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A Candid History of the *Evangelical Review of Theology*

John Langlois

As it becomes an open-source journal, the Evangelical Review of Theology will be new to most readers, but it has been around for a long time. John Langlois, who was there at the beginning, meshes personal recollections, theology and magic mushrooms in this fascinating story of how the journal came into existence, as part of the amazing revival of evangelical scholarship over the last fifty years.

From its first publication in 1977, the *Evangelical Review of Theology* has sought to present biblical truth so as to support evangelical believers in the ever-changing contemporary world in which they are called to live and witness. Forty-three years later, its purpose remains the same. This should be no surprise. Indeed, throughout the history of the Christian church there has always been a need to teach sound doctrine. Even before the twelve apostles had died, error was seeping into the church.

The apostles were very much aware of this. Late in his life, Paul exhorted Timothy to ‘Follow the standard of sound words which you have heard from me’ (2 Tim 1:13) and to be ‘trained in the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following’ (1 Tim 4:6), because already others in the church were teaching things ‘contrary to sound doctrine’ (1 Tim 1:10). Paul foresaw that ‘the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths’ (2 Tim 4:3).

Paul had exactly the same message for Titus, whom he encouraged to ‘hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it’ (Tit 1:9).

Over the centuries, the Christian church has been preoccupied with the concept of apostolic succession, typically defined as ‘the method whereby the ministry of the Christian Church is held to be derived from the apostles by a continuous succession, which has usually been associated with a claim that the succession is through a series of bishops through the laying on of hands.’ Until the Protestant Reformation, there was little concept of an apostolic succession of *faith*.

John Langlois was Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance’s International Council from 1980 to 2019 and is now Member Emeritus of the Council. He was also chairman of the WEA’s Religious Liberty Commission from 1992 to 2018 and Administrative Secretary of its Theological Commission from 1969 until 1982.

I have been involved with the World Evangelical Alliance (then called the World Evangelical Fellowship) since 1969, when I joined Bruce Nicholls, who had founded the WEF Theological Assistance Programme the previous year. Bruce's passion was to re-establish biblical theology in theological colleges where it had been eroded, and often discarded, during the preceding century of disdain by liberal theologians that had left the church in a dire state.

I refer to the period of one hundred years for a reason. The man generally regarded as the originator of current liberal theology, Julius Wellhausen, became a lecturer at the University of Göttingen in 1870, or exactly 99 years before I teamed up with Bruce Nicholls. In 1882, Wellhausen resigned his post as professor of theology for reasons of conscience, stating in his letter of resignation:

I became a theologian because the scientific treatment of the Bible interested me; only gradually did I come to understand that a professor of theology also has the practical task of preparing the students for service in the Protestant Church, and that I am not adequate to this practical task, but that instead despite all caution on my own part I make my hearers unfit for their office. Since then my theological professorship has been weighing heavily on my conscience.

Unlike Wellhausen himself, his students and followers did not resign. They energetically disseminated liberal theology through universities and theological colleges, deriding those who continued to believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and authoritative for faith and conduct. The World Council of Churches became an instrument to promote liberal theology. The WCC created an Ecumenical Institute in Bossey (near Geneva), Switzerland, which awarded scholarships through its Theological Education Fund to leaders of evangelical churches, often in Africa—training them to inculcate liberal theology in their leadership structures.

In 1968, Bruce Nicholls decided to do something about this situation. The WEF's Theological Assistance Programme was designed to raise the academic standards at evangelical theological colleges by giving promising students opportunities to pursue advanced studies, so that they would be in a position to teach and provide leadership in theological schools themselves. After more than fifty years, Bruce is still passionate in pursuing this never-ending task for theology—the true apostolic succession of faith.

It so happened that my own passion was the same as Bruce's, and by divine intervention God brought us together as co-workers in this important task. Bruce was the theologian and I was his assistant in getting the various programmes organized. We met at the London Bible College, where I was a theology student from 1966 until 1969 at a time when Bruce was undertaking further studies there. The college principal, Gilbert Kirby, just happened to be the previous General Secretary of the WEF. When I sought his advice regarding future ministry options, he mentioned Bruce's need for an assistant, so I met Bruce for a chat. We immediately clicked. We shared the same passion for sound theology.

My passion for good theology goes back to my teenage years, when I could see the erosion of solid theology in the Pentecostal church in which I was raised. In this case, liberal theology was not the cause. Rather, the theological training

its ministers received was very shallow, leaving pastors unable to preach the full counsel of God and the members of their congregations ill-equipped in effective discipleship. I realized that unless the denomination devoted itself to a solid Bible-based foundation, it would become liberal within fifty years, whereas the Methodist Church had taken two hundred years.

That comparison to the Methodists was particularly poignant to me and my family. My family had been active Methodists since the time of John Wesley, but in 1926 my grandfather left the Methodist Church and joined a Pentecostal church because that is where the gospel was preached. He wanted his children to be raised hearing biblical truth. Although the lay members in the Methodist church at that time were good people, the ministers were preaching Modernism—casting doubt on the authority of Scripture, including the Virgin Birth, the physical resurrection of Christ, the second coming and so on.

Without good biblical doctrine, the church cannot survive. That has proved to be the case on Guernsey Island in the English Channel, where I live. In the town where I worship, in the nineteenth century they were no fewer than 23 Methodist chapels. The last Methodist church in the town closed eight years ago.

Let me go back a few more steps, historically. In 1509, the Roman Catholic priest of the parish where I presently live was called John Langlois, the same name as me, a member of my family. Then the Protestant Reformation occurred. On the neighbouring island of Jersey, in 1574 the Royal Court of Jersey, which was the government at the time, asked another member of my family, Martyn Langlois, to go and study Protestant theology in Wittenberg, at Luther's seminary, so that he could return to the island and establish Protestant theology in the churches. It is one thing to declare a reformation of the church, but quite another thing to teach the clergy what the new theology is!

Martyn Langlois completed his studies in Wittenberg and returned to the island of Jersey in 1580. Within four years he had solidly established Protestant theology in the state Church (the Anglican Church). The government was so encouraged that it sent Martyn to Guernsey, the island where I live, to do the same on our island, which he did. Ever since that time the churches on all the Channel Islands have been 95 percent Protestant.

That is the main reason why, in my teenage years, I was passionate about the churches having a solid base in biblical theology. On 6 March 1963, when I was nineteen years old, the Lord called me to devote my life to the cause of raising the standard of evangelical theological education. I was studying law at the time. I eventually completed my law studies and was licensed to practise at the bar, but not before having undertaken my studies in theology.

My immediate objective in studying at London Bible College was to obtain a qualification that would enable me to teach at theological colleges overseas. To achieve that, I needed not only to study for the college degree (which, being evangelical, was not generally accredited) but also for the bachelor of divinity (BD) degree of the University of London. Unfortunately I failed the London BD, as did 72 percent of all theology students in all colleges of the University of London that year. It was a time when liberal theology was rampant throughout the university—a time when biblical answers to examination questions were unacceptable to the liberal examiners, who expected adherence to theories of

higher criticism, 'God is dead' and Jesus as a 'magic mushroom'. I redoubled my efforts to do something about the problem!

Interestingly, the faculty at London Bible College were of the opinion that I would make a better administrator than teacher, so when I met Bruce Nicholls and he told me that he needed an administrator for his work, it became very apparent that this was truly a team in the making, as Bruce was still teaching full-time at Yeotmal Biblical Seminary in India and was not as free to travel widely as I could be.

I spent three months with Bruce in India in 1969, also visiting a number of theological colleges in the country. At the end of that year, I went to Singapore, and in the next three months I set up the WEF Theological Assistance Programme's Asia office (now the Asia Theological Association), with Bong Rin Ro as its first secretary.

My work as administrator involved spreading the message of what was needed to reintroduce sound doctrine in evangelical theological education. We published a quarterly newsletter called *Theological News*, reporting what was happening and what was planned. We also produced a second newsletter, *Programming News*, to introduce the concept of writing specialized courses for students learning through Theological Education by Extension (TEE).

In 1977, we launched the *Evangelical Review of Theology* (ERT), with Bruce as its editor—initially twice a year, then quarterly since 1985. The object was (and still is) 'to publish articles and book reviews from around the world (both original and reprinted) from an evangelical perspective, reflecting global evangelical scholarship for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith, and of relevance and importance to its international readership of theologians, educators, church leaders, missionaries, administrators and students.' I attended to the logistics of publishing ERT—that is, printing, getting subscriptions, keeping mailing lists and distributing each issue.

I served on the WEF's Theological Commission until 1982, when Bruce handed over leadership of the Theological Commission and a new team took over. It was a very creative time as we started out on a task which was so sorely needed fifty years ago. We began as a team of two, but very soon many other people were co-labourers in the task and they deserve all the credit for everything that has happened over the years with God's help.

When I attended the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Asia Theological Association in Singapore in August 2019, I was deeply grateful to God for the huge amount that has been achieved in the past half-century. In 1969, there were just two people with doctoral degrees teaching at evangelical theological schools in Asia; in 2019 there were 516! During that time evangelical colleges have grown and liberal colleges have largely withered and perished, because they taught fake theology which was far removed from apostolic teaching and provided no spiritual nourishment for the faithful. For the past 150 years the liberal denominations have turned aside from the truth and wandered off into myths—such as those theories of higher criticism, 'God is dead' and magic mushrooms.

When he was on earth, Jesus said that He would build his church on the rock of biblical truth, and he is doing just that, as he has done through the ages. The *Evangelical Review of Theology* still has a vital part to play in proclaiming and restating that truth in a changing world.