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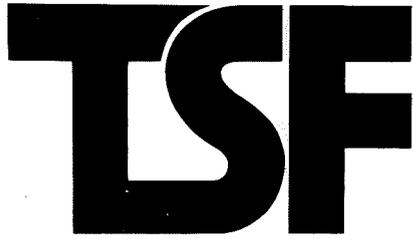
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# BULLETIN

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# “Evangelical”: Integral to Christian Identity?

## An Exchange Between Donald Bloesch and Vernard Eller

*An important contribution to thinking about evangelical Christianity in this country has been made by Donald Bloesch (Dubuque Theological Seminary), in his Future of Evangelical Christianity (Doubleday, 1983). The chapters include: “The problem of evangelical identity,” “The new conservatism,” “Evangelical disunity,” “Pathways to evangelical oblivion,” and “Toward the recovery of evangelical faith.” As an introduction to some of the issues Professor Bloesch raises, we are here printing the concluding section of “Evangelical disunity.”*

*One of the recipients of the proofs for the book was Professor Vernard Eller (University of LaVerne), who responded with a letter to Professor Bloesch. Professors Eller and Bloesch have graciously agreed to let us print both that letter and Professor Bloesch's response.*

### THE GROWING CHURCH CONFLICT

As the values of our secularized society increasingly penetrate into the church, the church is placed in the position of being obliged to strive to maintain its identity and the integrity of its message. On the left, Christian faith is threatened by an ever bolder secular humanism, and on the right by an emerging nationalism.

The evangelical community itself has proved to be vulnerable to ideological and cultural infiltration despite its claim that it has remained separate from the world and has thereby preserved the gospel in its pure form. The evangelical right is tempted to align itself with the political and ideological right, whereas the evangelical left is increasingly enchanted with the ideological left.

Liberal Protestantism, having severed itself from the historical and theological heritage of the church, is even more open to ideological seduction. Some segments of liberalism have been caught up in the ideology of the right. I am thinking here of Moral Re-Armament, Up With People, and Spiritual Mobilization (now defunct). Others have embraced the ideological left, with its uncritical support of radical feminism, abortion on demand and the revolutionary struggles of the third world. The magazine *Christianity and Crisis*, which at one time maintained a genuinely prophetic stance, seems in danger of succumbing to the ideological temptation on the left. *The National Catholic Reporter*, by so closely identifying with left-wing causes, including gay liberation, furnishes still another example of how ideology undermines a genuine prophetic critique of society!<sup>1</sup> Susceptibility to Marxist ideology is becoming ever more apparent in the boards and agencies of the World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches.<sup>2</sup>

The growing church conflict (*Kirchenkampf*) crosses all denominational and ideological lines.<sup>3</sup> The life of the church is not at stake (Christ will always maintain his church), but the ability of the church to speak a sure word from God to the present cultural situation is seriously impaired. In the industrial nations of the West, the church is not threatened by persecution (as is the case behind the Iron Curtain and in many parts of the third world), but it is threatened by seduction by the principalities and powers of the world that sometimes appear in the guise of angels of light.

Where does the pivotal issue lie? Some argue that the church will become relevant again only when it identifies with the poor and the homeless of the world, only when it throws its weight behind the struggle of the dispossessed peoples of the world for liberation. They contend that the church, to maintain itself as the church, must take a firm stand in support of socialism, feminism and pacifism.

*(This article is taken from Chapter IV of **The Future of Evangelical Christianity** by Donald G. Bloesch, © 1983 by Doubleday & Company and reprinted by permission.)*

Others see the overriding issue as the safeguarding of the transcendent vision of the church. They fear that the church is succumbing to an idealistic or naturalistic monism in its encounter with current philosophies and other world religions. This is the concern of those who drew up the Hartford Appeal in 1975.<sup>4</sup>

Still others hold that the church will not free itself from heterodoxy until it reaffirms the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible, its ruling standard for life and conduct. The issue is fidelity to the Bible, and only when this fidelity is restored will we see a growing sensitivity to the world's needs and the rediscovery of transcendence. This view is represented by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the recent books in defense of biblical inerrancy by Harold Lindsell, Norman Geisler, John Warwick Montgomery, R. C. Sproul and others.

My position is that the crucial issue today is the battle for the gospel. It is not simply the authority of the Bible but the integrity of the gospel that is at stake. This includes the ethical imperatives of the gospel as well as the doctrinal distinctives integral to the gospel.

We need to reaffirm what Paul Tillich calls “the Protestant principle,” the protest against absolutizing the relative.<sup>5</sup> Both church and

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*The authentic heirs of the evangelical heritage may find themselves allied with believers in liberal, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.*

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culture today are guilty of creating idols, of absolutizing ideas and values that supposedly serve the cause of human advancement. When either the state or the church, the Bible or the creeds, are invested with divinity, they become obstacles to worship that is done in spirit and in truth; indeed, they become substitutes for the true faith. As evangelicals, we believe that the Bible, the church and the creeds can become the channels or vessels of the Word of God, which alone is absolute; they can render an authentic and binding witness to the Word of God, but in and of themselves they are not to be confused with the very voice of God.<sup>6</sup> We cannot have the Word of God

1. This journal has not, to my knowledge, lent its support to other forms of sexual aberration such as incest and sadomasochism, which are defended by certain segments of the secular liberal community. These criticisms of both *Christianity & Crisis* and *National Catholic Reporter* should not be taken to mean that an authentic prophetic voice can never be heard from their pages. Moreover, when this voice does break through the ideological verbiage, it is one which is seldom available in magazines of a different orientation.

2. For a timely indictment of the World Council of Churches, see Robert Webber, *The Moral Majority: Right or Wrong?* (Westchester, Ill.: Cornerstone Books, 1981), pp. 57–86.

3. The National Council of Churches is now giving serious consideration to including the Metropolitan Community Church in its membership despite the latter's upholding of a gay life-style. Eastern Orthodox members have rightly objected that because such a life-style conflicts with biblical norms, this must be regarded as “a theological issue.”

4. Cf. Paul Vitz: “It is beginning to look as though there is a world-wide fundamental conflict between Christianity and the modern state—a conflict which has little to do with whether the state espouses a leftist or rightist political philosophy.” *Psychology as Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 114.

5. For an assessment of the Hartford Appeal by eight of its participants, see Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Against the World For the World* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

6. I do not share Tillich's belief that the object of faith is the unconditional beyond all human understanding; instead, it is the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, who enters into our understanding and remolds it. The absolute that I affirm became incarnate in a particular place in time in history.

7. Reformation theology holds that by the action of the Spirit the Bible can indeed transmit the Word of God. There is no absolute equation of the Word of God and the Bible, but there is an inseparable relation. The Bible is the vessel, the channel, the medium of the Word of God. The infallible criterion in Reformation theology was not the original autographs (as in later fundamentalism) but the unity of the Bible and the Spirit.

in our pockets, as is the case with the Bible or a church decree, but the Word can have us in his possession. We cannot possess or control the Word of God, but the Word of God can possess and control us. The Word can make us his fitting servants and instruments.

Today, our task is to emphasize the freedom of the gospel in the face of growing centralization of power and authority in the hands of the nation-state or the giant corporations. In America, it seems, the main enemy is the corporate state, the multinational corporations allied with a strong national government. A highly centralized state is not itself the main problem, though it is a contributing factor to the present malady. The real problem is the state in the service of secular humanism (the ideology of democratic socialism) or nationalism (the ideology of the right). It is not the state but state idolatry, it is not secular culture, but culture idolatry, that prove to be adversaries of the church and its gospel. I agree with Dorothy Sayers that

people who say that this is a war of economics or of power-politics, are only dabbling about on the surface of things . . . At bottom it is a violent and irreconcilable quarrel about the nature of God and the nature of man and the ultimate nature of the universe; it is a war of dogma.<sup>7</sup>

The time is approaching when the church in America, like the church in Germany in the 1930s, may be compelled to become a confessing church, one that confesses its faith out of fidelity to the divine commandment, in the face of certain hostility and even persecution. A confessing church will invariably have a confessional statement of faith, though it is not the statement of faith but the gospel that is the real object of its confession. Abraham Kuyper gives this sound advice:

When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin; you must, at the price of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith.<sup>8</sup>

It may well be that the present divisions within evangelicalism will be overshadowed by future divisions. The authentic heirs of the evangelical heritage—those whose ultimate trust is in Jesus Christ alone and whose only message is the gospel that he gives us—may find themselves allied with fellow believers who happen to be in liberal churches and even in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. They may also find themselves opposed by their fellow kinsmen in the faith, those who pride themselves on being evangelical or orthodox.

Before it brings about unity at a deeper level, the gospel creates division among people. The disunity that has its source in personal or denominational pride or in ideological or sociological alignments is an abomination to God. But the disunity that is brought about by the sword of the gospel may indeed be a blessing, since the true church then becomes distinguished from the false church, and people know where the real battle lines are (cf. II Cor. 2:15, 16; Heb. 4:12, 13).

The church today is called to speak a sure word from God concerning the critical social issues of our time: abortion, the population explosion, nuclear war, the poisoning of the environment, the breakdown of the family, and the growing disparity between rich and poor. It is also imperative that it address itself to the crucial theological issues of today: the authority of the Bible, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the meaning of the cross of Christ, the decisive role of the sacraments, and the mission of the church.

A church that claims to be evangelical, catholic and reformed will have to speak to these and other pressing issues. But what it speaks must be the Word of God and not the word of the "new demons," the harbingers of ideology, for then the church would in fact be the false, not the true church. The test of true prophecy is whether the church will recognize and successfully meet the challenges that the Spirit of God has placed upon it for our day.

Dear Don,

I have received and read the proof copy of your newest. And I am honored and pleased to have been chosen as a recipient. (I must also confess that I was somewhat aghast to discover that Doubleday had put out almost \$10 simply in postage as express mail. What was the point of that? You need to teach those people something about Christian simplicity.)

However, I find it simply uncanny how our writing seems to move in simultaneous parallel. Enclosed here is my latest—off the press less than a month now [*Towering Babble*]. It is entirely different from yours in style, approach, form, and probably audience (yours is scholarly in a way mine makes no pretense of being) but we are addressing much the same issue and making much the same point.

Let me, then, respond to your book—hoping that you will feel free to respond just as candidly to mine. First off, it probably goes without saying that, generally speaking, I am in full agreement with your theological analysis, coming out the same place you do on issue after issue. And even if that does go without saying, I want to say it anyhow—simply as an acknowledgement of how deeply I appreciate and value the witness this book (and your total corpus) is making in contemporary Christendom.

Next, from afar, I stand in awe of the scope of scholarship this work represents. The spread of your reading and research (as evidenced by your footnotes) is exceptional; I don't want to be read as even trying to be in the same league with you in this regard. More, in this one book, the spread of your capsulized judgments on issue after issue is encyclopedic. (I must confess that this character of the book also makes it read very like an encyclopedia to me—although this may be what is necessary and wanted in the situation.)

My one big difficulty with the book is what you likely have already guessed—it having been the focus of an earlier conversation between us. I consider that gross confusion is introduced by your using the one term "evangelical" in three distinct references. (1) It identifies your "ideal type" of truly biblical Christianity. (2) It identifies those biblical/theological scholars who can be most helpful in teaching us a truly biblical Christianity. And (3) it identifies what I will here call "classic evangelicalism," namely, that rather well-defined tradition within American Christendom (denominations, schools, institutions, theologies, and recognized leaders) which is eager to identify itself as and wants others to identify it as "evangelical." My problem is that I cannot accept that those three references show any natural convergence or affinity for each other; and to suggest that the three identify a common center I find to be very confusing.

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Most of all, I consider it just plain dangerous to give any particular sector of the empirical church the name of the universal church's ideal-type (or vice versa). For instance, in Chapter II you are describing evangelicalism sheerly as an ideal-type rather than from empirical observation. Then, toward the end of the chapter, you turn to score the fundamentalists—in the process switching from ideal-type to empirical observation. *And if you fairly would have treated empirical evangelicalism the same way, it would have come under many of the same criticisms you bring against the fundamentalists.* I know you do not intend it so—and it certainly is not the whole story of your book—yet I am afraid your terminology becomes an invitation for self-identified evangelicalism to thank God that it is not as other men—when the sad truth is that, in its own way, it is probably about as far off the norm of truly biblical Christianity as is any other sector of the church.

I see my *Babble* book as dedicated to the same truth that your

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), p. 25. Even though these remarks were made several decades ago, they are surprisingly relevant to the present scene.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in G. C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 12.

book is. Yet consider the “gosh-awfulness” that would have resulted if I had tried to cast my argument in your terminology. It then would have run: “The Church of the Brethren was founded upon an evangelical commitment. In this century, we have slipped out of our evangelicalism. What is needed now is that we move back to being more evangelical.”

That way, I would be read as saying that the CoB needs to become more like the NAE churches, more like Wheaton College, more like Carl Henry, Billy Graham (you choose the evangelical brand names). This, of course, is not what I have in mind at all. This, of course, would get my book thrown out of court without so much as a hearing. This, of course, would have lost me the very highly valued recommendations of Markus Barth, Walter Brueggemann, Warren Groff, and the like—who have no interest in promoting establishment evangelicalism. However, by refusing to give my ideal-type a party name, I think I have a book that can be heard not only by self-identified evangelicals but by a lot of people whom the liberals have thought to be liberals but who certainly are not liberals (nor are they evangelicals, either). By keeping the biblical ideal distinct from any party name, I think I leave it free to ignore and cut across all party lines—judging that which is unbiblical in all theological parties, affirming that which is truly biblical in any.

Then, regarding your No. 2 definition of “evangelical,” namely, those biblical theologians who can be of most help in our coming to a truly biblical understanding of the faith, I would guess the two of us would name pretty much the same men. Considering here only modern thinkers, my list would run: Kierkegaard, J. C. and Christoph Blumhardt (to whom I would recommend you very highly), Karl and Markus Barth (with Brunner), Bonhoeffer, and Ellul. I could go on to a longer list of second-rank figures (Cullmann, Jeremias, von Rad, Buber, Hengel, etc.), although I would guess that, with those, our two lists might become quite divergent.

Now it must be observed, first, that this is in no way a happenstance catch; there are very real mutual influences and interconnections among these people. Yet I find no value in giving or reason to give the group any sort of party label. “Neo-orthodoxy” is no help in that it provides no definition that ties the whole group together or explains its commonality. And to my mind, “evangelical” is even worse. What this crew actually represents is an uncommonly fresh approach to and understanding of scripture eventuating in theology done in a style, form, and vocabulary completely different from that of either classic orthodoxy or classic evangelicalism. Primarily, they break theology out of the mold of static, rational formalism (the appropriate form of which is “logical outline”) into the more biblical mold of existential-eschatological dynamism (the appropriate form of which is “the story of God with man”).

The primary value of these guys is in challenging and correcting the biblical understanding of any and every party. So they ought not be identified as representatives of the one, true party addressing the other, defective parties. In your book, you told us (two or three times) that Barth and Brunner called themselves “evangelicals.” However, you know that they were speaking in a different language (German) and in a context different from classic American evangelicalism. You know they were saying only that they were committed to being biblical in their thought and not at all identifying themselves with or expressing their approval of classic evangelicalism’s interpretation of the Bible. You know that the formulation of their biblical understanding did not come out of evangelical sources but directly from scripture as they strove to correct their inherited “liberal” upbringing. And you know that only quite recently have a handful of quite atypical evangelicals become willing to listen to this crew as being legitimate teachers of scripture or to identify them as evangelical brothers. I find it imperative to keep these people free from any party alignment so that they can make their biblical critique of any and all parties. Of course, they are profoundly critical of all forms of liberalism. But I find them to be just as truly and helpfully critical of classic evangelicalism as well.

Allow me to cite some examples of the latter. With the direct help of the Blumhardts and Markus Barth’s *Justification* (and the indirect help of the crew as a whole), I contend that my book includes a more truly biblical summary of the faith than that of your summary of classic evangelicalism. Mine is found in *Babble*, pages 65–76. Yours, as I read it, starts and centers in the cross (and that particularly as

atonement for personal sin) and then goes on to list a number of subhead doctrines under that.

Mine, by starting with God’s eschatological purpose for creation, gives the whole faith a unity and continuity and makes a place within which every aspect of it can fit. It establishes a thematic for the overall story of God with man. On the contrary, classic evangelicalism’s (hereafter “ce”) treatment of eschatology as one doctrine out of a subhead list, leaves the faith as a formal, static outline and is most unbiblical in failing to use eschatology for the preeminent significance the Bible gives it.

My first six points have the effect of getting the gospel underway even with and throughout the Old Testament. Ce’s going straight for the cross foreshortens the gospel by half and very often reduces the OT’s significance to simply prophetic prediction of the cross.

My last two points, I contend, are more truly biblical for properly treating the cross as one event out of the total sequence of Christ’s

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salvific-eschatological work rather than as the unique, paradigmatic work to which everything else must be subordinated.

This relates, then, to what may be my most serious charge against ce—and your treatment illustrates it. It is entirely unbiblical to center on the cross in a way that separates it from the resurrection. Those two must be held together as a single event if either aspect is to carry its true significance. Specifically, when separated, in ce, the cross becomes the atoning action Christ took for us—his dying so that we don’t have to—which we need only accept by faith. However, Markus Barth has demonstrated (to my mind conclusively) that Paul’s understanding was rather that Jesus’ death-and-resurrection is atoning as, by faith, we die and are resurrected with him. There is nothing saving about Good Friday until Easter gets into the picture. The Bible knows nothing of an atonement that begins and ends in the cross and is otherwise cheap grace in that it asks nothing of us. No, only the total action of Jesus’ death-and-resurrection (and our faithful readiness to undergo it with him) will fill the biblical bill.

My argument is that even your most accurate description of ideal evangelicalism (let alone empirical reality of the party) falls far short of being the truest possible type of biblical Christianity. And I am not arguing that some other party should be cast in that role. Let me pursue the matter further by doing a contrast between Markus’ study of the biblical (Pauline) understanding of “justification” and the ce understanding of the same. In *Babble*, I name *Justification* as the one best, brief presentation of the gospel I know. Some of Barth’s points we already have touched upon.

As I understand the ce doctrine, justification is something that happens to an individual believer when, in faith, he accepts Christ’s atoning work on the cross. Although in no way denying the necessity of personal justification, Barth breaks this concept wide open by eschatologizing it to show that “justification” is Paul’s name for God’s plan to get his whole creation made right. Consequently, justification deals in terms of faith communities, human races, and cosmoses (possibly “cosmii”) in a time frame stretching from Creation to New Creation—a great improvement over ce’s tendency to identify justification as that which happens to you when you go forward in a revival meeting.

In order to understand Paul’s “justification,” Barth has to go back and pick up the OT’s central metaphor, the juridical picture of the righteous Judge whose sole work is the justification of whatever is wrong (individually, socially, politically, cosmically). Barth operates out of a much larger and fuller “word of God” than does ce.

Barth sees that Paul will not tie justification to a point event (namely, the cross) but, rather, makes the total eschatological work of Christ (in its past, present, and future aspects) his justifying work. Above all, Barth will not let the cross be split off from the resurrection. Justification involves our dying and rising with Christ (as the crea-

tion itself must eventually die and rise with him) rather than our simply being spectators to something he does for us. Further, Barth resists all cheap grace implications of "forensic justification," the legal fiction of the Judge calling us innocent without the necessity of our happening any actual transformation of our character. And again, Barth beautifully resists any theory of the cross that explains it in terms of impersonal transaction instead of the very much person-to-person relationships of Judge, Advocate, and the Condemned.

Although he never draws the implication, Barth's biblical interpretation condemns liberalism as being hardly biblical at all but also condemns ce for a different sort of reductionism (making the gospel smaller and narrower than the Bible has it). Rather than evangelicalism's condescension in now accepting Barth (and company) as "an evangelical," one of us, a true biblical Christian just like we are, I think he ought to be left free to hit evangelicalism right where it needs to be hit. In using the term "evangelical" as broadly and indiscriminately as you do, I find your book too self-congratulatory of evangelicalism by half. I grant you that it is better off than liberalism; but that doesn't make it God's answer for his church.

So much for that. I trust you can hear that I am speaking in love, that I still stand in strong agreement with you theologically and am arguing only with your decision to make "evangelicalism" the name of the true faith. I do appreciate your laudatory citations of my *Kierkegaard* and *Language* books—although I do feel a bit abused by the one comment regarding *Language*. In that book I never offered to do nor claimed that I had done a total review of the Bible's imagery for God. Such would have been out of place. I was determined to address no subject other than language. And for that purpose it was sufficient to show than any attempt to evade or undercut the essential masculinity of God runs entirely counter to God's own self-revelation in scripture.

If you are interested in the different topic of how I handle the feminine imagery and characteristics the Bible clearly attributes to God, I refer you to the enclosed article, "Engendering Controversy." You will discover there that I welcome such femininity as a necessary component of his ideal masculinity—yet certainly not as something that throws his essential gender identity into question—any more than saying that a widower has been a real mother to his children raises questions about his actual gender. And this, I would contend, is the only possible biblical answer. Certainly it cannot be argued that scripture shows uncertainty, questioning, or confusion regarding what sort of gender identification God has chosen for himself.

And this brings me to a final matter. On the strength of my *Language* book, I was invited this spring to join a sort of informal, rump seminar that read papers to each other. We met in Claremont, and several of the members have association with the School of Theology though are not at all representative of its position and tradition. There were six or seven men and the wife of one of these. We represented Brethren, Mennonite, United Methodist, and Episcopal churches. All are ordained. Some would call themselves evangelicals and some would not; but none are theological liberals. Represented were professionals in biblical studies, the theology, black church studies, cultural history, and clinical psychology.

Our studies developed the thesis mentioned at the conclusion of the Engendering article. Namely: true "fathering" is as much as nonexistent in the animal kingdom and even among the higher primates. Fathering is, thus, a human invention. Yet, within pagan mythologies and among pagan peoples, although a father figure is regularly present, he tends to come across as quite remote, marginal, and ineffectual. Clearly, a rich, true, and precious concept of "father" was introduced into human history only with the biblical God's revelation of himself. In consequence, the people of this God developed the greatest understanding and practice of fathered family known to human history. The Father God became the model for human fathers, in relationship to whom could then develop true understandings of mother and child. But sad to say, under the pressures of pagan culture, quite early in Christian history began a gradual erosion of the Father-God model and a gradual feminization of the faith. The repercussions inevitably affected the role of human fathering and family life generally. This currently has brought us to a social crisis as threatening as anything we face in nuclear war, the endangered environment, poverty, liberal theology, or wherever. The

seminar has been a real eye-opener for me.

The seminar has concluded, and our organizer is currently collecting our papers and trying to get them into reputable shape. Our intent, then, is to duplicate them and share the package around with scholars who might be interested in joining the cause with some contributions of their own. The outcome might be a book, articles appearing in various journals, or simply an underground network. I have mentioned your name to the group and will see that you get a copy when the package is ready.

Thanks again for the advance copy of your book. I wish you the best with it. And I want you to know that I found it a very helpful overview and analysis of the evangelical scene—even though I can't buy the terminology around which you organize it.

Babblingly yours,



September 5, 1983

Dear Vernard,

I appreciate receiving your thoughtful response to my latest book *The Future of Evangelical Christianity*. I have always admired your courage to stand against the stream and champion a viewpoint that is currently out of fashion. You and I have many things in common including such mentors as Kierkegaard, the Blumhardts, Jacques Ellul and Karl Barth. I have other mentors, however, of whom you are sometimes quite critical: Luther, Calvin and Augustine. This perhaps accounts for some of our differences concerning the meaning of evangelical as well as disagreements on another theme—justification.

Your basic reservation concerning my book and my position generally is that I persist in using the term *evangelical* to denote a particular movement or thrust in theology. You claim that the word "evangelical" belongs to the whole church, and I agree. At the same time, many segments of the church have lost sight of the very meaning of the gospel: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and rose from the dead for our justification and redemption. There are various theological schools that reduce the gospel to a system of ethics. There are others that call into question the reliability and even the normativeness of the biblical witness concerning the gospel. With the Reformers and their Puritan and Pietist descendants, I affirm that the integrity of the gospel cannot be maintained without holding to the divine authority, inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture. The divine content of the Bible cannot be divorced from its historical form, from what Barth calls "the language of Canaan." This is why (with Barth) I reject *Sach* criticism (a critique of the substance or message of Scripture in the light of an extra-biblical criterion) but make a place for literary and historical criticism.

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***I question your intimation that one can go to the Bible directly without standing in a particular tradition or having some theological affiliation.***

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I am somewhat surprised by your refusal to acknowledge that the evangelical ideal, classical evangelicalism and the current evangelical movement (in America and elsewhere) have a natural affinity and convergence. I contend that evangelicalism as an ideal type is definitely reflected, though in various degrees, in classical evangelicalism (which I identify with the faith of the Reformation) and in the evangelical renewal movements that have proceeded out of the Reformation, including 19th and 20th century revivalism. The evangelical ideal is brokenly reflected but nevertheless truly attested in these movements. The substitutionary, vicarious sacrifice of Christ

on the cross, his glorious resurrection from the dead, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, salvation by grace, justification by faith alone, the divine authority and primacy of Holy Scripture and the urgency of evangelism are themes that unite all of these movements. In addition, the blessed hope of Christ's second appearing figures prominently in this evangelical heritage, though it was somewhat muted in the Reformation itself because the polemics of the time were directed to other issues.

Many theologians in the past as well as in the present (such as Erasmus) have disclaimed the designation "evangelical"; most but not all of these should be regarded as heterodox rather than orthodox. As a student at the Chicago Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago Divinity School, I had some teachers who went out of their way to disassociate themselves from what both of us would identify as evangelical affirmations. Their reinterpretation of the gospel was tantamount to a denial of the gospel, and I think you might agree here too. You are right that every Christian and every theologian should be evangelical, i.e., centered in the gospel and dedicated to the proclamation of the gospel to a lost and dying world, but this is simply not the case. Therefore, it is legitimate to distinguish between a theology or movement that is truly evangelical and one that is heterodox (but still within the purview of Christian faith and tradition). I also grant that there are members of the clergy and theologians who claim to be evangelical but whose credentials as evangelicals can be questioned. I am thinking of Robert Schuller, for example, who reveals his abysmal distance from the faith of the Bible and of the Reformation in his newest book *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. This is not an argument for dropping the use of the term evangelical; instead, it is a challenge to refine and clarify what this word and what this kind of theology should mean for our day.

You question whether Karl Barth should be considered an evangelical in the sense in which I am using it. Even though the word *evangelisch* has increasingly come to carry a sociological rather than a specifically theological meaning in German-speaking Europe, it can be shown that Barth made a definite effort to use the word in its theological or biblical context. He often contrasted "evangelical theology" with Roman Catholic theology on the one hand and "neo-Protestant theology" on the other. In his conflict with Bultmann, he challenged Bultmann's credentials as "an evangelical theologian" and confessed that Bultmann's position, like Roman Catholic theology, represented for him an altogether different form of Christianity (*Karl Barth/Rudolf Bultmann Letters*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, Eerdmans, 1981, p. 65).

You aver that by using the term "evangelical," one would alienate some leading biblical scholars who would not wish to identify themselves with the current evangelical movement. In my opinion, to disassociate oneself from the riches of the evangelical heritage and *all* of its contemporary manifestations is too high a price to pay for their respect and applause. If they cannot abide a legitimate use of the word "evangelical," that intolerance is more their problem than ours.

I question your intimation that one can go to the Bible directly without standing in a particular tradition or having some theological affiliation. In your new and provocative book *Towering Babble*, you confess that you belong to "the biblical school of theology," so I do not see how you can take issue with me when I align myself with "evangelical theology." At one point in your letter you seem to identify yourself with "story theology." In this discussion, Karl Barth would have been closer to my preferences in terminology than to yours. Barth had some real problems with the biblical theology movement, even though this movement was indebted to him.

I also take issue with your statement that the theological understanding arrived at by Barth and Brunner came "directly from scripture" and that they did "not at all" draw from "evangelical sources." This is how a sect mentality might understand the situation, but it certainly is not true in either case. Both of these men acknowledged their indebtedness to Kierkegaard and the Blumhardts, representatives of evangelical Pietism. Both also sought to be faithful to the Reformed tradition and to speak as Reformed theologians. Both confessed how much they were aided in their theological development by Calvin and Luther, the leading figures of classical evangelicalism. In addition, Barth came to a cautious admiration of Protestant Orthodoxy. He described this movement as a source of light for him on

his theological pilgrimage, even though he had to take exception to some of its conclusions, especially in the areas of Scripture and revelation. Barth commended Heinrich Heppes *Reformed Dogmatics* and even wrote the foreword to this monumental work.

You may well reply that it can be shown that Barth and Brunner were not influenced by what you call American classic evangelicalism, and there is some truth in this allegation, since there are very few German-speaking theologians who have ever taken American theology seriously. Yet American evangelicalism was decisively shaped by English Puritanism and continental Pietism, and at least

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***I believe that the term "evangelical" needs to be rehabilitated and restored rather than abandoned.***

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the second movement had a significant impact on the dialectical theology. As a matter of fact, both the Puritan tradition and the ethnic continental churches in America (Lutheran and Reformed) drew heavily upon the theology of the Reformation and of Protestant Orthodoxy. Philip Schaff, a leader in the Evangelical Alliance for the U.S.A. and a pastor in the German Reformed church, sought to differentiate "evangelical theology" from both "rationalism" (modernist theology) and Roman Catholicism. The way in which he delineates the differences is practically the same as that of Barth and Brunner. Schaff, whose roots were in continental evangelicalism, gave his support to America's leading evangelist at the time, Dwight L. Moody.

American evangelicalism, before the rise of fundamentalism, was remarkably similar to English Puritanism and Dutch and German Pietism, and confessional and dialectical theologians in Europe drew upon all these sources, though not to the same degree. Helmut Thielicke expressed his admiration for the English evangelical Charles Spurgeon, indeed holding him up as a model preacher. Both Brunner and Bonhoeffer gave a qualified endorsement to the Oxford Group, a revival movement of American origin. Barth especially came to have an increasing respect for Pietism, including its English and American versions.

When I speak of the gospel of the cross, I, of course, include the resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and the second advent. I prefer to speak of the cross rather than "the Christ event" (in the manner of Tillich) because the cross epitomizes the heart of the gospel: the vicarious, atoning suffering of Christ for the sins of a fallen human race. The atoning work of Christ was completed on the cross, but its concrete efficacy in the world is dependent on the resurrection of Christ and Pentecost.

With the Reformers, Barth and Ellul, I affirm the unity of the biblical revelation and therefore make a real place for the hidden Christ in the Old Testament. Indeed, with Calvin, I see the gospel of the cross in the Old Testament as well as the New, just as I see the church of Jesus Christ beginning with Abraham.

Regarding your allegation that I do not subject empirical evangelicalism to the same kind of critical scrutiny in the light of the gospel as empirical fundamentalism, I have to retort that you have overlooked a major section of my book. In my view, fundamentalism is a part of the wider evangelical movement, but one which is regrettably insular and provincial. But this insularity and sectarianism are also present in much of empirical evangelicalism, including center and left evangelicalism. This is made abundantly clear in Chapter V, "Pathways to Evangelical Oblivion."

I believe that the term "evangelical" needs to be rehabilitated and restored rather than abandoned, and this is what I have tried to do in this book. Likewise, such controversial terms as "Reformed" and "Catholic" need to be redefined in fresh and vital ways, not discarded.

This brings me to your latest book *Towering Babble* in which you boldly critique the life and thought of your own denomination. I could not agree with you more on your warnings against ideological feminism, liberation theology, peace zealotry and selective sin and righteousness.

I thought your remarks on the secularization of the peace movement within the churches today were especially profound and very

much needed. Unlike you, I am not an absolute pacifist, but I have taken a stand against weapons of mass extermination, and therefore I am virtually a pacifist in the modern context. At the same time, pacifism, while it can be a confession of conscience, is an extremely difficult strategy for nations, and here Reinhold Niebuhr's relevance may come to the fore. I think that it is risky, however, to speak of war as a *necessity*, as Ellul does, because this tends to make nations that wage war inculpable. Nations and the leaders of nations are responsible before God for their decisions, but this would not be the case if their actions were determined by some inner or outer necessity. My own thought on this subject is still evolving, and my statements on this question in my book need to be amplified and expanded.

I agree with you that true peace, eternal peace, will not come to the world until the eschaton, which signifies both the telos and finis of history. At the same time, does not the Bible hold out hope for a millennial foretaste of this peace before the second coming of Christ? You need a strong dose of millennialism (which the Blumhardts had) to counteract the pessimism of Jacques Ellul.

My final comments will be directed to your discussion of justification in your book. Here the issues that separate us become much more clear. You lean heavily on Markus Barth's treatment of justification as an eschatological process rather than simply a forensic declaration of acquittal. Markus Barth does not deny the latter dimension, but relegates it very much to the background. I do not agree that the "forensic justification" position, upheld in classical Protestantism, makes justification a "legal fiction," although it does in fact sometimes create this impression. The Reformers and their Orthodox followers meant to say that the penalty for sin was truly paid, but it was paid by God himself who took upon himself the just retribution of our transgressions in the person of his Son, in his sacrificial life and death. Therefore the guilt for our sin has been fully and definitively removed. But Christ sanctifies those whom he justifies, and this is why a change in character invariably accompanies the pronouncement of justification.

I concur that justification has an eschatological dimension, since Christ at his second coming will reveal and confirm what he has fully accomplished through his sacrificial atoning death at Calvary and his glorious resurrection from the grave. Yet I would take issue with you when you assert that the second coming of Christ *accomplishes* our justification (p. 111). This denies the sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ on the cross. You give the illustration of the diagnosis of cancer (the justification at Calvary) and its surgical removal (the resurrection of the dead at the eschaton, which supposedly completes justification). But does not this surgical removal take place when we are grasped by the justifying grace of the crucified and risen Christ in the awakening to faith?

The plan of salvation is fulfilled by his second coming, but the work of salvation (justification) is finished. Your emphasis on the need for a completion of justification perhaps explains why you are uncomfor-

table with a theology of the cross and prefer a theology of eschatological hope. I have the feeling that we are closer on this issue than it first appears, but I may be mistaken.

Finally, I have difficulty with the Barthian concept of cosmic justification, which you approve. It seems to me on the basis of my reading of the Gospels and epistles that justification is personal rather than cosmic, and it pertains to the church but not to the whole world. Does the cross and resurrection event mean that God says "Yes" to humanity or "Yes" to faith, the believing community? Paul says that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1, 3:26). All things were consigned to sin "that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Gal. 3:22). Those who reject Jesus Christ and his salvation are still under the law of sin and death (Jn. 8:24; Eph. 5:6). This is not the place to exegete those many passages that affirm the universal outreach of the atonement, but I contend on the basis of Scripture that the justification and sanctification won for us by Christ are of no effect until we make contact with these realities through faith and obedience.

Our differences undoubtedly stem at least in part from our church backgrounds. My background is in one of the churches of the mainline Reformation (the Evangelical & Reformed Church) where the influence of a churchly evangelical Pietism was nonetheless very strong. Your background is in the Church of the Brethren, which is identified with both the left-wing Reformation and Radical Pietism. I believe, by the way, that on the question of cosmic justification I would have most Pietists as well as Kierkegaard with me.

We are both indebted to the prodigious work of Karl Barth, but I stand closer to Barth in his early and middle phases whereas you are closer to him in his later development (where he breaks with sacramentalism).

Thank you again for your critical assessment of my book, and thank you also for your book. I feel that you are a closet evangelical who is reluctant to identify with the evangelical movement for fear of severing communication with your liberal colleagues. But this may be an entirely unfair judgment. I would encourage you not to hide your evangelical allegiance, however, because we in the evangelical movement need voices such as yours that call us to sanity as well as sanctity.

Yours in the service of His kingdom,

*Don*

P.S. I appreciate your recommendation of the Blumhardts. I have learned from them in the past, but I need to read them more thoroughly. You will be interested to know that I am finding your book on the Blumhardts *Thy Kingdom Come* very helpful for an assignment that I am now working on concerning the secularization of the modern church.

## DECEMBER PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

### Evangelical Theology Group at the AAR

The Evangelical Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion is holding three sessions during this year's annual meeting. On Tuesday, December 20 (9 a.m.-12 noon), the topic will be "Theological Turning Points." The panel includes Clark Pinnock, Royce Gruenler, Gerald Sheppard and Donald Dayton. There will also be a paper, "Typologies and Biographies: Evangelical Turning Points" by Dayton. On Wednesday (3 p.m.-6 p.m.) Donald McKim, Paul Feinberg, Harold Hunter and Thomas Finger will present papers under the theme "Methodologies in Interfacing Biblical and Systematic Theologies." A roundtable on Wednesday (1:30 p.m.-3 p.m.) on "Evangelical and Process Thought," will focus on papers by Stephen Franklin and Royce Gruenler. (You must have advanced reservations for the roundtable and pick up the papers earlier in the week.) Registration and/or membership information can be obtained from Scholars Press, P.O. Box 2268, Chico, CA 95927.

### Evangelical Theological Society

The Evangelical Theological Society will be meeting December 15-17 at the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas. The theme is "Preaching and Biblical Exegesis," plenary speakers including W. A. Criswell, Ray Stedman, James Boice, Stephen Olford, Richard Halverson. The Evangelical Philosophical Society and the Near Eastern Archaeological Society will meet concurrently. Sessions begin 1:00 P.M. on Thursday and conclude at noon on Saturday. For more information write ETS Local Arrangements Chairman, Criswell Center for Biblical Studies, 525 N. Ervay, Dallas, TX 75201.

### Institute of Biblical Research

The Institute of Biblical Research will be meeting December 18-19 in Dallas. Earl Ellis and Edwin Yamauchi will deliver papers, and sessions will be devoted to (1) linguistics, computers, and the study of the Bible, and (2) the use of the Kaypro II computer in scholarly writing (hands-on). The (dinner) meeting December 18 begins at 6:00 P.M.; the Monday sessions end at 12:30 P.M. Further information may be obtained from Jerry Hawthorne at the Wheaton College Graduate School. (Meeting location not yet finalized as of October 31.)