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EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

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Dimensions of the Faith: A Shaping of Evangelicalism

Michael Burgess

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1 Introduction

In this short essay we are going to take a brief look at the evangelical orientation that exists throughout much of the global church and which also has expression here in Zimbabwe. As this will be a general discussion, we will be considering evangelicalism as a whole, rather than focusing simply on the Zimbabwean evangelical context. Since evangelicalism is a widespread and multifaceted phenomenon, we can attempt only a broad overview of the orientation. By orientation, we mean an approach to being Christian, and doing Christianity, that is held by a significant number of people at any one time.

Evangelicalism, rather than being a rigidly static system (as over against fundamentalism), is characterized by stability as well as change. The basic evangelical garden remains firmly in place, but there is room for develop-

ment or differences between individual gardeners. Various issues attract differing and sometimes contentious views. For example we have the debate on annihilationism¹, or the issue of the 'openness of God'.² Differences appear also in the various cultural expressions of the faith, as existential contexts and theological points of departure diverge from each other. The above phenomena are to be expected due to the 'umbrella'-like nature of evangelicalism. We would do well, furthermore, to remember that the orientation is transdenominational and not bound to any particular church polity, as McGrath reminds us.³

We have chosen to look at evangelicalism through the various 'dimen-

1 David Edwards & John Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).

2 John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1998).

3 Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), pp. 74-76.

sions' that characterize it. These, we believe, derive from the orientation itself and can be delineated as the dimensions of 'word', 'experience', and 'mission'. We will further note the integration of these dimensions—in that they operate holistically or integratively as one. It is our opinion that it is in these areas where most of the constructive and deconstructive critique of evangelicalism occurs.

It should be stated at the outset that our desire is to contribute to an understanding of what it means to be Christianly human before God; it is not to engage in some form of theological empire building. It would indeed be arrogant to maintain that *only* evangelicalism provides authentic theological constructions. Being generally aligned with a particular theological orientation does not preclude one from being informed by the ideas of others. Obviously our discussion will be limited by the constraints of space, while the main emphasis will be placed on the dimension of 'word', as this has proved to be the most challenged area by non-evangelicals.

2 The Dimension of 'Word'

2.1 The Revealing God

One thing that strongly characterizes evangelicalism is the firm belief that God has revealed both himself and an accompanying body of conceptive truth through general and special revelation. It is believed that to a degree, reality *can* be conceptualized by the human mind. This is seen in the fact that God helps us to understand reality cognitively through the agency of 'word'.

Christians, (who are spiritually capable of appropriating the divine word or truth [1 Cor. 2:6-16]) are called upon to nurture their minds with this 'word'. The path of understanding, or truth, especially redemptive truth, travels from God to humanity. As we are addressed, so must we respond. We agree with Morris who emphasizes this approach as he disagrees with Barr's contention that scripture reflects mere *human* theologising about God.⁴ For Barr, who would represent liberal thinking on the matter, the Bible may indeed portray the human *witness* of God's alleged revelatory acts in history, but it is not *itself* identical with the 'word of God'.⁵ For evangelicals, however, the theological starting point lies in our attendance to the actual a-priori revelation of God.

Evangelicalism has been stigmatised as an orientation that is guilty of 'bibliolatry', caught up in a fixation on propositional revelation. This is an unfortunate perception. While we would indeed affirm the notion of propositional communication from our revealing God, we would propose a holistic nature to God's special revelation. In fact we agree with McGrath who suggests that revelation concerns 'the *oracles* of God, the *acts* of God, and the *person* and *presence* of God'⁶ (Emphasis original). It must be said

⁴ Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 104-106.

⁵ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1973), pp. 118-119.

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollis, 1994), p. 107.

that God has given both himself to be in relation with us, as well as conceptual data to inform us and to help us to interpret our very existence. God, then, has acted and spoken *for* us.

For most evangelicals, the Bible as the *written* word of God, is the inspired recording of, first, the acts of God in human history, second, conceptual revelation *from* God to us, and third, the experiences of the friends and enemies of God. The recordings of the above, and the acts of personal historical research on the part of some biblical writers concerning the meaning and significance of the incarnate Christ (Lk.1:1-4), are equally inspired. We would insist, furthermore, that the 'word' of God stands over against our own human theologising. Any human theological construction cannot claim to be inspired!

Black and white evangelicals in Zimbabwe continue to hold to a high view of scripture, even though this is an 'imported' position from the West. Some of our leaders who have been trained in liberal western institutions will of course look down with disdain upon the so-called 'fundamentalists'. Interestingly, these leaders, who rightly call for contextualisation, are very *western* in their liberal approach to scripture.

2.2 The Place of Reason

It is ironic that liberal scholarship generally finds evangelicalism to be intellectually wanting while also accusing it of being too rationalistic. One would surely hold that sound intellect and reason presuppose each other. Be this as it may, we wish to assert that scholarly evangelicalism has a healthy rela-

tionship with the reasoning process. As beings created in God's image we are endowed with the capacity to think. We are able to cognitively appropriate and interpret our environment, especially when we listen to the God who has spoken.

In line with recent thought, evangelicals understand that thinking or reasoning simply cannot take place in a vacuum. We are indeed socially and culturally conditioned creatures and as such our reason can never be fully autonomous or value free. In this context we would affirm Davis who adds that the human race finds itself with a conflict between regenerate and unregenerate reason.⁷ One's moral and spiritual use of reason reflects one's spiritual condition. As evangelicals, we would believe that this holds true in any given cultural or religious tradition.

Reason, we would contend, is not an end in itself. Newbigin speaks out against what he believes to be the rationalistic dogmatism of both fundamentalism and liberalism.⁸ Proper Christian understanding requires reason to be in concert with faith. We concur with Newbigin that reason is 'not a substitute for information' and being informed requires 'acts of trust in the traditions we have inherited and in the evidence of our senses'.⁹ In a similar

⁷ John J. Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 131-135.

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 94.

⁹ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, p. 96.

vein, Holmes rightly argues for the unavoidability of personal act or commitment in thinking.¹⁰ We accordingly maintain, then, that Christian *reason* is an act of Christian *commitment* that results in Christian *belief*. This is said in the light of our contention that God, who is Absolute Person, made a divine commitment to privilege us, as human persons, with a reasoned and personal self-revelation. For evangelicals, the act of reasoning must involve an interfacing of subjective and objective factors, especially as we thoughtfully respond to God's revelation.

God's reasonable revelation to mankind allows, *inter alia*, the inbreaking of the supernatural into what to us is the natural. Evangelicalism believes that the act of reason does not preclude the existence and activity of the supernatural and the miraculous in history. We agree with Brown that miracles were revelatory events helping people to interpret the meaning of Jesus and God.¹¹ They were signs, and thus were 'indicators, summoning a response of insight, faith, and obedience'. This response, we believe, was to the Word of God as he broke into history as well as to the conceptive word of God as it was revealed. Talking of 'words' brings us to the controversial issue of language.

2.3 The Place Of Language

In light of the pressing challenge of postmodernist deconstructionism, we

must allow ourselves to make a few pertinent comments. To begin with, it must be said that language is indispensable. We would agree with Silva who argues that God is a language being and relates to us as language beings.¹² The very existence of both the incarnate 'Word' and the written 'word' of conceptive revelation presupposes this linguistic basis. Indeed it is very difficult to imagine how either God or humankind could articulate reality without some form of language. We agree that language in certain respects can be seen as a 'game' or as a form of social power play, but this does not annul the functional usefulness of verbal communication. It takes language to question language!

Language can inform, command, prohibit, exhort, question, doubt, affirm, express emotion, reveal intentions and will, and even address mystery. Thus, while recognizing the possibility of the manipulative and relativistic use of language, evangelicalism finds language to be necessary and useful and would deny the charge of 'logocentrism'. In other words, the fact that we are language beings does not mean that language defines our very existence. We would argue that human existence precedes the articulation of the same. The existence of social power plays or rationalistic dogmatism is not the fault of language (or reason, for that matter)—it is, rather, the

10 Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 136-137.

11 Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 286.

12 Moises Silva, 'God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics', 1990, pp. 204-217, in M. Silva (gen. ed.), *Foundations in Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

expression of the prior human state. As human beings, we are free to use language negatively, for evil, or to use it positively, for good.

2.4 The Place Of Knowledge, Belief, And Truth

2.4.1 Knowledge And Reality

The history and philosophy of the notions of knowledge, belief, and truth is a vast, complex and fascinating field. Nevertheless, at least some comments must be forthcoming here, as evangelicalism boldly claims that it has 'truth', or a picture of reality, to offer. The primary question to be asked, of course, is do we in fact have any real access to reality? Is reality, or at least the grasp of it, hidden away (at least from the 'common' person) in the sphere of Platonic universals or in the Kantian realm of the noumenal, ultimately frustrating the human quest for knowledge or truth? Evangelicalism would like to maintain that it in fact *does* have at least some grasp of reality, especially as it pertains to the questions of human existence, including the persistent quest for the ultimate.

In connection with the search for knowledge, the paradigm shift from enlightenment certainty to postmodernist doubt has raised many epistemological questions. In the light of this, Curtis and Brugaletta suggest a 'multidimensional' approach to achieving a comprehensive understanding of reality. They point out that postmodernism rightly emphasizes our limitedness as far as any in-depth analysis of reality goes. Further, it would benefit evangelicalism to combine the strengths or acceptable points of mod-

ernism and postmodernism in the search for, and the construction of, philosophical and theological truth.¹³ We would agree with the above authors. They are in fact saying that, without becoming avowedly postmodernist, evangelical scholarship in the main recognizes the need to balance a confident use of reason (modernism) with a definite epistemological humility (postmodernism).

Since we have not travelled *throughout* reality we cannot say just how far we have penetrated it, that is, if we define it simply as 'that which is', irrespective of our attempts to understand it. Our own self-understanding is inextricably linked to our perception of reality, or worldview. In and of itself, the 'that which is' forms the backdrop to our quest for existential meaning. Evangelicalism is intensely interested in the scientific, philosophical, and of course the *redemptive* meaning of human existence. Given our belief in divine conceptive revelation, we are able to say that we can potentially 'know' that which God has revealed, our human theological differences notwithstanding. As Curtis and Brugaletta point out, we can attain a correct appropriation of value and truth in line with what God has specially revealed (concerning at the very least redemptive reality) if we attend to that revelation in the context of spiritual faith.¹⁴ Implied in all of this, for evan-

¹³ Edward M. Curtis & John Brugaletta, *Transformed thinking: Loving God with all Your Mind* (Franklin: J.K.O. Publishing, 1996), pp. 66-67.

¹⁴ Curtis & Brugaletta, *Transformed Thinking*, p. 70.

gelicals, is the belief that *God*, as personal and Trinitarian, is the supreme reality behind the rest of reality, the 'that which is'.

To some degree, then, we can say that we have a limited knowledge of reality as a whole, but a fair knowledge of the historical interrelationship between Creator-God and mankind. Knowledge of this relationship derives from our own human experience and from divine revelation, which, along with conceptual communication from God, also includes God's active participation in human history and the message and impact of the whole incarnation event in and of itself. For evangelicalism, the interpretation of the above leads to our various theological constructions, or, *beliefs*. The relationship between the notions of 'knowledge' and 'belief' is a very complex issue, which we cannot go into here. It may be said, at least, that the former implies a true grasping of a 'bit' of reality, which exists objectively, while the latter implies a subjective interpretation of the same. Our 'beliefs' may accord with reality, including God's self-revelation or, they may be disastrously mistaken.

When we human beings think or reason, we do so as subjective agents (using language). It is therefore well nigh impossible to come up with a completely objective understanding of the objective world around us. Evangelicals of course believe in a created objective universe *out there*. As human beings, individually and collectively, we have to relate to the *it*, the *thou* and the *THOU* outside of us. (For Christians, of course, we also have to relate to the *THOU* inside of us, in other words, the indwelling God.) This act of relating, however, is inescapably sub-

jective. Epistemologically speaking, evangelicals would find extreme subjectivity as problematic as a cold impersonal objectivity. We would opt for a balanced and holistic epistemology. In this light, we agree with Holmes that 'metaphysical objectivity' is compatible with 'epistemological subjectivity'.¹⁵ Things, in other words, can exist irrespective of our physical or non-physical perception or ignorance of them. Reality, however, is not inherently undermined by our understandably subjective appreciation of it. Holmes also puts forward the idea that we cannot really avoid interpreting our environment; thus what we consider to be facts could be called 'interprefacts'.¹⁶

2.4.2 Truth and Belief

Our hunger for truth is ongoing. The definition of 'truth' of course varies according to the subject in hand as well as to one's cultural and logical-linguistic tradition. Also, the battle between absolutism and relativism rages on, sometimes with verbal weapons of mass de(con)struction! For the purposes of this discussion, we use the word 'truth', as far as the cognitive realm is concerned, to mean a correspondence between actual reality and human articulation of it, however limited. We could never attain to mathematical certainty of course because this would presuppose a previously existing 'metaphysical manual' by

¹⁵ Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 6.

¹⁶ Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 151.

which to evaluate our understanding. The existence of such a manual would obviate the need to search for truth anyway.

The dynamics of *redemptive* truth involve God and his revelation. For evangelicalism, conceptual authority is located in the inspired written word of God as well as in the historical event of the incarnate Living Word who acted and spoke and said of himself 'I am the way and the truth and the life' (Jn. 14:6. NIV). In this sense, truth is more than mere propositional data, although it definitely includes that. Carson supports this in his discussion of the biblical idea of truth in opposition to pluralism.¹⁷ He also reflects the evangelical view that in the process of informing us, the primary function of scripture is to redemptively point the way to the true God.¹⁸ In addition to this, we would agree with Nicole's view that the biblical picture of truthfulness is that of 'factuality, faithfulness and completeness' in relation to God's word and activity in history.¹⁹ For evangelicals, then, the Bible redemptively portrays the holistic self-revelation (and therefore truth) of God as it in turn holistically impacts the human situation.

Of course this does not automatically mean that we have always correctly interpreted this revelation. As

evangelicals, we are cognisant of the fact that our theologising is not inspired. However, we feel free to proclaim that theologically and existentially we do have access to God's revealed knowledge or truth for us. As mentioned earlier, our interpretation of this leaves us with our 'beliefs'. Naturally we would be slow to equate our beliefs with the notion of final truth as our theological constructions are always developing. While we are sensitive to the fact that the notion of *foundational* beliefs or truths has been under attack for some time, we still choose to maintain that we are the inheritors of divine revelation that necessarily includes the reality of a certain body of fixed truth. At the very least, then, we talk of primary or foundational truth (for evangelical theology, the equivalent of theological absolutes). Where we are confident of our interpretation, we talk of primary or foundational beliefs, which in turn precede secondary and tertiary beliefs. These last two are always undergoing development. Interestingly, Nash, in support of Plantinga, points out that included in foundational beliefs is the non-provable belief in God himself.²⁰

Evangelicalism believes it has a story to tell. That is, we have the core gospel message and the body of theological assertions that attach to it. We are still learning, but we have a substantive body of knowledge or truth or set of theologically confident beliefs to proclaim. We follow Newbigin who in this context says: '[W]e do not have all

17 Don A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 164-165.

18 Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p. 167.

19 Roger Nicole, 'The Biblical Concept of Truth' in D. Carson & J. Woodbridge (eds.), *Scripture and Truth* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1983), p. 296.

20 Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 85-88.

the truth, but we know the way along which truth is to be sought and found.²¹ Against the postmodernist charge of 'logocentrism', (that we are bound to relativistic beliefs as a result of the social manipulation of language), Sire maintains that our story revolves around the undeniable and absolute historical fact of Jesus Christ.²² Indeed, evangelicalism places fundamental significance in the Christ story that talks about the Christ who *is* the 'way, the truth and the life' and who opened up the path of truth along which to walk. Fundamental to the story is the coherent identity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.²³ In response to postmodernist relativism, then, we believe that actually *we do* have an historically backed metanarrative to offer. In this light, Hinkson and Ganssle rightly declare that the gospel 'is the ultimate metanarrative declared to a culture incredulous of metanarratives'.²⁴ This last would not specifically apply to black

Zimbabwean evangelicals who, in good African tradition, would be open to existentially meaningful metanarrative.

On being asked to enumerate the foundational beliefs it holds to, evangelicalism would offer, *inter alia*, the following: the Trinitarian personal Creator-God; the deity of Christ; God's self-revelation and the inspiration of the Bible; the fallenness of humankind; the redemptive gift of salvation based upon the substitutionary atonement; the real death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the ongoing historical interaction between God and humanity, including the inbreaking of the supernatural into the human story; the demand upon the church to be 'salt and light'; the literal second coming of Christ in order for him to execute eschatological judgement, and consummate the kingdom of God, already inaugurated during the first coming; and the final ushering in of the New Age, including the final realities of heaven and hell. The above 'list' indicates the basic markers of the biblical story line. Obviously the theological explication of these markers or if you will, foundational beliefs, is to be found in the abundant evangelical literature already existing.

2.5 The Act of Theologising

We have earlier highlighted the fact that the reasoning process must recognize the subjective element and the need for personal commitment. As evangelical Christians we find ourselves in the personal-cognitive act of articulating our faith and responding to its existential implications for us. For evangelicalism, the theological act is

21 Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to tell: The Gospel as public truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 34.

22 James W. Sire, 'On Being a Fool for Christ and an Idiot for Nobody: Logocentricity and Postmodernity' in T. Philips & D. Okholm (eds.), *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1995), pp. 120-122.

23 I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), pp. 73-74.

24 Jon Hinkson & Greg Ganssle, 'Epistemology at the Core of Postmodernism: Rorty, Foucault and the Gospel' in D. Carson (gen. ed.), *Telling the Truth: Evangelising Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 85.

at once a challenge and an indictment. While there is an increasing body of serious evangelical scholarship worldwide, it must be allowed that outside of the academy a significant proportion of the evangelical population is either afraid of or too lazy to enter into the intellectual dimension of the faith. Wells bemoans the weakening, at least in his part of the world, of 'theological profundity'. For Wells there has been too much alliance with modernity and a letting go of God's transcendent demand upon us. Also, the church and the theological academy have not taken each other seriously enough.²⁵ Noll goes a step further and calls for a revitalisation of intellectual pursuit across the board (secular and religious) of disciplines. We must entertain a creative and broad based intellectual life of the mind.²⁶

Evangelical theology worldwide is now opening up more to the call and action of contextualisation. We believe that this is a good development as long as it is done seriously rather than faddishly. Curtis and Brugaletta rightly point out that a 'dialogue with the world' is critical for Christian understanding, with the proviso that we do not get sucked up into the *zeitgeist* of the world.²⁷ Different cultural con-

texts, of course, provide somewhat different worlds. On a broad level, the 'African Renaissance' movement currently being spearheaded by Thabo Mbeki of South Africa has presented a serious challenge to evangelical theology in Africa, as the movement impacts directly on the 'Africanisation' of Christianity. Unfortunately we have no space to discuss the intricate relationship between culture and theology in this particular essay, other than to say with Grenz and Olsen that theology involves 'trialogue', that is, allowing the interplay between scripture, theological heritage and culture.²⁸

It goes without saying that one's theological agenda or prior theological orientation directly affects how one would contextualise. In the African context, we have the example of the evangelical Bediako²⁹ and the non-evangelical Oduyoye³⁰ who similarly criticize the evangelical theologian Byang Kato for an alleged insensitivity to local culture and lack of desire to enter into inter-religious dialogue, as well as for his belief that divine revelation is to be found only in the Christian tradition. Even within given orientations, then, including evangelicalism, the various points of departure of the-

²⁵ David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 290-292.

²⁶ Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

²⁷ Edward M. Curtis & John Brugaletta, *Transformed Thinking: Loving God with all Your Mind* (Franklin: J.K.O. Publishing, 1996), pp. 35-36.

²⁸ Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olsen, *Who Needs Theology?: An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1996), pp. 112-113.

²⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), pp. 397-413.

³⁰ Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), pp. 63-65.

ologians across the globe result in differing theological confessions, although the fundamental or foundational beliefs must remain globally and recognizably Christian. For evangelicals, the existence of positional differences in theology does not abrogate the truthfulness of God's revelation in and of itself. In all of this, the centrality and authority of Christ remains key.

Theologising ideally is an *act* in that it should involve the interplay of the following factors: subjective knowledge and belief; the objective content of revelation; general context; personal worldview and point of departure; theological agenda; and absolute personal commitment. Along with this, of course, is the fact that God and his word continually address us. The role of *faith* is vital here, and evangelicalism is cognisant of the ongoing debate over the precise relationship between faith and knowledge. At the end of the existential and theological day, however, it can still be said that we accept a particular theological formulation as true by an act of faith. For evangelicalism, our response to the divine revealer and his revelation strengthens our faith. Holmes reminds us that faith in and of itself is not knowledge; rather, it is a subjective and trusting response to God and his revelation.³¹ The act of theology, then, is none other than our faithful participation in the dimension of 'word'. Faith and act speak of experience, the dimension to which we now move.

3 THE DIMENSION OF EXPERIENCE

3.1 The Givenness Of Experience

As human beings, we do not merely exist; we also grow in subjective experience. In this, we do not live as isolated beings. All human beings (including rugged individualists and existentialists) live in relation to each other, the environment, and God, either as estranged or reconciled. Further, we find ourselves to be creatures of space and time, and thus experience duration. This linear progression from one moment to another allows us to keep building on the fountain of human experience. The preceding tells us that it is impossible to live a human life without gaining some degree of knowledge and wisdom. This also includes the unavoidable experience of the historical tension between good and evil, although Christians will have a different historical perspective from non-Christians. As a whole, the human experience is anything but uniform. This is because of the multitude of cultural, social, religious, geographical, and political points of departure. Evangelical theologians are becoming more aware of the above scenario as they attempt to articulate Christian experience in this day and age.

The issue of specific Christian experiences actually engenders much debate in evangelical circles. Klaas Runia offers the interesting concept of 'clusters' of experience as far as Christians are concerned. For Runia, *justification* implies the experiences of becoming Christian, *sanctification* cov-

31 Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 71-72.

ers the experiences of spiritual growth and witness in the world, and the *charismata* lead to the experiences of serving God and each other in the church and the world.³² In all of this, we would contend, evangelicals share the whole package of discoveries and disappointments, certainties and doubts, suffering and freedom, stagnation and purpose. Unfortunately, evangelicalism is marked by in-house tensions between non-charismatics and charismatics over such issues as baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. However we approach these issues, and the broader field of experience, evangelicalism must be careful to actualise the unity that exists amidst diversity.

We have discussed earlier the place of subjectivity in our attempt to understand reality. Evangelical scholarship will see our cognitive faculties and subjective daily experiences as epistemological siblings. The dialectical tension between the two can only stimulate the growth of our Christian understanding. In Zimbabwe, black and white evangelicals will sometimes have different tensions to deal with. Black Christians, for example, face the issues of ancestral spirits and the relationship between the natural and the supernatural, as well as the issue of cultural identity. White Christians will tend to focus more on western issues of experience and doctrine. Whatever the tensions are, however, evangelicals will tend to define what is normative via the conceptual

rather than the experiential. Davis rightly feels that experience is not the norm of truth as such, but it is a channel for it, and it makes truth 'real'.³³ Indeed it can be said that experience often validates or invalidates a given conceptive idea. For evangelicalism, though, truth in and of itself is normative and universal, whereas sometimes experience can be misleading.³⁴

3.2 The Place of Christ

Evangelicalism holds fast to the claim by the Word that he is the vine and believers are the branches and as such are to 'abide' in the vine (Jn. 15:1-4). For evangelicalism the centrality of Christ in Christian experience cannot be over-emphasized. The demand to abide is given to believers as individuals and as members of the 'body' of Christ. This implies that the 'image of Christ' to which we are to be conformed must be reflected on both the individual and corporate levels. For Christians, then, one's existential focus should be to *actualise* one's dependence on Christ. Runia rightly insists that the very source of Christian experience lies in our union with Christ, which union is engendered by our relationship to the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ.³⁵

Kraus presents us with the stimulating idea that our understanding of personhood is linked to Jesus being the self-disclosure of God. As such, Jesus

32 Klaas Runia, 'Towards a Biblical Theology of Experience' in I. Howard Marshall (ed.), *Christian Experience in Theology and Life* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1988), pp. 187-193.

33 John J. Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 167.

34 Holmes, *All Truth*, pp. 80-81.

35 Klaas Runia, 'Biblical Theology of Experience', pp. 177-179.

reveals the 'ultimate nature' of personal being and relationship—in fact, he is the 'other in whose presence the nature of our own selfhood is disclosed'.³⁶ Evangelical theology will be quick to insist that this does not mean that we become divine, but it does mean that our divine saviour is the means of our existential self-understanding. None of this could happen, it must be said, without the ministries of the Holy Spirit within believers and the body of Christ as a whole. Our experience of, and our relationship with, the Son and the Spirit further picture our filial relationship with the Father.

4 The Dimension of Mission

4.1 The Witness of Mission

To be a Christian is to participate in the human story. For evangelical theology the *Christian* human story lies within the greater human story, and both stories answer to the biblical story line. The individual believer and the corporate body of Christ actuate the Christian story which becomes the story of mission; the branches of the Vine are to bring forth fruit. Mission, then, is the natural outworking of faith. It is public witness, by Christians, to the Christ and his existential demands upon us. It is the announcement of the divine answer to the human question. This answer required God's identification with the human story and this took place through the deeds and words of the incarnate Son.

We must not forget, of course, that God has always been answering mankind via his revelatory address throughout human history; but the supreme address was Jesus Christ. The ascension of the historical Christ meant that those who follow him are to continue with, and participate in, the mission of Christ in the world. This participation must follow the pattern of the Son—deeds and words. Our mission or witness, then, is representative, that is, we labour under the ongoing authority of Christ. Kraus explains that we 'represent him [Christ] in acts of witness (*marturia*) that continue his witness to the father'³⁷ (Emphasis original). We are serving *Christ*, not ourselves or the institutional church. For evangelicalism, there is an integral relationship between the act of proclamation and the demand of service, and it is to be empowered by the Spirit.³⁸

Our witness-service is constantly under fire from the pluralistic world surrounding us. Non-religionists and adherents of other religions consider it arrogant for Christians to promote only the Christian story line and the biblical Christ. Evangelicalism, the in-house debate between exclusivists and inclusivists notwithstanding, holds firm to the priority and uniqueness of Christ. As Kirk argues, the *uniqueness* of Christ is indeed the central issue in inter-religious encounter.³⁹ For evangelicalism,

³⁶ C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ our Lord: Christology From a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1987), p. 120.

³⁷ C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, p. 243.

³⁸ Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: I.V.P., 1992), p. 234.

³⁹ J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 135.

the Christ of Christianity is ontologically a member of the Trinitarian Godhead—there can be no other religious Christ.

Naturally the Christian stand against pluralism involves more than what we think about Jesus Christ. Carson reminds us that this stand covers more than epistemological and Christological differences; in fact ‘an entire vision of reality is at stake’.⁴⁰ We are advocating for a complete worldview and it is incumbent upon us to be familiar with the biblical story line in this regard. Our witness implies that we have a grasp of reality, however limited, and our bold call is for others to adopt a Christian worldview and submit to Christ. It is our goal that others should become Christianly human (the debates on election-predestination notwithstanding). In all of this we affirm Kirk’s view that the world and its cultures must not ultimately control our agenda; rather, the church is to be faithful to the apostolic witness.⁴¹ None of this means that evangelicalism is automatically anti-dialogue with other religions as there are benefits to be obtained through dialogue, but it is not prepared to relegate Christ to mere equality with competing ‘saviours’ or systems.

The whole question of stewardship and justice as avenues of witness is a major discussion in its own right. At this point we shall just state that the biblical injunctions to environmental responsibility and the doing of peace and justice (Gen. 1: 26-30; Mt. 25:31-

46) are open and clear. Evangelicalism has for some time been conscious of its peace and justice mission, but its sensitivity to ecological issues is fairly recent. Wilkinson speaks of our creative relation to the environment to the effect that human beings and especially Christians cannot avoid their God-given task of responsible environmental management. Creation is obviously important to the creator.⁴² In fact creation ‘is fallen through human sin and will be redeemed through human redemption’.⁴³ For evangelicals, our environment and justice record now forms a major part of the witness of mission. Our deeds in fact constitute a significant part of our word.

4.2 The Eschatology of Mission

Evangelicalism maintains that at some point in space-time history, the witness of mission as we understand it for now, will come to an end. The church does well to realize its historical perspective arising from the ‘salvation’ and ‘theological’ histories that precede and accompany it. Our proclamation and activity of today can never be isolated from what has gone on before. This means that just as human history is linear, so is church history, and in fact this falls in with God’s eschatological plan for humanity. For evangelicalism there is a definite consummation to this present history or age; indeed, we expectantly await the real and historical second coming of the

⁴⁰ Don A. Carson, ‘Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism’ in D. A. Carson & J. D. Woodbridge (eds.), *God and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 63.

⁴¹ Kirk, *What is Mission?*, p. 92.

⁴² Loren Wilkinson, ‘The Uneasy Conscience of the Human Race’ in D. Carson & J. Woodbridge (eds.) *God and Culture*, pp. 316-319.

⁴³ Wilkinson, ‘The Uneasy Conscience’, p. 317.

Christ who has impacted history. Our present history will give way to the eternal history of the New Age.

The continuity-discontinuity debate over the coming in of the New Age is an interesting one. For our purposes, it will suffice to say that the consummation of our history does not imply a complete discontinuity. We would agree with Berkhof that there is no *absolute* contrast because 'Christ who is the first fruit, and the Spirit who is the guarantee of our glorification, are already active in the world'.⁴⁴ Christ and the Spirit, then, are actualising the kingdom of God in this world through their own sovereign activities and through the church. When this history ends (when the kingdom of God has grown up into the big mustard tree and the yeast has done its work [Mt. 13:31-33]), there will be a carry over of the fruit that has been achieved into the new age.

In the light of the above, we would agree with Kuzmic in his desire to see the discontinuity-continuity tension maintained and who states that we are 'invited to both the responsible *participation* in the Kingdom-already-arrived, and to the watchful *expectation* of the Kingdom-still-to-come'.⁴⁵ (Emphasis original). This means that we can in fact talk of *the accountability of mission*. We have only a limited time period in which to accomplish the *missio Dei*; it is in *this* history that we must realize our Christ-

ian being and witness. Evangelical theology firmly holds that at the eschaton we will inescapably have to account for our lives and service to the kingdom (Mt. 25:14-30; 1 Cor. 3:11-15).

5 Together as One

5.1 Holistic Unity

The above discussion on the dimensions of word, experience, and mission does not mean that they operate independently. Evangelical theology is keen to emphasize a holistic understanding of these dimensions, that is, they must be treated as an integrated unity. To be sure, the dimension of 'word' receives much attention because of the evangelical propensity for conceptive or cognitive revelation along with an attendant programme of theological construction. It is this dimension that other theological orientations and the spirit of postmodernism challenge the most. Nevertheless, evangelicalism affirms the idea that knowledge, truth and belief derive from an integration of our three dimensions. The three are understood as being in dialectical tension with each other. Indeed the very contemplation of, and search for, reality or truth already implies experience; the evaluation of experience already implies the ability to think and make value judgments; and the realities of contemplation and experience become meaningless apart from a sense of existential mission, at least for Christians. The objective, subjective and missional operate holistically to form the platform from which the Christian self can relate to *the it, the thou, and the THOU*.

⁴⁴ Hendrikus Berkhoff, *Christ the Meaning of History*, trans. by L. Buurman, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), p. 184.

⁴⁵ Peter Kuzmic, 'History and Eschatology: Evangelical Views' in B. Nicholls (ed.), *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985), pp. 153-154.

The above idea can be carried over into the concept of holistic spirituality. Traditionally, the idea of spirituality has been related to the activities of the human spirit or soul where one's 'religious' experience of God is supposed to take place. To our mind, while the written word of God does seem to speak of the materiality and immateriality of the human constitution, it nevertheless cannot be accused of promoting some sort of Platonic dualism. Our contention is that *all* of life's dimensions comprise a realistic spirituality. The physical and non-physical are lived equally before God. If we define spirituality as living according to the revealed will of our Maker, in whose image we have been created, then this will involve the totality of our human existence. For believers spirituality, that is, living in a conscious relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit, must be expressed in the physical, mental, volitional, emotive, 'religious', social, work, play, family, and ecological areas.

5.2 Holistic Diversity

Our overall human history has reflected many sub-histories, ranging from the tragic to the triumphant. Also, human experience is punctuated with diversity, which seems to reflect the creative will of God, barring the problems of sin and evil of course. Be all this as it may, there is still only one human race with all non-Christians standing equally in need of salvation. Those who are saved have the awesome responsibility of demonstrating how to be Christianly human in whatever particular historical situation one finds oneself. The truth of the biblical storyline does not change even if our

situations and theologies do. God and his word can still directly and holistically impact the human situation in all its diversity.

We are all children of our culture and cultural language. This applies also to the historical body of Christ even as responsible 'strangers in the world' (1 Pet. 2:9-12). Our historical-cultural diversity will of course affect how we interpret the world and the word. In the light of this, evangelicalism recognizes the need for informed and scholarly hermeneutics, but it also continues to insist on the existence of foundational truth or universals or absolutes, which holistically apply to all aspects of living. It is realized that this insistence precedes our fallible human theologising. Our constructs may vary, but the Constant is Jesus Christ and his prior conceptive word.

Evangelicals may disagree on various issues, but if Christ is the Constant, we *can* talk of a global Christian faith, embodying the above-mentioned unity, with the proviso that there will be various or diverse contextual expressions of it. The global church will still hold to foundational Christian truth as the kingdom of God continues to grow and the sovereignty of God remains intact. There can be only one body of Christ anyway, incorporating the fact that all Christians, wherever they are, live out their Christian faith via the dimensions we have been discussing. In all of this we should be together as one.

The unity and diversity issue of course brings up the vital and somewhat controversial question of *final theological authority*. This requires a separate study in its own right. Who or what does one listen to? Obvious can-

didates are God, or the Bible, or one's denomination, or experience, or traditions and confessions, or geographical location (the contextualisation issue). We do believe that God has linguistically revealed truth to us, but our contextual and methodological differences, even as evangelicals, may sometimes cause a stirring of the theological waters. Most evangelicals would probably opt for the view that all the above candidates contribute to the platform of authority, with an emphasis on the dimension of 'word', as this combines the aspects of truth and God himself. However we end up on the issue of authority, evangelicals will still reiterate the view that concept, experience and mission interrelate with one another and that these in turn relate to Jesus Christ.

6 Conclusion

It should be clear that we have been discussing evangelicalism on a general level, as it is a very broad based trans-denominational orientation. In a short essay we, of course, have been able only to touch on issues rather than discuss them in depth, including the sensitive dimension of conceptive revelation and the grasping of truth. Nevertheless, we trust that we have presented a fair picture of the evangelical mind and methodology. As in any other theological orientation, we have indicated that there will be in-house debate over the specific application of what we have said.

We have been proposing, then, that evangelicalism functions around the dimensions of word, experience, and mission and that these three operate together. God has spoken and acted in

history—we are to do the same, that is, to participate in God's 'salvific' and 'general' historical programme. To be Christian is to be Christianly human before other humans and to draw them into the kingdom of God. We do this by *hearing* God's truth for us, *experiencing* it, and *serving* it as it penetrates the human story. Our personal and corporate experience of being Christian, and our public witness of the divine initiative and demands, must be holistic, faithful, and buoyed by the hope of Christ within us.

The evangelical picture is always undergoing development, especially in the areas of methodology and belief. Further, evangelical scholarship is becoming more constructively engaged with other theological orientations, the need to do deeper in-house theologising notwithstanding. In all of our theological activity, the belief that the Trinitarian God has historically acted *and* has accordingly revealed a certain body of truth remains an evangelical watershed. There *are* things to be understood and believed. What we believe directs and motivates the equally important areas of lifestyle and sense of mission. We need to be reminded here that emphasis on the dimension of word does not contradict or abrogate the holistic unity of the three dimensions, all of which interface with each other and attach to the living Word. For evangelicalism, it is accepted that all three contain constants and variables, and that this can be at once liberating and problematic. Nevertheless, to be addressed by the word of God, to experience the way of Christ, and to be engaged in God's will on Earth as it is in Heaven (mission), is to live the normal Christian life.