestine. We think of Augustine as a western writer, but remember how decisive was the story of Anthony of the desert to him, and how important was Egyptian monasticism to his early writings. Augustine had first to disgorge eastern Manichean assumptions from southern Mesopotamia before he could become a Christian under the mentoring of Ambrose. The monastic experiments in Lerins and Subiaco were largely patterned after the monks of North Africa, particularly the Egyptian deserts, the valleys of Scetis. Christianity survived the persecutions and was reborn in the deserts of Scetis and Sinai and in the lauras of Judea and Cappadocia.

The great consensual writers of early Christianity were African (from Carthage to Alexandria) and Asian (from Cappadocia (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa) from Antioch (Ignatius, John Chrysostom), from Pontus (Gregory Thaumaturgus, Evagrius) and from Asia Minor (Polycarp, Irenaeus).

III. The New European Evangelical Agenda

The Call for a New Western Gratitude For Pre-European Apostolic Faith

Evangelicals in Europe today are asking themselves just what God has done in Europe that pertains to God's purpose for all humanity.

*How can the European consciousness learn better to serve Asia and Africa in a way as decisive as Asia and Africa once served in the founding of European Christianity? What of European history and identity needs to be defended and preserved for the benefit of all humanity? How can Europe's Christian experience be made more accessible to world Christianity in a serviceable way, without presuming to be normative for all else? How can contemporary European Christianity learn to resonate once again with the whole *consensus fidelium* of all times and places?*

Insofar as European Christians are blinded to the amazing work of God before Europeanization, they have failed to understand European Christianity itself in its genius, dependency and vulnerability. Cambodian Christians today have an equal right to appeal to the preEuropean sources of the witness to God's revelation as do Europeans. On this premise they may have a better chance to extract themselves from the demonic aspects of modern western colonialisms and the dying forms of western hegemony. The sun is descending upon westernization, partly due to its own idolatries and myopias.

In the attempt to reappropriate and reclaim the patient work of God that has emerged by grace during the last five centuries of western history, we of the west must be humble about where that faith came from. We are called to be realistic about how these cultural encasements of the gospel that have seemed to us so durable

may now have already run their course. We are living in the period of a decisive crisis for modern consciousness—perhaps even a terminal crisis. Modernity is not likely to regain the spiritual strength and regenerative power and moral vigour to reassert once again its former hegemony. It is now in either an equal or serving relation with the younger churches and nation building cultures. Let the west now serve gladly, as it has been served so long by the east. These observations are not intended to be read as defiantly anti-European or anti-American. Euro-American gifts like Afro-Asian gifts are culturally encased, fragile and temporally formed gifts.

It is time for east and west to join together in the nurture of an emergent vision of charismatic and evangelical faith grounded in ancient ecumenical teaching grounded. This is a challenge equally for Protestant, evangelical, orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal communities of faith on every continent. God is calling European theology to become humbled in the divine presence about the limitations of European cultural accretions, duly penitent for its recalcitrant limitations, and open to true evangelical catholicity. Some strains of immense vitality still remain within European Christianity, especially when it makes its strength vulnerable and accessible to world Christianity.

Multicultural Orthodoxy

The apostolic tradition itself is best understood as a history of exegesis. If so, the reappropriation of scripture in ongoing cultures is itself a living holy tradition being passed from cul-

ture to culture under the supervising guidance of the Spirit.

The actual history of world Christianity reliably attests Christian truth. Its conciliar processes of scriptural reflection have clearly defined what Christians of all times and places believe. We today are called to respect and hearken to all those multicultural voices that resonate with the actual historical *communio sanctorum*.

The errors of post-Enlightenment modernity stand a better chance of being corrected by the multi-cultural perspectives of the *consensus fidelium* than by modern secular multiculturalism. Modern secular multiculturalism is not nearly as varied and diverse as multicultural Christian orthodoxy. Modern secular forms of multiculturalism remain narrowly unigenerational. Authentic Christians forms of shared memory are always not only multigenerational but multicultural and in intent omnicultural. That is a huge difference. The *communio sanctorum* remains the most profound multicultural reality in the world today, far more than in Islam, which itself is far more multicultural than modern egalitarianism. Pray with me that God the Spirit may reawaken the catholic-apostolic centre of European evangelical theology, grounded in pre-European orthodox consensuality. Pray that we might nurture in our souls those charitable forms of world-wide sensitivity that will enable the younger churches to trust their own roots in pre-European forms of general lay consent to the apostolic witness. Pray that the Spirit may reawaken

the tired secularization of Europe and America to a renewed respect for the work of the one holy universal and apostolic church the world over. Lord, show us the way of meekness concerning our language, our culture, and our skin-colour.

No Particular Culture is Privileged in the Communio Sanctorum

Advocates of ancient orthodoxy are sometimes criticized for making the assumption that there is a preference for a particular period of history, so that the texts of some special era are viewed as superior to the texts of other periods. The unintended implication is that there is an intrinsic superiority to antecedent cultures and insights, hence an archaism, romanticism, and nostalgia that hangs over the whole enterprise.

There must be no pretence within the *communio sanctorum* of making any single culture expression absolute for all other cultures. Only the truth of the gospel is eternally true, not its passing cultural shells.

We are being freed to think within the *consensus fidelium* in a way that respects consensual orthodoxy. We do not thereby view modern European categories of understanding as normative or definitive for the whole *consensus fidelium* viewed intergenerationally. Why? A transgenerational community of wisdom cannot say that modern categories are intrinsically superior to pre-modern assumptions. Nor can the faithful say in a simple way that pre-modern cultural assumptions are superior to modern or post-modern. A fifth century worshipping community cannot

be expected to have an understanding of what might follow it in the fifteenth, due to the linear nature of time.

The Holy Spirit Speaks All Languages

The apostolic tradition passed through Africa and Asia before it passed on through Europe to modern world missions. This does not imply that modern European and American contributions are negligible. European and American Christians have received extraordinary benefits from a western tradition that itself depended radically upon African and Asian exegesis in its earliest layers of formation. This is a point of gratitude, not of inferiority. Nor does this imply or provide a rationale for privileging any particular location or nation or language or century or culture. Rather we are simply recognizing that the history of revelation occurred by God's providence in a particular sequence and direction.

All the first witnesses to the gospel were Aramaic speaking, yet Aramaic was never regarded as a normative holy language for the Gentile Christians. The gospel preachers made use of Aramaic as long as Aramaic was a living language, but then passed the torch to other languages and cultures, leaving only a few Christian communities in Northern Mesopotamia today who still speak a version of the original Syriac, a version of Aramaic. As at Pentecost, we learn that the Holy Spirit speaks all languages. Christianity is different from Islam which has only one privileged holy language: the Arabic of

the Quran. The apostles used but did not absolutely privilege Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin or Greek. These languages were serviceable but were not limiting, and the gospel entered soon into Coptic, Georgian, and Armenian, but note that it took many centuries to take its modern form in French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and English.

The Directional Flow of Consensual Apostolic Exegesis

Exegesis, as we are using the term here, is the reading or interpretation of a sacred text that allows the voice of the text to speak untrammelled, as opposed to reading cultural assumptions into scripture (which is eisegesis). Consensual apostolic exegesis preceded so called scientific exegesis by eighteen-hundred years. Consensual exegesis is a coordinated form of reasoning about how apostolic texts correspond and fit together. It prays to be guided by the Spirit who leads believers into all truth. The pre- and proto-European writers of the north shore of the Mediterranean were from the outset dependent upon sources and collaborative insights that came from beyond the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.

It is a western form of hubris to imagine that the earliest exegetical traditions of the Latin west had chronological or moral or liturgical precedence over Greek and Syriac traditions of the east. The flow of influence was largely from south to north, and from east to west. The intellectual current was flowing from Polycarp west with Irenaeus to Lyon, from Origen north to Gregory Thau-

maturgus in Armenia, from Anthony north to Cassian and Benedict, and from Augustine north to Prosper of Aquitaine. It did not flow primarily from, but rather toward, Europe. The antecedent exegetes were pre-European. The Macedonian call was answered directionally from the southeast to the northwest.

It is a misnomer and demeaning to northern Africa's great cultures and intellectual history to think of them as a mere appendage of European culture. The west appears to have unmade and remade Africa and Asia in the last 200 years. But it remains even more truth that the west is the child of Africa and Asia. This is a historical argument that contains an edge of rhetorical advocacy. The recovery of pre-European patristic exegesis will deepen the intentionality and vitality of African and Asian theology today. It will encourage the confidence of Afro-Asian Christians as they confront the mystique and pretence and supposed historical hegemony of modern western ideologies.

One Gospel of the One Lord

The gospel proclaimed by voices from Africa and Asia is not different from the gospel articulated later north of the Alps. The gospel understood by Irenaeus is substantially the same gospel as that of Paul of Tarsus or Polycarp of Smyrna. There was not diminution of the gospel in its trajectory toward Europe, but rather an accelerating momentum.

There are admittedly distinctive tonalities in Alexandrian exegesis as compared with Antiochene or Palestinian exegesis, but taken together

they tend to correct each other; by means of the ecumenical conciliar process they have engendered a plausible consensus, especially with respect to the heretical boundaries of baptismal faith. Once these boundary issues were settled (largely by the fifth century), so that the counterfeits of the apostolic witness were well-identified and forever marked, then there was a large playground or intellectual arena in which orthodoxy could practise and experiment with harmonizing the whole of scripture.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. There is no substantive difference between the baptismal faith of the church catholic in Cordova or Jerusalem or Alexandria or Milan or Cologne. But there were permissible differences in cultural expression and language and symbol systems that did not distort or disavow the central substance of the gospel message. There were no distinctive characteristics of the faith in Thessaloniki as over against Caesarea Palestina. It is the same faith spoken variously. There are not sixteen faiths, but one. This one faith requires ongoing reinterpretation in terms of emerging concrete historical challenges. It must be respoken in various languages and understood in as many symbol systems as emerge in history. Apostolic Christianity does not propose itself to be an end to cultural development, but a penetrator of all conceivable cultural developments.

It is Not Demeaning to European Christianity to Recall its Pre-European Roots

We come to this conference con-

cerned about the development of European consciousness in world perspective. We are trying to see what it is that Europe has provided for the world, how it has refracted the gospel in a way through which the whole world can benefit. This is best grasped by recognizing the pre-European exegetical consensus as a unifying influence upon all subsequent forms of exegesis.¹¹

Why should an American come to European evangelical theologians to speak of pre-European classic Christian understandings that ante-date European Christianity? My assigned task is to speak of the patristic tradition in relation to 'European Christianity in World Perspective'. Evangelicals theology is today concerned with the renewal of Europe. My hope and working premise is that the renewal of European evangelical theology will be grounded in pre-European evangelical, ecumenical teaching. This is not an attempt to circumvent the European evangelical agenda, but to deepen it.

Europe's achievements after the eighth century (when European literary tradition and consciousness begins to emerge) are still best understood in relation to the exegesis of earlier pre-European Christian centuries. What happens after the eighth century in the formation of

post-Charlemagne Europe is already grounded in classic Christian exegesis, in the African, Asian and Levantine ecumenical ethos that anteceded the northern Latin European tradition. This is not to diminish or ignore the great gift the Holy Spirit has engendered by making use of European consciousness and languages. It does not demean Europe to appeal to the pre-European exegetical tradition. Rather it celebrates the providential fact that European Christianity is the great flowering of the work of the Spirit in the post-patristic period. European Christianity is as profound and spectacular as Byzantine and North African Christianity. The western Spirit flowered in European culture-formation, scripture interpretation, doctrinal cohesion, and moral teaching, all of which guides most subsequent world Christianity, and indeed much world history.

The gospel was proclaimed in an ethos that was pre-European, largely African and Asian (Asian in the sense of the ancient Near East generally and particular in Asia Minor), before it become European. Therefore, the Malaysian and Zimbabwean and Brazilian cultures do not need to take as normative the European form of expression of Christianity, but can themselves appeal to a previous pre-European cultural ethos, not as an end in itself, but as an incarnate mediator of the gospel of the Incarnation. However valuable may be the work of God the Spirit through European Christianity, it is not absolutely normative for what preceded it or will follow it.

¹¹ There is a danger here of ethno-centricity that might seem to imply that whatever Europeans have decided is normative for all non-Europeans. That is an arrogant form of an argument that can better be stated quite humbly in relation to the grace of God utilizing the voices of Europeans for a decidedly trans-European purpose in world history. This does not make European thought forms normative for Malaysian Christianity.

Revelation in History

Protestant and evangelical traditions have had a high respect for ancient ecumenical consensual exegesis in their earliest formation. They do well to recover this respect in the future.

God the Spirit is working patiently in linear history. Classic reasoning argues that each layer of apostolic testimony is stretched out upon the previous layer. Earlier layers are self-evidently closer to the apostolic testimony than later ones. This does not imply that an earlier layer is superior, but simply that an earlier layer is earlier, and has chronological priority.

Did the Holy Spirit work more effectively in the first five than the last five centuries? I do not find evidence that the ancient Christian writers would assert that the Spirit's work is more effective in an earlier than a later century. When Irenaeus and Tertullian and Vincent placed a strong emphasis on antiquity as a criterion for ecumenical teaching, the antiquity referred to was the revealed and inspired ancient apostolic teaching, not simply an earlier culture or idea or thought form as such.

It is a matter of historical inquiry as to whether the Holy Spirit worked in a way that is more consensual in the first millennium than in later centuries. There is good textual evidence to conclude that the exegesis of the first millennium was far more unified and consensual than the second. That does not mean absolutely consensual, since any assertion about scripture is always subject to inquiry within the varieties of memory of the *consensus fidelium*. The rule of faith, the baptismal creeds, catech-

esis, conciliarity, and the early traditions of Christian moral reasoning show evidences of this greater proximate cohesion and agreed general consent.

Worldwide Evangelicals in Concert

The World Evangelical Alliance is a significant expression of the work of Spirit in all these cultural situations. Christians in house churches in China do not need evangelicals to approach them with a hubris that assumes that we in the west are the single conveyor of salvation by grace through faith. That is not true. Our cultures are just as tainted by and implicated in the history of sin as any. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit has not ceased to work through all our cultures, east and west, broken as we all are, to refract God's glorious mercy in the world.

The modern mission movements are largely an expression of counter-Reformation Catholicism and Protestant pietism. This has emerged out of a real history, not a blank slate. We are called to give thanks for this history, just as we must learn to give thanks for mission histories within Eastern Orthodoxy and Mar Thoma and Coptic traditions. Despite their limitations and myopias, all these mission movements have been useful instruments of God the Spirit to bring persons the gospel.

This gospel is at this moment being proclaimed in dusty villages and on the airwaves and by people on bicycles in India and Vietnam and Luzon, and in microeconomic service projects in central Africa, and relief work

in Afghanistan. The truth of Christianity is now becoming newly embodied in distant places like Mongolia, Myanmar (Burma), Nigeria and Peru. All of these emerging communities have a full right to access to receive durable blessings from the pre-European fathers in the faith.

We need not be ashamed of evan-

gelical history, nor inordinately proud of it. We are humbled by the way God the Spirit has utilized European Christianity for world Christianity. *We in the west are called to become humbly aware of how God has prepared the way in the east for the work of the west, and how now the west must learn once again from the east and south.*

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ISBN: 1-84227-201-2 / 229x145mm / 224pp / £14.99

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