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The Future of Evangelical Theology and its Missionary Challenges in the Church of the 21st Century

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY has a very impressive *history* of nearly two thousand years. But we live in a secular world with a plurality of ideologies, philosophies and powerful religions; and so we need to ask: Does Christian theology also have an impressive *future*? Since the century of the Enlightenment, and especially the religious criticism of the influential philosophers of the Nineteenth century, the future of Christianity has been written off. The spectacular success of the modern sciences and the Industrial Revolution put the Christian faith and the old privileges of the Christian churches aside.

Therefore, it is no wonder that at the beginning of the twentieth century Christians were concerned to empha-

size their unity beyond all historical confessions and denominations. When John Mott sent out invitations for the first Conference on World Missions in 1910 in Edinburgh, his main argument was that the Christian churches could have a future only if they were united in confessing their faith. At that time, the mainline churches and the different denominations were willing to look forward to confirm the common ground of all Christian theology and to stand together in order to win the future for Christian theology and the Christian Church.

Therefore, we have to ask today if it makes sense to proclaim one specific, and relatively new, form of Christian theology at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with all its challenges to the Christian church and its thinking. If we claim a future for evangelical theology, we have to clarify the way in which evangelical theology is

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rooted in Christian theology, and ask where the differences are that make it necessary to distinguish evangelical theology from (for example) Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran or Methodist, theology. What is the specific shape of *evangelical* theology?

1. The Missiological Shape of Evangelical Theology

Evangelical theology is inextricably intertwined with the fortunes of the evangelical movement as a whole. Theology both influences the development of the evangelical movement and, at the same time, is also dependent on the development of evangelicalism.

Evangelicalism is primarily an *evangelistic* and *missionary movement* within the worldwide Christian church. It is a gathering of Christians who are committed to Christ and his mission throughout the world, transcending all the divisions of Protestant denominations. Evangelicalism unites Christians from different theological backgrounds and traditions and, to some degree, emphasizes by its missionary engagement new theological profiles within the diversity of historic Christian faiths. The fundamental factor of integration of those different Christian traditions which unite in the evangelical movement is their commitment to *world evangelization*, as expressed for example in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974.

Here, I would like to examine how this fundamental commitment to missions is shaping evangelical theology and why it is important that we should reaffirm the evangelical movement in its evangelistic task by developing a

biblical basis for a missionary theology. I believe evangelical theology has a future *only in as far as it serves its missionary task*. One can have a future only if one has a real presence. Evangelical theology has a presence because mission is in God's time. Within the framework of biblical salvation, mission is on God's agenda for this period of time. The Christian church is created by the Holy Spirit through the word of the risen Lord. He, in his authority, has put mission at the top of his agenda and the only thing that we as Christians have to do is to remain in step with the Spirit and God's own purpose. The future of evangelical theology is not guaranteed by any academic standard or by any human thinkers, but only by the promises of the Lord himself.

Therefore, I will propose an outline in what follows, at least in part, of what it really means to define theology as a function of the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. In order to accomplish this theological program, I will give a systematic commentary on the Great Commission from the perspective of our question: What should evangelical theology be in order to have a future guaranteed by Christ?

2. The Christological Authority of Evangelical Theology

Immediately before his ascension, Jesus proclaimed his lordship in the presence of his disciples: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' By this, the Lord emphasized within the great commission itself the fact that all theological truth is *personal* truth.

This makes the truth of the Christian faith fundamentally different from that of the founders of religions or great philosophers of the past. Their personal mandate has unquestionably ended with their deaths. After their deaths, their words were collected as literature and have to be carefully preserved. The only influence that founders of religions and philosophers have in the history of philosophy and ideas is that the finalized traditions which they left behind have been preserved. Those who follow them have to deal with merely historical events and facts. This kind of a closed situation is something completely different from a living communication process between persons living today who interact with and react to one another.

Therefore, evangelical theology must be aware that it has to deal not only with a great historical past, but with the living God who is present in the Spirit of the risen Christ. Because Christ is given all power, theologians cannot confront his words only in terms of literature, but in interaction with the real Christ who reveals himself by his living Word. I think that is one of the deepest divides between evangelical theology and the so-called historical-critical theologians who deal with the Bible only on the level of historical interest. There is a great difference between trying to restore a former teaching of a prophet or philosopher who has already died and hearing the Word of the almighty powerful Lord who speaks and works his miracles throughout history. The words spoken two thousand years ago have the same relevance and dynamic power today because Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Christ is the one who builds the bridges between transcendence and immanence, heaven and earth. By his incarnation, he sustains the ongoing relationship between God and men among his disciples and within his church. Because of this, evangelical theologians can never follow the atheistic statement of modern science which claims that we should think *etsi deus non daretur*, as if God were not there; on the contrary, all real theology flows forth out of this powerful dynamic relationship between the teaching Christ and the learning disciple, between the revealing God and the reflecting theologian. This reality of interaction between Christ and the theologian in all theological thinking and writing demands, as one consequence, that the theologian respects the glorious presence of his Lord. Theological reflection can be done only in the attitude of a humble servant who hears his Lord's voice and bows before him.

Paradoxically, this attitude of servanthood is the foundation of all theological self-awareness and every authoritative statement. The authority of the Lord who sends out is given to the apostles and, on the basis of their written testimony, to all missionaries who follow in church history. Therefore theology has the supreme authority to defeat every ideology, religion, and philosophy that dares to direct opposition against Christ's word. Theology does not take place in the sense of a Platonic dialogue in which nobody knows the truth and where the partners want to find truth as they gather to answer one another and enlighten one another by their questions. Instead of this understanding of dialogue, Christian theology has a prophetic

mandate. The Christian teacher or theologian has to proclaim the truth in the prophetic sense of the Old Testament prophets who spoke *ko amar Jahwe*, that is, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says'. Furthermore, as long as theologians stay in this humble attitude before the Lord and proclaim his word, he reveals his power today through the words spoken in human weakness. The future of evangelical theology depends exclusively on the authority of the Christ who sends forth and proclaims his gospel through his disciples.

3. The Evangelistic Purposes of Evangelical Theology

The Great Commission commands us to disciple all people. This should be done by two instruments of grace: by *baptizing* and by *teaching*. Baptism emphasizes the objective dimension in the conversion process of an unbeliever becoming a Christian and teaching is a subjective application to this powerful sign of grace given in baptism. In the context of our topic today, I do not want to emphasize here the objective side in terms of sacraments and teaching about baptism, but, simply, to ask the question: 'What is meant by Christian *teaching*?'

Firstly, we have to recognize and reflect upon the fact that the foundation of all theology lies exclusively in the mandate to teach what the risen Lord has given to his apostles. Thus, Christian theology is implicated as one function of the overall missionary task of the church. By the teaching of the gospel, people will recognize who God is in his Trinity and learn that they are to become aware of their sin and lost-

ness. They hear the word of redemption and the Spirit moves their hearts to repent and he makes them into disciples of Christ. The Word of God proclaimed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is, in itself, the effective means of making a sinner into a child of God and an heir of the coming blessings. By the Word, the reality of heaven is brought to mankind, and vice versa: people are brought to Christ in order to become heirs of the heavenly kingdom.

Whoever denies that Christian theology is only a function within the process of discipling cannot be a theologian in the sense of the New Testament. Whenever theology becomes a *master* of Scripture and separates from the church and its evangelistic tasks, it perverts itself.

The liberal understanding of theology cannot, therefore, by definition, be called evangelical because the emphasis of liberal theology is to *liberate* human thinking from the authority of a given authentic revelation. Instead of leading people in the obedience of faith, it longs for liberation from any authority outside the rational dignity of the person. It is no wonder that the modern rationalism of the West tends to uproot churches from their biblical foundation and ends in alienation from the historic Christian faith. One of its consequences is declining churches. Liberalism, in the way it views itself, will not agree to use the intellectual potential of man simply as a tool in the possession of a servant who is concerned about ministering only his Lord's teaching. There is a fleshly fascination in leading people to the abandonment of heteronomic influences. Consequently, every theologian has to

decide whether he is willing to serve Christ in teaching others and, through his teaching, to bring them to Christian maturity, or whether he is to liberate them from God's revealed truth in the name of the human capability of rational thinking.

Last, but not least, evangelical theology has its source in the repentance (or transformation of and renewing) of the mind and intellectual behaviour (see Rom. 12:1-2). It comes *from* conversion and leads *to* conversion. The criteria for all theology that claims to be evangelical must be formed by biblical thinking and must be empowered by the Holy Spirit to make disciples and to build them up in maturity through the process of sanctification. It is not any particular academic standard that makes theology worthwhile and relevant, but only the biblical foundation of its content and the missionary purpose for which it is spoken. Evangelical theology cannot strive for the scientific ideal of *sine ira et studio* (without deep personal engagement and commitment). Theology is no science in the modern sense of a purposeless enterprise on the intellectual level.

Spiritual ambition is what makes not only the difference between evangelical and liberal theology, but also between evangelical and *Orthodox* theology. On the one hand, there is unity between Orthodox theologians and evangelical theologians in terms of the objective contents of Christian theology, which must be based on a biblical foundation. On the other hand, there is an important difference between them, as evangelical theology longs for and prays fervently to promote revival. In all its aspects of thinking and depths of

reflection, it longs for the repentance and conversion of non-Christians and the edification of Christians through the increasing sanctification of their lives. A good evangelical theologian looks forward to bearing eternal fruit through a humble ministry of the Word of God.

4. Biblical Teaching and the Practical Profile of Evangelical Theology

The Lord commands his disciples to teach all nations to obey everything he has told the apostles. The word 'everything' implies two principles for our understanding of the Scriptures. The reformers of the sixteenth century emphasized their theological position in two fundamental hermeneutical tags: *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*. They were convinced that Christ has bound himself to the written word of Scripture. In Scripture and only there, can his will be found. There is no other source of divine revelation where people can find true knowledge of God and his eternal will and the way of redemption. This completeness of godly truth is what is meant by the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) and *tota scriptura*. This principle has to be maintained in evangelical theology today, not only against the Roman Catholic doctrine of a combination between ecclesiastical tradition and Scripture, but also against the modern ecumenical approach to inter-religious dialogue with non-Christian faiths.

It is indeed very humbling for the human wisdom that likes to put its confidence in the so-called 'eternal truth of reason' rather than in the contingent

events of salvation history. But there is no true knowledge of redemption aside from biblical revelation. Jesus is the only way to truth and life for every man on earth throughout history.

On the other hand, evangelical theology also has to defend the hermeneutical principle of *tota scriptura* against every form of liberalism that searches to find a new canon within the biblical canon. Every attempt to select and distinguish within the Bible between an everlasting authentic word of God and mere words of human writers will be a failure. The history of Protestant theology throughout the last 250 years has demonstrated the chaos of theological opinions. Theologians who tried to build up theology on the basis of a selected or restricted Bible could not find a common basis for confessing Christ today. All attempts to develop theology by selecting between divine and human statements in the Bible end sooner or later in pure relativism. There is no convincing argument—even on the intellectual level—as to how a theologian could, after a period of more than two thousand years, possibly distinguish between those events of salvation history that really happened and those phrases in the Bible that were spoken by the ‘historical Jesus’.

Evangelical theology has to refer to the whole of the Scriptures without any amendment to the Bible. This is a basis for evangelical theologians to become good stewards who can be trusted to serve in God’s house and to make known all mysteries of God’s revealed truth. They are not allowed to leave any Christian untaught or ignorant concerning any aspect of the biblical revelation, beginning with predestina-

tion, creation, sin, redemption, and sanctification, and ending with the eternal consummation of God’s kingdom. Moreover, if theologians teach and provide God’s people with eternal truth, this teaching is, by no means, simply a theoretical affair. For ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for all good work’ (2 Tim. 3:16f).

Therefore, it is not the strength, but, rather, the *weakness* of the academic tradition of western theology that it strives for the ideal of mere theoretical knowledge in terms of philosophy or even traditional theology. Biblical truth is very practical and all theological research must be validated by the spiritual relevance it has for the practice of godly living. The theoretical approach to theology leads to dangerous pitfalls. This is clear from the history of the early church with its Hellenistic background, throughout Scholastic theology in the Middle Ages and the period of the so-called ‘Protestant Orthodoxy’ of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries even to today’s scholars with their high academic standards.

Every intellectual decision insulated from the grassroots problems of the church, is, at best, ineffectual and, at worst, extremely dangerous for God’s people. A good theologian is one who struggles in a responsible position as teacher with all the temptations of his age and who searches for relevant, contemporary answers found in the Bible in close contact with his fellow disciples. Those scholars who hide themselves behind the walls of monas-

teries or modern universities are often incompetent in relation to the questions of everyday life in the church. The opposite, though, is evident in the lives of those theologians who have shared the needs and the problems of a congregation as vital members of the church. They have a fruitful public ministry in teaching and writing. Paul was an excellent theologian because he was such a dedicated missionary. Or, one could cite the bishop of Hippo, Augustine, or the enormous outreach of the Reformers, or the ministry of John Wesley or contemporary theologians, such as John Stott, who have a fruitful ministry today.

The future of evangelical theology lies in this indispensable combination of solid biblical thinking regarding and understanding the meaning of salvation history and the capacity to apply this biblical knowledge to different situations in the church in a practical manner. For it is the practice of biblical truth that convinces the non-Christian world and makes our teaching and preaching effective for the hearer. The message will be heard when love is seen. Evangelical theology looks forward not to winning academic debates, but to winning for Christ those who are lost in their sins.

5. The Ecumenical Outreach and Eschatological Drive of Evangelical Theology

The Greek word *oikumene* means the totality of mankind living worldwide in a colourful diversity of nations, tribes, and tongues within different societies, political systems, and cultures. This diversity is implied in our Lord's own

words when he compels us to invite nations to his kingdom, insisting that the apostles should 'make disciples of all nations' (see, for example, the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14:15-24). The different ministries of proclaiming, preaching, and teaching the gospel are spiritually one in their foundation in scriptural truth and its missionary purpose. But the ecumenical outreach of missions leads us to the point where we have to study sincerely the abundant variety of different gifts given by the Holy Spirit and the variety of ministries in the church. Because of the very different situations of the peoples to be reached with the gospel, there is a need for different missiological applications in teaching the gospel.

It is an ongoing process of Christian teaching, starting with the elementary truth of redemption, to develop every Christian into the full potential of knowledge that God has prepared for us. Therefore, the proclamation of the gospel leads to the necessity to distinguish between the specific input that has to be provided by evangelists, pastors, and teachers in different ways. Evangelists and pastors are also teachers and must teach what the gospel implies and what is the distinctive context of revealed truth that should be known and understood in order to be believed. In that sense, the Great Commission's injunction, '*teach them*', is an unlimited request.

But an evangelist or pastor can teach others only after he has been taught and disciplined himself. This is, therefore, one of the main tasks of teachers and, in the deeper sense, of theologians. Theologians first should aim their research and teaching towards providing a solid Christian

doctrine for the next generation of evangelists and pastors.

I stress this because there is an ongoing temptation in all theological education not to train and teach evangelists and pastors, but only to reproduce theologians for an academic career. Let me say clearly that I am not denying the importance of intellectual training for every Christian worker, to enable him to fulfil potentially the apologetic task of 1 Peter 3:15 ('Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have'). But this intellectual apologetic task is that of defending the faith and sustaining the proclamation of the gospel with solid argumentation in different changing situations. The need for contextualizing the gospel in very different cultural situation requires a solid intellectual education in theology.

Moreover, this apologetic outreach, which arises from an urgent search for those who are lost in sin and error, must be rooted in a basic and profound understanding of the Scriptures. Biblical thinking, therefore, must not only be planted in the consciousness of a theologian, it must become his second nature and it must shape his thinking and his attitudes very deeply, permeating his unconscious personality. This is a life-long process and implies a deep commitment from every disciple to learning from his Master.

Anyone who is sent to teach what Jesus taught must carefully study the Scripture in order to become able to handle spiritual questions properly. This includes the capacity to connect biblical lines between the Old and New Testaments and to recognize how the meaning of the revelation is to apply to

a particular situation today. Furthermore, it is a matter of wisdom to study diligently the history of the church and its mission to gain spiritual insight. It is one of the characteristics of evangelical theology that it is not bound to any particular systematized forms of Christianity or theology, but includes knowledge and experience from different Christian traditions and tests them out in the light of the Scriptures. In this sense, evangelical theology is ecumenical theology with a broad aspect of freedom to test everything and to retain the best.

With the wisdom that arises from the study of history, evangelical theologians will be sensitive to problems that come up in similar situations in the church today and they will become capable of avoiding the mistakes of recent generations. We should not repeat unvaryingly all the practices of former generations. Last, but not least, there is a necessity to use all the tools of the social sciences and humanities in terms of education, mass communication, theory of communication, sociology and so on.

But all these treasures of knowledge should be integrated into a clear perspective of discipling nations for Christ's sake. No theological knowledge and education should replace this eschatological awareness of the coming Christ and the sense of responsibility to save the lost and to lead Christ's flock to maturity and into the likeness of Christ through sanctification.

The missionary outreach of theology can be threatened by a tendency for our teaching to become pure specialization. It has been said, harshly, but with some truth, that 'a specialist in the area of theology is someone who

knows everything about nothing'. If a theologian reflects for many years on the same subjects and does research in only one area of a single theological discipline, the temptation arises to confuse one's own specific research subject with the mandate and needs of the whole church. To stand firm against this temptation, every scholar should challenge himself every day with this provoking question: 'Why should anyone hear the gospel twice before everyone has heard the gospel once?'

Theologians have a tendency to sit down and remain seated, as the rabbis did in Jesus' time. But it was while Jesus was walking throughout Palestine that he taught and disciplined the apostles. Evangelical theology has to be *mobile*. It is the eschatological restlessness and the challenge of the unfinished task of reaching and penetrating every culture for Jesus Christ that gives theology a dynamic power. The urgent need of going into depth in different areas and doing specific research programs and projects to supply evangelists and teachers with profound background knowledge must be balanced with the passion to reach everyone on earth for Christ.

It seems to me, then, that evangelical theology should be shaped by these two dynamic dimensions: first, to dig into the depths of the Scriptures in order to be able to 'demolish arguments and every present pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5); then, to be characterized by the restlessness of ambassadors with an urgent message to communicate. It is a spiritual fact that all real

Christian theology must lead to missions, for it is the Holy Spirit who continually guides and enlightens the theologian in his work of research and teaching; it is the very same Spirit who involves himself in missions to accomplish the unfinished task of world evangelization.

In this context, I want to add one remarkable fact which we as theologians should especially note. Since the period of Romanticism, with its emphasis on originality and individual development, everyone who works as a scholar feels compelled to pioneer and publish something *new*. In many cases, the drive for originality leads theologians to heretical statements and sometimes even to heretical concepts of theology. In the Great Commission, the Lord commands us to teach only what he has taught, not our own modern individual ideas. For this reason, evangelical theology has to remain conservative to be alert in protecting the original Christian faith. But, as fallen beings, we evangelical theologians also feel sometimes the fleshly impulse to oppose the historical Christian doctrine in order to find our own place in provoking the church with strange and controversial ideas. This should not be so.

What, then, is the answer to the temptation to become *stagnant* in a conservative and orthodox theology? Many theologians search for the answers in terms of liberal or syncretistic concepts. However, the right biblical answer to this problem is not liberalism or syncretism, but, rather, missions. If he keeps in step with the Spirit who goes forth to reach the unreached, the theologian is compelled to think new thoughts, contextualizing

the gospel to different nations in order to meet within the apologetic confrontations with new ideologies, religions, and philosophies the heights and depths of Scriptural truth.

Therefore, evangelists, pastors, and theologians should not be at loggerheads, but they should have a mutual exchange. Evangelists and pastors need from time to time some fresh input of deepening doctrine and renewed knowledge for their ministry. In addition, theologians should occasionally cooperate with evangelists and pastors in the grass roots experience of fulfilling the Great Commission. In this way, they ought to serve one another by performing a mutual service to build up the whole church. Permanent contact between theologians and evangelists and pastors will help the theologians in theological education to distinguish between specific projects of research and things that are necessary to teach to every student of theology. They will recognize what research projects are useful and will

have the promise of bearing fruit in the ministry of evangelists and pastors.

Evangelical theology has a future if it is moved by the Spirit to go forth and to recognize what we should say in this eschatological period of salvation history, that is, to proclaim Christ until he comes. The future of evangelical theology is the coming Lord himself, who will charge, test, and reward every theology, as Paul put it: 'If any man builds on this foundation [Jesus Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward' (1 Cor. 3:12-14). Evangelical theologians may look forward with joy and comfort to this climax of history because the living Lord gives his promise also for their task of researching and teaching. 'And surely I am with you always', he says, 'to the very end of the age' (Matt. 28:20).

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