Evangelical Theology Should Be Evangelical

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Evangelical theology is not a popular cause these days. In many evangelical churches, theology of any stripe is something for which apologies are rendered from the pulpit whenever an intrepid preacher ventures onto its turf. Among some evangelicals, theology is something to be held up for amusement or scorn, as the silly games of underemployed and slothful intellectuals. Or theology is something to be feared as an abyss of dangerous speculation in which one’s traditional faith can be torn apart in the crosscurrents of divergent and even antagonistic streams of thought.

Having attended my share of professional theological conferences and read more than a few books of academic theology, I confess to some sympathy with these attitudes. But such antipathies hardly serve to encourage the work of evangelical theology.

The situation for evangelical theology is actually even worse than this, however, for trouble lies even within the ranks of the theologians. For nowadays evangelical theologians over here are enamored with Karl Barth, or over there by his latter-day saints, the postliberals. Some evangelicals currently explore intellectual trajectories farther, along which have traveled the theologians of process, while others seek wis-
dom from the ancient Eastern churches. Some evangelicals find both stimulation and stability in the first millennium, while others seek it in early modern Reformed scholasticism. And some few evangelicals work creatively in liberationist, feminist, and postmodern modes.

Evangelicals these days, then, seem to be looking interestedly at what almost everyone else is doing in theology. This openness to learn from other Christians is to be commended, particularly as one considers the confessional or fundamentalist blinkers many of these brothers and sisters have labored to shed. Still, however, the evangelical tradition itself stimulates precious little creative work within evangelicalism and virtually none, to my knowledge at least, from without. While evangelicals around the world rejoice as millions of people convert to their form of Christianity, there are few theologians of stature who have converted to evangelical theology from some other tradition and now work within it. And even if I have overlooked a notable convert or two, to look for converts is to miss the larger point. Evangelicals can and do explore Ruether, or Hartshorne, or Zizioulas, or Gutiérrez in order to enrich their evangelicalism. But which liberals, neo-orthodox, Roman Catholics, or what-have-you take the evangelical tradition seriously as a theological resource even to enrich their own perspectives?

Whether or not anyone else takes notice, however, I suggest that the evangelical tradition itself continues to offer good gifts to evangelical theologians today. And I do not mean merely that this or that overlooked or forgotten evangelical theologian deserves greater attention—although it is gratifying to see attention paid to Jonathan Edwards and increasing attention paid to Adolf Schüller, to mention just two worthy examples from the past. I mean that the evangelical tradition itself provides a stance in which theology can be ably and helpfully undertaken in our time. It is, I would now like to contend at some length, a stance that both guards against some of the dangers of contemporary theology and guides toward the benefit of all those who study the theology it produces.

What Is "Evangelical"?

It is an irony that in a tradition that prizes plain, clear speech, the very word evangelical is patois of at least half a dozen definitions, and


2. For more thorough discussion of definition, see D. W. Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1-19; George Marsden, "Introduction," in Evangelicism and Modern America, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), viii-xvi; and John G. Stockhouse, Jr., Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 6-12.
ment of new birth and the lifetime of transformation that follows as the Holy Spirit prepares us for eternity with God.

Fourth, evangelicals believe and champion mission as the chief goal of Christian life on earth. At times, such activism in seeking to bring to others both the message of salvation and the charity of Christ has meant that evangelicals have paid relatively less attention to worship, or theology, or the cultivation of the earth, and other expressions of the well-rounded Christian life. Still, evangelicals affirm that Christ has built the church on earth and maintains it here not merely, or even primarily, to praise, or to think, or to garden, but to make disciples.

Fifth, evangelicals believe and champion these four elements of the generic Christian tradition in ways that other traditions do not. To be sure, all branches of the orthodox Christian faith affirm the story of salvation centering on Christ; the authority of the Bible as God’s written Word (even as some place other authorities alongside it); the necessity of conversion; and the call to mission. There is nothing peculiarly evangelical in any of these four convictions. But evangelicals place special emphasis on this constellation of four and do so in such a way as to relativize every other conviction. There is nothing in the generic evangelical impulse that militates directly against denominational distinctives and divisions, but there is an important ecumenical dynamic to the elevating of these four convictions above the faultlines of denominational division. Evangelicals see these four convictions as nonnegotiable elements of Christian profession and practice, and therefore are willing to negotiate, or even simply leave to each Christian community, decisions regarding all other issues of dispute, which are seen as secondary and nonessential. This transdenominationalism, therefore, is the fifth evangelical quality to round out our list.3

So what? That was then, this is now, and tomorrow will be yet another new context. Why should the convictions of two hundred years ago guide us in contemporary theology? Indeed, these convictions might have been helpful then, as they are today, for providing a basis for cooperative evangelical ministry. But how useful are they theologically?

Bold and exciting it would be, indeed, to call all Christian theologians to adopt evangelical principles. I shall aim, however, at a more modest objective: to encourage evangelical theologians—that is, theologians who already take these five principles seriously for their Christian identity—to be guided by these convictions in their theological work. And as fellow Christians watch evangelicals doing so, one might entertain the hope that such Christians will find it sufficiently interesting and (more important by far) edifying so as to learn what they can from it, even as we evangelicals already are learning from them.

Evangelical Convictions and Evangelical Theology

Christ and Salvation

Evangelical theology ought to focus on Jesus Christ both epistemologically and substantively. Thus, evangelical theology ought to be both Christological and Christocentric.

In the epistemological sense, evangelicals traditionally have interpreted the Bible and gone on to construct theology primarily in the light of the revelation of God in Christ. Historical-critical exegesis of the Old Testament properly considers the process by which God’s revelation of himself and his work on earth emerges in human, and particularly in Israelite, history. But evangelicals unapologetically not only move forward from beginning to end of so-called progressive revelation in the Old Testament but also freely move backward from the New Testament to see the Old Testament illuminated in the light of God’s definitive revelation in Jesus. Similarly, as evangelicals encounter later developments in Christian thought and practice—whether the formulation of the doctrine of God as Trinity, or the understanding of the status and role of Mary and the saints, or the direction of Christian mission in the world—they properly, even reflexively, refer back always to what God has revealed of himself during the earthly career of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the substantive sense, evangelical theology views Christ as the center of God’s story—the most important thing God has ever done or said. The person and work of Christ do not merely crown God’s work of revelation and redemption as a sort of splendid ornament or even as the best example of God’s activity in the world. The person and work of Christ constitute the defining chapter of the whole narrative, the hinge of history, the basis upon which everything else in creation makes sense.

One might think that a religion that is content to be called “Christianity” would not need evangelicals (or any others) to champion the importance of a “Christ-ion” focus to its theology. Yet in contemporary theology, as in the history of Christian thought, theologians have called theology away from its Christological and Christocentric focus.

A couple of decades ago, James Gustafson wrote his well-known ethics that calls for a “theocentric” perspective, stating straightforwardly in the title what most liberal theology has taught since Schleierma-

3. Evangelical statesman John R. W. Stott demonstrates this quality vividly in the conclusion to his Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity, and Faithfulness (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 115–19.
cher—himself perhaps the first and last liberal to see the Redeemer as essential, and not just helpful, in salvation history.  

Process theology interprets the world through the scheme of A. N. Whitehead and his theological epigones, not through any important Christological lens. And the "salvation history" celebrated by process theology has no central role for Jesus to play. His witness to the truth of God and his example to his followers in realizing that truth constitute a considerable gift to humanity. But the actual scheme of God "hurling" the world to its highest end does not in any important sense require the career of Jesus of Nazareth, as the orthodox gospel does.  

It is this reduction of the importance of Jesus that, not coincidentally, links liberals such as Gustafson and process theologians such as John Cobb to a third form of contemporary Christian thought that also is determinedly non-Chistological and non-Christocentric, namely, pluralism in the encounter with world religions. In the pluralism espoused by John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Hans Küng, and many others, Jesus is one prophet among many, an admirable man who gestured instructively toward Ultimate Reality and provided a model for relating appropriately to that reality—just as Lao Tzu, Moses, Confucius, Krishna, Zoroaster, Gautama Buddha, and Muhammad did. Evangelical theology rightly maintains the "scandal of particularity" in this conversation, even as evangelicals themselves debate just how best to understand the work of Christ toward non-Christians and the relationship of the Christian faith and other faiths.  

Liberal theology of various stripes is not the only sort of theology needing correction from an evangelical focus on Christ, particularly in his cross and resurrection. Recently, evangelical theologians have encountered, and some embraced, Orthodox theology—perhaps epitomized best in John Zizioulas's work. There is much in both Orthodoxy's piety and theology to complement and even correct Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. But evangelicals who appreciate their tradition's emphasis on the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and see such an emphasis as emergent from the New Testament itself, will be cautious about a too hasty and too enthusiastic embrace of a theological tradition that does not share this emphasis.  

Indeed, non-Orthodox Christians have long been chary of Orthodoxy's focus on ontological categories of divinity and humanity, eternal and temporal, spirit and matter, when it comes to salvation. In the light of these concerns (which doubtless reflect Orthodoxy's cultural cradle in the Hellenistic East), Orthodoxy focuses more on the incarnation itself as the basis of salvation—as God bridges the various ontic divides—and the impartation of God's divine nature to the human soul as the central mechanism of this salvation. However much Catholic and Protestant Christians can profit from such a theological model (and I believe we can profit a great deal), evangelicals do well not to throw over their model in their excitement over the riches of the Eastern traditions. Instead, evangelicals ought to recognize that Orthodoxy's model—Christ-centered as it is, in its way—also does not fully account for the biblical portrait of Christ.  

Within evangelical theology itself, finally, a Christological and Christocentric reminder perhaps needs to be issued to those who currently pursue trinitarianism as a sort of key to unlock a wide range of theological puzzles. We can learn about the one true God, yes, from Old Testament revelation that only hints at God's trinitarian nature, but we know what we know about the Trinity per se mostly because of God's revelation in Christ. It was, after all, the disciples' encounter with Christ that led to their worship of him and conceptualizing of him as the divine Lord—thus leading to a unitarian understanding of God that became trinitarian only as Christian thought matured (indeed, one would say, only as the Holy Spirit himself guided the church to this insight). And the Holy Spirit remains—despite some impressive expositions by evangelicals of late—a relatively minor, shadowy figure in the New Testament compared with the center stage, fully lit person of


Jesus. 9 For all we know, to put the point more provocatively than it perhaps should be put, God might actually be “quadritarian”—or more complex still. Christian theology, after all, has inferred the triune nature of God from what we see in God’s revelation in Christ.

Of course evangelicals should be trinitarian (for we have no evidence that God is more than a trinity and lots of evidence that he is), and of course we should plumb what depths we can of God’s revelation of himself as trine in order to know and enjoy and serve him best. My concern here is simply to emphasize that evangelicals ought to maintain our Christological approach and Christocentric emphasis in all doctrine, including the doctrine of God. This tradition will keep us from presuming to know more about, and emphasizing more than we should about, the Holy Spirit, or God the Father, or the Triune God in Godself. God the Holy Spirit points us to Christ, and Christ is the one who shows us God the Father.

The Bible

Evangelicals have always been “Bible people.” Evangelicalism typically has championed excellent preaching, personal Bible study, general biblical literacy—all in the name of the unique authority of the Bible for our belief and practice. Evangelicals have symbolized this regard for the Bible typically by erecting impressive pulpits in the center of church platforms, by lionizing great preachers, and by observing rituals of everyday piety, such as never letting a Bible rest on the floor or be covered by another book.

Indeed, among the criticisms most frequently leveled against evangelicals is that we are too focused on the Bible at the expense of not taking other God-given theological resources as seriously as we should, whether tradition, reason, or experience. A similar criticism runs that evangelicals are simplistic in their interpretation of the Bible and use of it in theology—seeing the Bible as a two-dimensional plane of proof-texts that can be applied directly to matters of doctrine or ethics without recognizing the realities of progressive revelation, genre differences, and other important qualifications of the “voice” of the Bible. These attitudes combine to a syndrome that places the text of the Bible at the center of evangelical life and in fact displaces the Holy Spirit’s role as primary teacher, thus amounting to a bibliolatry.

Evangelical theologians, aided especially by the findings of our colleagues in the historical study of evangelicalism, can wince and agree with many aspects of these charges. 10 In our embarrassment over our overuse, misuse, and abuse of the Bible, however, we might yield to the temptation to surrender the kernel in the midst of so much husk. That kernel remains the unique and supreme authority of the Bible as both itself the Word of God written and as an unequaled tool in the hands of the Spirit of God to render God’s Word to us today.

To be sure, the renewed interest in the historical theology of the church and the postmodern critique of epistemology have combined to warn contemporary evangelical theologians not to confuse any particular interpretation of the Bible with the Bible itself. The Bible is God’s Word written, but our interpretations of it are not. And our interpretations of the Bible may well need to be adjusted in the light of our interpretations of God’s other means of revelation, whether science, history, tradition, spiritual experience, and so on—just as, nonetheless, our interpretations of those phenomena also ought to be in respectful dialogue with our understanding of Scripture. Indeed, truly evangelical thinking about any subject will always privilege scriptural interpretation and never willfully contradict what the Scripture at least seems to say—however much tension we must live with while we try to sort out apparent contradictions. 11

Our own generation has been blessed by some first-rate wrestling with matters of the nature of the Bible, its authority, its interpretation, and its application to our lives: Books by Anthony Thistleton, Kevin Vanhoozer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Tom Wright shine among other luminaries in a constellation of scholarship. 12 No one supposes, however, that we have sorted out all of the pertinent issues. Indeed, few have ventured to respond to postmodernism with a theology that takes it seriously from the inside and responds to it with biblical truth: Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh’s pioneering Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be is a lonely effort in this vein. 13 Evangelical…


11. For quite different, but complementary, statements of this point, see Donald A. Thoson, The Weslevian Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason within the Bounds of Religion, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979 [1967]).


ism has yet to produce a substantial theology written from a feminist perspective. On this score, we continue to spend our limited theological resources arguing about, among other things, whether women can be theologians at all. But where is the theology—or even the sustained biblical study as resource for such theology—that starts with evangelical premises and pays attention to gender, to power, to women, and to other subjects overlooked by male-dominated theology, and in modes unexplored by such theology heretofore? And formal evangelical theology written from the perspective of the Third World is relayed to us mostly by informed Americans (such as William Dyrness) and expatriates (such as Lamin Sanneh)—even as informal theology, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic modes from Argentina and Korea, flows powerfully into “sending” countries such as ours.  

Evangelical respect for the Bible continues, however, to be needed in theology today. Resistance to the full affirmation of homosexuality—especially in the face of the collapse of the psychological and psychiatric community’s recognition of its pathology—can be justified only on the basis of something like an evangelical Scripture principle. Anything short of a clear divine word can be dismissed as mere human convention or invention and thus simply “homophobic.” What is true of this particular debate is true of other ethical debates as well: Discussion of the legitimacy of war, capital punishment, care for the poor, and so on is crucially shaped in each case by whether we believe we have authoritative guidance from God in Scripture.

Evangelicals properly distance themselves from a liberal methodology that feels “free” to ignore, and even contradict, express teachings of Scripture in the name of the putative superiority of current opinion. And evangelicals continue properly to wonder just how “postliberal” postliberals really are in this respect. Do they stand under the authority of the Bible—even the awkward parts, even the parts that seem sexist, or fantastic, or wrong—or are they still working with too much liberal freedom?  

A sound allegiance to the authority of the Bible, furthermore, speaks to at least three dangerous trends within evangelicism itself. One trend has evangelicals engaged in theological speculation, particularly associated with the doctrine of the Trinity, in ways that would be profitably chastened by a closer tethering to the scriptural text. Indeed, it is becoming common to hear an evangelical theologian simply make the following syllogistic move without recourse to Scripture itself: “God, the Holy Trinity, is X; we are created in God’s image; therefore, we are X.” Martin Luther and John Calvin, who wrote a great deal about God, nonetheless would chide us for repeating the scholastic mistake of presuming to venture much beyond the scriptural text into the abyss of Godself.

A second dangerous trend is heading in the other direction, toward a traditionalism, even a credalism, that is satisfied that God has broken forth all the light from his holy Word that he is ever going to break. If the previous danger is that of speculation, we now encounter the danger of formalism. It arises in evangelicalism nowadays with certain devotees of certain brands of Reformed orthodoxy, often dubbed the “Truly Reformed” by those who have felt the sting of their criticism. These warriors not only claim to speak authoritatively and univocally for what is in fact a multifaceted Reformed tradition, but presume then to go on to speak for all evangelicals (as in the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals).

16. Colin Gunton is arguably the most important theologian of this type. His writing honestly attests at times to his own ambivalence about using the doctrine of the Trinity as a kind of “control” or “way into” other theological issues. When it comes to the nature of the church, for instance, he acknowledges that “different theologies of the Trinity generate correspondingly different ecclesologies” (Colin E. Gunton, The Promise of Trinitarian Theology [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991], 74; see also Miroslav Volf, After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], esp. 214–20). Indeed, when it comes to the particular question of gender in the church, egalitarians (such as Gunten) appeal to the “perichoretic dance” of the Trinity, while hierarchists appeal to the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father (e.g., Michael Harper, Equal and Different: Male and Female in the Church and Society [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983], 153–63). Space here does not permit an adequate discussion of this issue. But one perhaps can fairly raise the question of just how truly illuminative and directive the mystery of the Trinity can be in this respect, and how much we should instead look at more explicit biblical guidance in considering this or that theological issue. (For a recent attempt to set out a trinitarian guide to hermeneutics from a conservative Reformed American point of view, see Vern S. Poythress, God-Centered Biblical Interpretation [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1990].)


18. So several books by David F. Wells beginning with No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); for the ACE, see www.AllianceNet.org.
Evangelical allegiance to the Bible would instead, however, take all of us to the place of John Calvin, who revised his own summary of doctrine (the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*) several times—without, to my knowledge, ever claiming infallibility for it. Or perhaps to the place of Martin Luther, who never felt it urgent to systematize his theology. Or to Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, who wrote much theology in their different ways but always to meet the needs of their contemporaries, not presuming to speak for generations past or to generations in the future. The Bible, they each recognized, was inexhaustibly rich, complicated, and mysterious—just as one would expect from a divine Author.

The "Truly Reformed" formalists are joined, of course, by those other credalists who are willing to put their own tradition's statements of faith above any fresh reading of Scripture, whether the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession, the Formula of Concord, the Thirty-Nine Articles, or the Lausanne Covenant. Such doctrinaire theologians parallel those Christians who rigorously defend traditional liturgies (whether traditional Anglican, traditional Mennonite, or traditional Pentecostal), traditional hierarchies (whether ecclesiastical or domestic), or traditional devotional practices (whether saying a rosary or having a "daily quiet time") without continual openness to scriptural investigation to "see if these things be true" (Acts 17:11). Evangelical biblicism at its best, then, is not only a conservative force but also a radical dynamic. It-free theology from automatic conformity to any such human approximations of God's truth—wonderful gifts to the church as many of these traditions may be.

A third danger is the danger of mysticism, of spiritual experience trumping all other claims to knowledge. Evangelicalism has always glorified in spiritual experience. One of its chief characteristics, I am in fact arguing in this paper, is its emphasis on personal conversion. "You ask me how I know he lives," evangelicals still like to sing, "he lives within my heart." And recent Christian work in epistemology (one thinks of William Alston especially) has been reclaiming spiritual experience as cognitively important not merely personally moving.19

The worthiness of spiritual experience as a theological resource is not in question here, however. My question concerns mysticism as a cognitive style. "I believe God is saying..." can function dangerously as "Thus saith the Lord..." unless everyone agrees to place priority on God's written Word as supreme guide to those who exercise discernment over such prophecy. Failure to truly give such priority to the Bible is at the root of many oddities in contemporary mystical movements, whether charismatic (as in the Toronto Blessing) or devotees of particular mystical writers (such as Madame Guyon or Thomas Merton).20 And such extremes point to the importance for evangelical theology of keeping together in right balance all five of these evangelical convictions.

One of the earliest practitioners of historical or "higher" criticism of the Bible was the zealous Roman Catholic Roger Simon. His agenda in the face of the rise of Protestantism was transparent: to so undermine the Bible's authority that any sensible and devout Christian would flee from the broken reed of *sola scriptura* to the strong, wise guidance of Mother Church. In our own day, ironically, the Jesus Seminar and certain other higher critics seek to undermine the Bible's authority in order to encourage a move in the opposite direction, toward a religious pluralism that glorifies no one particular religion or leader or scripture as divinely authoritative. Centuries ago, Roger Simon recognized the crucial importance of a "high" doctrine of Scripture. So today does Robert Funk. Evangelicals must not forget it.

**Conversion**

Princeton Seminary’s Ellen Chary has been bringing a widely noted message to academic theology of late. In her book, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, she reminds us that once upon a time—indeed, in most times until our own—Christians pursued theology in the cause of spiritual transformation.21 Theology, that is, was no mere intellectual exercise, let alone a full-time profession that even unbelievers could undertake (*pace* Paul Tillich and David Tracy).22 Theology always served the fundamental Christian concern for conversion.

When Professor Chary graced our theology conference at Regent College in 1998, however, she found (to her express delight) that she was bringing coals to Newcastle. For all of evangelicism’s many faults both theological and spiritual, evangelicals at least have kept theology and piety together as an ideal, and often as a reality as well.

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22. For Tracy, following Tillich, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Winston/Seabury Press, 1973), esp. 57 n. 3.
Theology is doxology, as J. I. Packer likes to put it, and it is properly (to borrow a phrase from Andrew Murray) an “aid to devotion.” Certainly Calvin intended his “handbook” (or Institutiio) to serve in this way. Whether one considers John Wesley or Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney or Charles Hodge, Donald Barnhouse or Donald Bloesch, John Wimber or John Stott, evangelicals characteristically view theology as fundamentally concerned with the new birth and the subsequent life of discipleship.

Beyond the academic theology indicted by Charry, some other forms of contemporary theology, and particularly those with a clear political focus, also have neglected the spiritual dimension of the Christian message. If we turn to feminist theology, we find that some exponents—not all of them, of course—preoccupy themselves with secular matters: who occupies which position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy or domestic economy, and more general questions of how women are to function and be treated in a just society. Some forms of liberation theology—again, not all of them—similarly have been criticized for focusing on the amelioration of economic and social oppression to the exclusion of spiritual deliverance.

In such programs of social concern, one can sympathize with activists who fear that any promise of “pie in the sky by and by” will cut the nerve of the political revolutions they see to be mandated by Christian compassion and justice. They hear Marx’s warning about religion’s narcotic powers, and they also are inspired by the New Testament, which denounces those who intone good wishes for the needy without lifting a finger to help them (James 2:16).

Still, an evangelical will prefer the wholistic agenda of a Gustavo Gutiérrez, and particularly of our own Ron Sider.23 These theologians have established irrefutable records of advocacy for the needy while steadfastly proclaiming the “whole counsel of God.” This counsel demands care for the poor that includes the good news of God’s offer of conversion in Christ as the heart of his plan to restore all of creation to shalom—indeed, his plan of cosmic conversion.24 Evangelical theologians, furthermore, will beware the lure of strictly academic theology. To be sure, it seems rather odd to warn evangeli-cals of excessive intellectualism: The “scandal of the evangelical mind” seems not to lie in overindulgence in arcana.25

But as evangelicals continue to graduate from prestigious research universities and enter the professional guilds of the Society for Biblical Literature, American Academy of Religion, and other such high-altitude organizations, we do well to maintain the life-giving linkage between the science of theology and the scientia that begins with the “fear of the LORD,” the vital connection of head, heart, and hands that characterized so many of our evangelical forebears.

Mission

Therefore, in the light of this our faith and our resolve, we enter into a solemn covenant with God and with each other, to pray, to plan and to work together for the evangelization of the whole world. We call upon others to join us. May God help us by his grace and for his glory to be faithful to this our covenant! Amen, Alleluia!26

Thus ends the Lausanne Covenant (1974), perhaps the definitive statement of international evangelical commitment in the twentieth century. The Covenant places mission, and particularly evangelistic mission, at the center of the church’s role in the world. It recognizes worship, compassionate ministry of various sorts, and the edification of the church as key responsibilities for all Christians. But it affirms that evangelism is the central call of God on the church in this epoch.

Not all evangelicals—and certainly not all Christians—endorse this priority.27 Some take their cues from what they read in other traditions, notably Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christianity, and declare worship to be the church’s main task, now and ever. Others see the church’s primary responsibility to lie in care for the needy, and while such service will involve spiritual counsel at times, such counsel is only a part of a full-orbed representation of God’s purposes in the world. And many evangelicals act as if the kingdom of God consists entirely of the steady expansion of congregations, church buildings, and parachurch agencies.

Even if for the sake of argument, however, we leave aside the knotty question of just which of the good things Lausanne says the church is


27. It is more than a little ironic that just as some evangelicals are disputing the priority of evangelism, some mainline and Anabaptist Protestants are reaffirming it; see Darrell L. Guder, ed., Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
to do deserves priority, evangelicals cannot be evangelicals without endorsing the importance of evangelism. And even this less controversial affirmation—which, one might think, would be endorsed by every Christian—sets evangelical theology over against some trends in contemporary Christian thought.

For one thing, it keeps evangelical theology from falling into the respective ditches of liberal and postliberal theology. The liberal tendency is to echo the culture—or, at least, to echo certain elites in that culture. This liberal “evangelism,” perhaps exemplified best today in the proselytizing efforts of the Jesus Seminar, John Spong, and Hans Küng, says very little to the culture that the culture is not already saying. Indeed, its fundamental message seems not to be directed toward the culture at all but to traditional Christians in the kerygmatic formulation of Bishop Spong, “Change or die!”

Postliberalism, for its part, retains a commitment to the gospel as traditionally understood in many respects, but its tendency, reacting as it does to the liberalism that is its constant foil, is to sectarianism and even unintelligibility. An evangelical will fear that postliberalism’s stout insistence on retaining the church’s own language and subsuming the contemporary world (somehow) into the biblical world can entail (as it did for Barth) a denial of sufficient common ground with the world upon which to proclaim the faith—despite the evident cultural sophistication of scholars in this school. Apologetics, therefore, is, at best, an ad hoc enterprise (as Hans Frei and William Werpehowski put it) and perhaps at worst a simply dubious one (as Barth thought it was). It is not at all clear, as William Placher himself candidly puts it, how postliberals can suggest that what they themselves have found in Christianity to be true can be proclaimed as “just plain true” for everyone.

And therefore evangelism becomes deeply problematic.

In fairness to the postliberals, however, the postmodern critique of knowledge does render problematic the proclamation of a universal gospel. Indeed, a cutting edge for evangelical theology today—as it is for any form of Christian theology that takes evangelism seriously—is to work out the epistemological grounds upon which we can then compose the most appropriate forms of evangelistic address to our neighbors. Analyses of some fundamental problems have been undertaken by an impressive group of scholars, ranging from sociologists such as

Craig Gay and David Lyon to theologians such as Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh to philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

What has yet to emerge clearly is a posture and a rhetoric appropriate to evangelism in such conditions. Indeed, if evangelicals are to continue to prize evangelism, then more of us must engage, and engage in, apologetics—both working out its theory for this cultural moment and actually undertaking conversation with thoughtful “others” in our culture. We must not confine, as we currently do, the great preponderance of our theological efforts to addressing either the church or the religious studies academy.

By extension, of course, it is evangelicalism’s commitment not only to our neighbors but also to world evangelization that should prompt evangelical theology’s investigation of perhaps the greatest theological question of our time: the plurality of the world’s religions. The state of the art, alas, consists of evangelicals disputing over whether anyone who has not heard an authentic presentation of the gospel by the Holy Spirit can somehow be saved. Only elementary work, and not much of it, has been done so far toward constructing a thorough theology of religions that can explain world religions under the providence of God, and then suggest how Christian evangelism should be carried out in the light of such a theological understanding. It is a paradox, and perhaps an indictment, of evangelical theology that theological liberals have been working on this question in detail for years while evangelicals—whose missionaries continue to have the most actual contact with people of other faiths—lag conceptually far behind.

Indeed, one of the greatest scandals of evangelical theology in our time—and of academic theology in general—is the almost complete disinterest such theology has for the experience and reflection of missionaries and missiologists. Yet theologians today would do well to link


up the ivory tower and the mission field, to draw together Theology Today and the International Bulletin of Missionary Research. What historian David Bebbington calls the “activistic” quality of evangelism has often milted against the sedentary work of theology, as action takes precedence over reflection. But if one looks at the theology written by Paul the missionary in the New Testament; the work of the early Greek apologists; Thomas Aquinas’s missionary handbook, the Summa Contra Gentiles; or the musings of Jonathan Edwards on the missionary frontier of colonial Massachusetts, one sees that the evangelistic impulse has galvanized Christian theology many times, and wonderfully, throughout church history. Evangelical theologians should joyfully seek its energy today.

Transdenominationalism

Evangelicalism’s elevating of the previous four concerns above all others has allowed evangelicals to band together on a variety of Christian projects: relief and development, publishing and broadcasting, education from preschool to graduate school, music, and evangelism both domestic and international, among many others.

When it comes to theology, this transdenominational openness has positioned evangelicals also to engage in dialogue with Roman Catholics, with postliberals, and with the Eastern Orthodox.32

Evangelicals also have increasingly contributed to mainline theological inquiry, notably in the pages of both academic journals and middlebrow periodicals such as Theology Today and The Christian Century. Each of these is a dramatic development when viewed from the perspective of just a generation or two ago, whether one’s perspective is British, American, or Canadian.

But one can ask for more—and less. For more, we could ask that evangelicals capitalize on their transdenominationalism beyond affirming their lowest common denominator of theology or acknowledging respectfully their various differences (so the genre of books that offer “four views” on this or that area of disagreement). Could evangelicals profitably seek to read each other, as well as reading liberals of various stripes, postliberals, Catholics, and others, in order to refine their own views precisely on the secondary, but still important, matters on which evangelicals disagree?

It seems to me that an evangelical transdenominationalism might dispose an evangelical Calvinist toward considering more seriously than he might the merits of Arminian or Pentecostal theology since such a Calvinist already recognizes and affirms his Arminian brother or Pentecostal sister as not only a fellow Christian but a fellow evangelical. Mennonites are sometimes read with profit by evangelicals—John Howard Yoder is exhibit A—but do Anabaptist evangelicals read other evangelicals in order to refine (I do not say “desert”) their outlook? Such a perspective—that starts from a given tradition but is inclined to appreciate, not merely guard against, other evangelical traditions—might lift us beyond inherited impasses and draw on fresh light regarding perennial mysteries such as original sin, the relation of human will and divine providence, and the nature and scope of the atonement.

Evangelicals hold conferences to learn from each other regarding worship, preaching, church growth, social action, and other areas of joint concern. Will we support conferences that also bring together different viewpoints on gender, salvation, polity, the fate of the unevangelized, God’s redemption of creation, and so on that help each of us become at least better versions of ourselves? Wheaton College’s theology conference is a good step in this direction, and I hope Regent’s conference will be another. When the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society has avoided mere diatribes to concentrate on constructive work, it has offered useful fruit. In this regard, I believe that our British counterparts have much to show us, particularly in the ongoing example of the Tyndale Fellowship and the journal Themelios—which regrettably have no exact parallels in either Canada or the United States, as they have fostered evangelical theological excellence for more than a generation.33

We can also ask for less, however. We can ask for less arrogance and energy devoted to sorting out who are the true evangelicals and who are the pretenders, deviants, or apostates.34

We can ask for definitions of evangelism that are truly as broad as historic evangelicalism has been, and then move on to the interesting and important work that theology has to do in our time. Indeed, as

32. For the Evangelicals and Catholics Together document and evangelical commentary, see Christianity Today 41 (8 December 1997): 34; or www2.christianity.net/ect8/77e034.html. For evangelicals and postliberals, see Phillips and Okholm, Nature of Confession. For an example of evangelical-Orthodox theological exchange, see the articles by J. I. Packer and Bradley Nassif in Crews 12 (September 1996): 12–32; see also the magazine Touchstone, which brings together certain conservatives of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions.

33. For an appreciative American account, see Noll, Between Faith and Criticism, chap. 4 and passim.

34. At this particular juncture, I have deliberately avoided the scholarly convention of providing examples of the genre in question precisely because I do not want to fight fire with fire, denunciation with denunciation. Readers who are not already familiar with such diatribes can count themselves blessed.
a Canadian... with some familiarity with the American scene, I wonder if British and Canadian evangelicals have less inclination to specify sharp boundaries of authentic evangelicalism, not because we are morally or spiritually or intellectually superior to our American cousins, but because we simply can't afford the luxury of continual heresy hunting and the division that it produces. Indeed, the logic of my argument today is that such intra-evangelical wars are actually anti-evangelical.  

A robust transdenominationalism, finally, should promote respect for difference in secondary matters and devotion to the central importance of Jesus Christ and his gospel. Such an attitude fosters related theological virtues of zeal tempered by reserve, of confidence qualified by humility. Evangelicalism at its best keeps these pairs in play and, by God's grace, in balance.

Conclusion

Evangelical theology has profited in the past as it has attended to the voices of other Christians and, indeed, people of other faiths and philosophies. Evangelical theology according to the sketch I have set out here does not, and cannot, answer every question and solve every problem. Still, I have found it to be a good stance from which to consider theological challenges. I see no compelling reason to abandon it for another. I recommend it to theologians of other stripes as a resource well worth exploring for their own enrichment. Most centrally, I encourage my fellow evangelical theologians to engage unapologetically in theology from this perspective and to maintain this historic balancing of evangelical convictions as they do.

35. Thus when Gary Dorrien suggests that evangelicalism "has been poorly suited to affirm pluralism of any kind" and that "the evangelical impulse is to insist that only one religious tradition can be true," he overlooks the transdenominational dimension of evangelical conviction and focuses instead on the dogmatic and sectarian dimensions only (The Remaking of Evangelical Theology [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998], 3).